

Lip Tattoos to Identify Racehorses

Answering the call: “Riders up!” a row of sleek and fit equine athletes made its way out of the paddock toward the starting gate. The identity of each one of the Thoroughbred horses in the starting line could be verified thanks to an original lip tattoo identification system. Beginning in 1947, the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau (TRPB) adopted this new method of identification to eliminate the persistent problem of “ringers” (equine imposters of the authorized and listed racers) and thus help to prevent fraud in horseracing.

The technique was developed by military veterinarians at the Western Area headquarters of the U.S. Army Remount Service in the early 1940s. Captain Harvey L. Rubin, VC, was based at the Pomona QM Remount Depot in California, formerly known as the W.K. Kellogg Institute of Animal Husbandry, when a shipment of especially magnificent Arabian stallions arrived. Reluctant to permanently disfigure these animals with the Army’s standard Preston or hot-iron neck brand, Dr. Rubin developed a technique involving a multi-pronged needle to apply a number to the mucosa of the upper or lower lip.

In a 1946 article in *The Blood-Horse*, Colonel F.W. Koester, QMC, described the development over several years of a 6-pronged, hand-operated needle and lip clamp applied with minimal restraint. The tattoo technique of identifying Thoroughbreds was first introduced at the Saratoga Race Track in New York on August 15, 1945, where track veterinarians demonstrated the new Army tech-



Figure 1. Example of equine lip tattoo showing standardized sequence of letter and numbers. Photograph courtesy Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau (TRPB)

nique on horses from leading stables across the country and displayed some of the older tattoos on military horses. Along with Captain Rubin and Colonel Koester, the press was present at the event. Later, the TRPB obtained a patent for the parallel cluster tattoo dies.

According to the TRPB at that time, “the Thoroughbred industry is provided with the most effective, practical, and economical method of identification available today.” The procedure involved tattooing a 4- or 5-character system of letters and numbers associated with the year of the horse’s birth, such as “Z12345” for a foal born in 2022 (Fig. 1). Licensed TRPB technicians applied the permanent identification numbers that were then registered with The Jockey Club. This numbering system continues to be used for Thoroughbred, Standardbred, and Quarter horses as a result of a few inventive military veterinarians over 70 years ago. In 1946, Colonel Koester noted, “the accomplishment by the U.S. Army Remount Service is but one of the many contributions it has made to horse husbandry in the United States.”

In keeping with technological advancement in the 21st century, the TRPB recently transitioned to a digital tattoo registration system using microchips. As a result, all Thoroughbred foals from 2017 onward have a listed microchip on their Jockey Club papers. Effective January 1, 2020, physical lip tattoos were discontinued, and any Thoroughbred not previously tattooed is now required to have a TRPB digital tattoo to be correctly electronically identified in the paddock and permitted to race by state racing commissions.

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