Quarter Horse racing has had a presence in Brazil for many years. Even though the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) maintains the largest breed registry in the world, registering over 4 million horses, the Racing Quarterhorse’s presence in Brazil, including the AQHA’s South American Racing Challenge, is not as large as that of Thoroughbred racing. While veterinary practitioners that care for racehorses may be more familiar with Thoroughbred racing, awareness of the unique differences in the Racing Quarterhorse will be of value to the practitioner found in the position of caring for them.

Quarter Horse racing has a much more visible presence in the United States. In 2008 the total purses for Quarter Horse racing were $125,545,586 distributed in 9,152 races at 94 different racetracks. A total of 16,911 AQHA registered Quarter Horses started in those races in 2008.

While the Racing Thoroughbred typically competes in races with a distance of one mile or greater, the Racing Quarterhorse has been bred for their classic distance of 440 yards. The shorter distances in Quarterhorse racing, which may be from 220 yards to 870 yards, dictate a much greater importance and more emphasis in the “break” from the starting gate. Typically the Racing Quarterhorse has been bred and trained to break from the starting gate with much more force and immediate acceleration than the Racing Thoroughbred, as a less-than-perfect break will often determine the winner or loser of the race.

Racing Quarterhorses are schooled to stand in the starting gate with a greater level of anticipation of the pending opening of the gate so that they may better prepared to take advantage of the first few strides away from the gate. One of the unfortunate consequences of this gate training, especially in the younger and mentally immature racehorse, revolves around the tendency of the horses to become fractious in the gate. This may be evidenced simply as a “false” break seen when the horse charges the gate prior to opening or, in may be manifested in the horse “flipping” in the gate, seen as rearing and even getting upside-down in the gate. This often results in injury to the horse involved as well as horses on either side of the fractious horse in the starting gate. These injuries are much more common in Racing Quarterhorses than in Racing Thoroughbreds. Often the individuals that tend to become difficult to load and fractious in the starting gate are beginning to dread the starting gate due to a pre-existing problem, such as a lameness problem. The trainers that have a tendency to rush their training program will
sometimes resort to the use of a “flipping halter” that ties the horse’s head in the “V” of
the gate until it opens rather than spending the necessary time to educate the horse.

The veterinarians and horsemen that are familiar with the two racing breeds recognize the
difference in the style of breaking from the gate. While the Thoroughbred race horse is
trained and ridden to leave the gate at a full gallop they are usually immediately taken in
hand by the jockey to enable positioning of the horse and judging the pace of the race.
The Racing Quarterhorse, on the other hand, is trained to attempt to be running at full
speed immediately away from the gate and to continue this maximal effort throughout the
entire race. Injuries to the back and hind quarters are more commonly seen in the Racing
Quarterhorse due to this different style of “leaving the gate” and sustaining this effort. In
addition, any accidental contact with horses on either side during the break can lead to
more serious consequences with this type of break than when horses break from the
starting gate in a more relaxed fashion.

If a “wreck” (accidental contact with an adjacent horse) does occur at the break as the
horses leave the starting gate, the involved horses are thrown off of stride as they attempt
to attain maximum speed. This may only be manifested as a slight impediment to the
stride which can often cause interference injuries, or as one of the more severe levels of
contact that can even cause a horse (or horses) to go down. Obviously these incidents
can result in more serious injury.

The Racing Quarterhorse tends to experience a greater number of problems related to
exerting maximal effort throughout the entire race. While many of these may be
musculo-skeletal problems, other conditions such as Exercise Induced Pulmonary
Hemorrhage (EIPH) are very common, especially at racetracks located at a higher
elevation. Various metabolic muscle problems are also seen such as equine exertional
rhabdomyolysis that is commonly diagnosed in the Racing Quarterhorse.

Typically, if a Racing Quarterhorse experiences an episode of EIPH during a race it will
tend to be more severe than those experienced by the Racing Thoroughbred. The clinical
impression is that the Racing Quarterhorse will more often exhibit epistaxis as a result of
the EIPH than a Racing Thoroughbred, especially immediately post race. Many of these
severely affected horses will actually go down and even occasionally die from the anoxia
caused by the EIPH. It is not uncommon in the affected Racing Quarterhorse to see both
conditions, EIPH and exertional rhabdomyolysis, concurrently.

Intra-articular osteochondral fragments commonly occur in the Racing Quarterhorse.
Since a high percentage of the young Racing Quarterhorses are aimed at the more
lucrative stakes races, arthroscopic surgery is commonly performed on the involved
horses if time permits. The stakes commitments of many of the horses are often a big
consideration when the owner and trainer are consulted by the veterinarian regarding
therapeutic options, and time constraints may determine that the problem be managed
medically rather than surgically.
The occurrences of other commonly diagnosed injuries seen in Racing Quarterhorses parallel those seen in Racing Thoroughbreds. Soft tissue injuries, such as desmitis and tendonitis, are common. When injury occurs in a Racing Quarterhorse running at maximal speed they are often very difficult for the jockey to pull up, and catastrophic injury to the contralateral limb is common as the horse loads the contralateral limb as they attempt to get weight off of the limb that sustained the primary injury. This poses a different kind of injury management problem for the attending veterinarian and regulatory veterinarian as these catastrophic injuries seem to invariably happen at, or just beyond, the finish line in full view of the racing public.

Recent media coverage of the medication situation in all of horseracing has become an issue for everyone involved in racing. This involves all veterinarians in racing, whether their patients are Racing Quarterhorses or Racing Thoroughbreds or whether they are practicing veterinarians or they are involved on the regulatory side of racing. The smaller “bush track” beginning in the early days of Quarterhorse racing seems to have made it a bigger target for some of these issues. The words spoken by the media, such as “medication”, “anabolic steroids”, etc. are heard by many as “drugs” and carry a sinister connotation as a substance used to alter the outcome of a race. The racetrack practitioner has to be constantly aware of the wording of replies to questions by the media regarding the medication issue. It is important that information underscoring the fact that racing is conducted under strict rules of Controlled Medication (rather than “permissive medication”) be made available to the media. Of further importance is making known the fact that these Controlled Medication rules were formulated with the welfare of the horse as a priority.

From a veterinarians perspective the Racing Quarterhorse industry is both similar and different when compared to the more familiar Thoroughbred industry. The breeders, owners, trainers, and others involved in the industry sometimes appear to have slightly different objectives. The horses are bred to be a different type of athlete and thus experience a higher percentage of some injuries and problems than do the Racing Thoroughbreds. The style of racing that the Racing Quarterhorse exhibits excites many horsemen and racing fans while insuring that the veterinary practitioner will have a future in caring for these great athletes.