

May 14, 2026

Lisa Lazarus
Chief Executive Officer
Horseracing Integrity and Safety Authority
201 East Main Street, Suite 340
Lexington, KY 40507

Dear Ms. Lazarus,

I am writing to urge the Horse Racing Integrity and Safety Authority (HISA) to investigate and take appropriate disciplinary action against the two Puerto Rican jockeys reportedly tied to illegal cockfighting activity in Puerto Rico. Jockeys Jose Ortiz and Irad Ortiz, Jr., two internationally known horse jockeys who competed recently at the Kentucky Derby and won accolades for their performance at the most visible event in the sport, were reportedly identified at an illegal cockfighting event in Puerto Rico through social media posts.

Individuals entrusted with the care, handling, and stewardship of animals in professional horse racing should not be participating in acts of felony animal cruelty. In this case, they were directly involved in staged fights and attending these fights – both are federal crimes.

Cockfighting is a sadistic and cruel practice that inflicts slash wounds and stabbing injuries for the thrill of bloodletting and illegal gambling. Participation in such conduct is fundamentally incompatible with the responsibilities expected of licensed jockeys and other racing professionals. It also threatens to compromise them given that organized crime interests conduct the illegal gambling at staged animal fights. The accruing of gambling debts has the potential to cause jockeys to rig their races.

Congress has made animal fighting ventures illegal throughout the United States and its territories under Section 26 of the Animal Welfare Act, codified at 7 U.S.C. § 2156. Federal law prohibits knowingly sponsoring, exhibiting, attending, or otherwise participating in an animal fighting venture. The law also criminalizes the possession, transport, and promotion of animals used for fighting.

The federal courts have repeatedly upheld the constitutionality and applicability of these prohibitions in Puerto Rico. In 2021, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit affirmed that Congress had validly outlawed cockfighting in Puerto Rico and throughout the United States and its territories, stating the law “is a valid exercise of Congress’s Commerce Clause power and does not violate plaintiffs’ individual rights.” See *Hernandez-Gotay v. United States*, 985 F.3d 71 (1st Cir. 2021). That appellate decision also affirmed the district court holding that “Congress acted well within its constitutional authority in extending the prohibition on animal fighting ventures to Puerto Rico.” See *Club Gallístico de Puerto Rico, Inc. v. United States*, 414 F. Supp. 3d 191 (D.P.R. 2019).

Based on the video evidence alone, there can be no doubt that both Ortiz brothers were violating federal law.

Horse racing has gone through its fair share of doping scandals, gambling crises, and in-competition breakdowns. Its future depends on public confidence that those involved in the sport are committed to animal welfare, fair play, and integrity. When the human athletes at the center of horse racing competition are linked to organized crime and felony animal cruelty, it rightly erodes confidence in the sport.

I respectfully request that HISA:

1. Investigate the involvement of these jockeys in cockfighting activities and call them in for an interview to corroborate their participation;
2. Establish a HISA policy that jockeys and trainers will be suspended from horse racing competitions if there is documented involvement in animal cruelty crimes, as is plain in the case of the Ortiz brothers; and
3. Maintain an explicit policy to suspend any jockey or trainer involved in animal fighting crimes, since illegal gambling and animal cruelty are comingled at these spectacles. Involvement with illegal gambling creates suspicion about the spillover to the sport of horse racing, which has had more than its share of controversy over cheating and rigging of races.

There should be zero tolerance within professional horse racing for individuals connected to animal fighting enterprises. Those who profit from or participate in cruelty toward animals should not be entrusted with the welfare of racehorses.

As one of the architects of the Horseracing Integrity and Safety Act, I can assure you that the congressional charge for the Authority in regulating horse racing is broad to protect the integrity of horse racing and the credibility of competition. The actions of the Ortiz brothers threaten the reputation of horse racing.

When it became known that Michael Vick was involved in dogfighting, his team and the NFL took action, as did law enforcement. There is no moral distinction between dogfighting and cockfighting, and federal law treats them as equally serious crimes. We urge you not to dismiss acts of animal cruelty that are the most severely and widely criminalized practices forms of it in the United States.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wayne Pacelle".

Wayne Pacelle
Animal Wellness Action, President