

# Animal Aid - Grand National Fact Sheet

## Summary

The Grand National – the world’s most demanding horse race – is notorious for the consistency with which it kills and injures horses. Despite numerous changes to the course and conditions of the race over the past 50 years, 35 horses are known to have lost their lives, while many others have been injured. In fact, the death rate has increased over the past five decades. Today, the race is, on average, more than five times more lethal than other steeplechases.

The media and public outrage at the deaths of two horses, Ormais and Dooneys Gate, in 2011 put the spotlight once again on the race’s safety record. Historically, there has been a lack of transparency and access to welfare information from the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) and its predecessor bodies. Fatalities tend to be characterised as ‘accidents’, rather than routine and predictable.

The income generated by the race in betting and other receipts is a key factor determining the way in which it is presented to the public. In addition to the course operators, beneficiaries include bookmakers, sponsors and the BBC, which broadcasts the race live, on radio and TV.

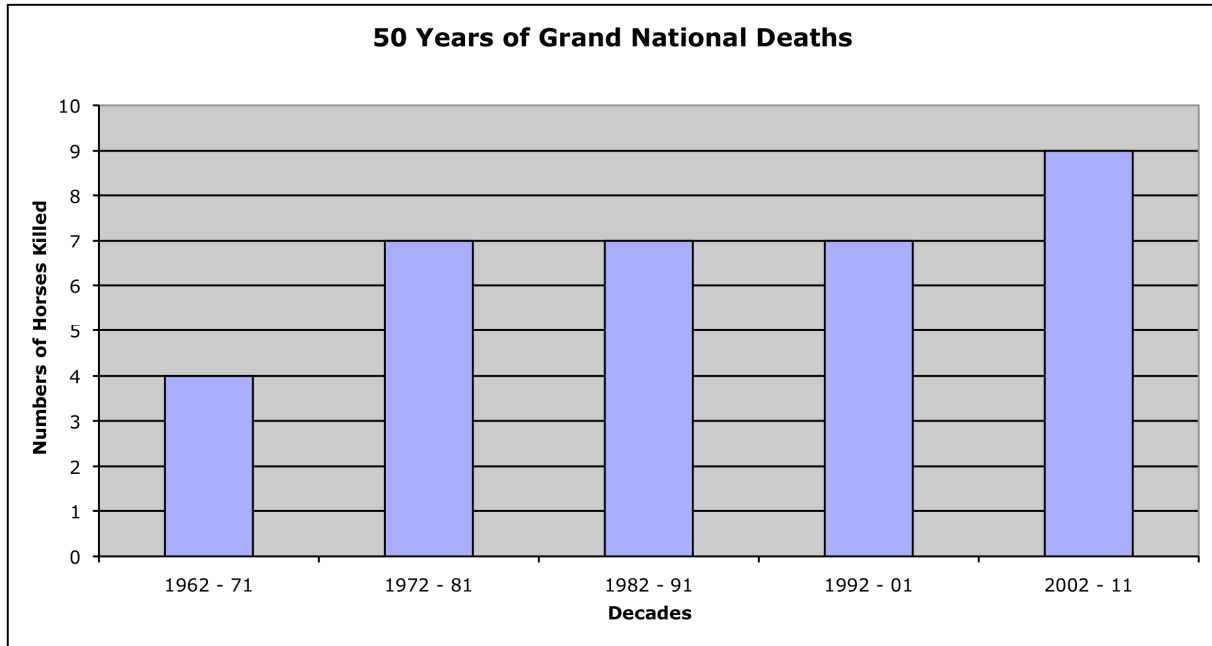
## Background

The Grand National has been run under various names almost every year since what can be seen as its inception in 1839. It is staged at Aintree in Liverpool and is run over a stamina-sapping four-and-a-half miles on a roughly triangular shaped course. The course comprises 16 fences, 14 of which are jumped twice. This means that the set number of 40 competing horses are confronted by a total of 30 fences.

## The Problems

- Too many demanding fences – 30 in all – have to be jumped
- Five particularly unusual and awkward fences catch horses out
- There are concerns about the horses’ abilities and experience and the demands made upon them. Only 36 per cent have finished the race in the past 10 years
- The crowded field of 40 runners causes death and injury
- The extreme distance – four-and-a-half miles – makes it the longest in world Thoroughbred National Hunt racing

# Grand National Statistics & Analysis – 1962 to 2011



## Deaths 1962-71

1963	1
1967	1
1968	1
1970	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>

## Deaths 1972-81

1973	1
1975	2
1977	2
1979	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>

## Deaths 1982-91

1983	1
1984	1
1987	1
1989	2
1990	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>

## Deaths 1992-01

1996	1
1997	2
1998	3
1999	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>

## Deaths 2002-11

2002	2
2003	1
2006	1
2007	1
2008	1
2009	1
2011	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

## **The deadliest decade of the race 2002 to 2011**

Despite its long history, the past decade has been the race's deadliest decade.

### **Fate of runners**

399 Runners

143 Finishers (36 per cent)

256 Did not finish (64 per cent)

Of the non-finishers:

162 Fell or Unseated Rider or Collapsed Exhausted (41 per cent)

76 Pulled Up (19 per cent)

9 Brought Down or Carried out (2 per cent)

9 Refused at a fence or to race (2 per cent)

**Nine were killed (2 per cent)**

### **The decade's fatalities**

2002

The Last Fling – Fatal Fall

Manx Magic – Fatal Fall

2003

Goguenard – Fell – Injured. Destroyed

2006

Tyneandthyneagain – Injured. Destroyed

2007

Graphic Approach – Injured. Died later from complications

2008

McKelvey – Injured. Destroyed

2009

Hear The Echo – Collapsed. Died close to the finish line

2011

Ornais – Broke Neck

Dooneys Gate – Broke Back. Destroyed

## **The National Fences**

The Grand National fences are unique. They are notably bigger than those found at other British racecourses, both in height and spread. Many have ditches on either side of the obstacle that are wider and deeper than those a horse would normally expect to jump.

It is often claimed that today's Grand National fences are considerably less formidable than those that confronted horses in Victorian times. In fact, if we look back to the course of 1897 when legendary race horse, Manifesto, won his first Grand National, there is no significant change in the total height jumped then compared with 2011. While some obstacles have been lowered by a couple of inches, others have increased by the same amount.

The fences have seen physical changes. From 1961, they were sloped on the take-off side. In 2009, run-outs were introduced that enable fences to be bypassed by the runners and loose horses. There have also been changes to the core structure of the fences. However, these innovations have not reduced the fatalities.

It is claimed that persistent criticism of the course in recent years by animal rights campaigners has succeeded, perversely, in making the course easier and, therefore, faster and more dangerous. This is incorrect. As we have seen, the height of the fences – taken collectively – has not changed since Victorian times. And while the fences are less upright than in previous decades, those changes came about in 1961 – more than a decade before the advent of the modern animal rights movement. The fences remain daunting obstacles and solid at their core. A significant danger is the sheer volume of horses taking part in the race. Since 2000 there has been a set field of 40 horses. This makes the race more competitive and consequently more dangerous than in past years when the mean field size was 29.

### **The deadly fences with examples of horses who were killed**

Fourteen of the 16 fences are jumped twice during the race, which means that the first fence in the race is jumped a second time as the 17<sup>th</sup> fence, and so on.

#### **Fence 1 (& 17): Plain**

The 40 horses tend to come to this fence at some pace. This is one of the smaller fences on the course but it has brought down as many as nine horses at a time.

Tyneandthyneagain: 2006 – Fell here and was killed running into a fence later in the race.

Pashto: 1998 – Was killed in a first fence fall.

#### **Fence 3 (& 19): Open Ditch**

This is a big, five-foot high fence with a wide, open ditch on the take-off side, making the obstacle extremely demanding.

Goguenard: 2003 – Fell here and was hit by another falling horse and jockey. Severely injured, he was immediately destroyed.

Other deaths: Vulcano, Ragoon

#### **Fence 4 (& 20): Plain** – Responsible for the deaths of five horses in 50 years.

Without doubt, this is the most underestimated fence with regards to its high fatality rate. It's a 'standard' plain National fence that is 4 foot 10 inches high and without any ditches – yet it is deadly. There is no clear explanation as to why this is.

Ornais: 2011 – Fell and died instantly from a broken neck – clearly seen under a green tarpaulin during the BBC TV coverage of the race and described by their commentator as an ‘obstacle on the course’.

McKelvey: 2008 – Ran loose after falling at this fence and was subsequently killed. Other deaths: Manx Magic, Do Rightly, Smith’s Band.

**Fence 6 (& 22): Becher’s Brook:** Fence & Ditch – 8 deaths in 50 years.

Becher’s is the Grand National’s most infamous fence. It is a diagonal, 4 foot 10 inch obstacle with a notorious 6 foot 9 inch drop on the landing side, which rolls back on a camber into a now-covered ditch at the foot of the fence.

Dooney’s Gate: 2011 – His back was broken after he fell and was hit by another horse.

Graphic Approach: 2007 – He ran loose and tried to return to the stables. He jumped a rail, fell, was concussed and suffered a black eye. He died a month later from further complications linked to the fall. In its reporting of Grand National deaths, the BHA has failed to acknowledge Graphic Approach as a fatality.

Other deaths: Alverton, Winter Rain, Dark Ivy, Brown Trix, Seeandem, Eudipe

**Fence 8 (& 24): Canal Turn**

The course takes a challenging 90-degree turn immediately after the fence. This causes crowding in the approach, as jockeys fight for an inside berth.

The Last Fling: 2002 – After leading the field for the majority of the race, this tired horse was killed falling at this awkward 5-foot-high fence.

Roll A Joint: 1990 – A Scottish Grand National winner. He took a deadly fall here on the first circuit. His body could be seen under a sheet on the second time around, after he’d been dragged away from the fence.

**Fence 9 (& 25): Valentine’s Brook**

It is a 5 foot high fence, with a ditch and a drop on the landing side. Many horses have been killed here.

The famous Zeta’s Son was killed here in 1977.

Two horses, Plaisir D’Estruval and Prudent Honour, broke their necks in simultaneous falls in 2010 during the Topham Chase, which is run over the Grand National course.

**Fence 15: The Chair**

This is the highest fence on the course, at 5 foot 2 inch, and also the narrowest. It is immediately preceded by a 6 foot wide ditch. It is jumped only once.

Deaths include: Grey Sobrero, Land Lark, Kintai.

## **Changes to the Race**

Various changes to the course have been introduced over the years in the name of improved safety. But some of these 'safety measures' have subsequently been reversed. (See below.)

### **Extreme distance of the race**

The race has increased in distance over the years – from four miles to the present four-and-a-half. The last extension was in 1975. The event has seen numerous horses collapse, some of whom have died. Most recently, in 2009, Irish horse Hear The Echo collapsed and never recovered, shortly before the finishing post. Millions of television viewers were especially distressed to see the 2011 Grand National winner, Ballabriggs, being thrashed at the end of a race that left him so exhausted, that he needed oxygen. His jockey, Jason Maguire, was banned from racing for five days but kept his prize money and his winner's position.

### **Mixed ability horses race together**

1984 saw entry qualifications for horses simplified and reduced to just one win in a steeplechase over the previous two and a half seasons.

In 1987, the minimum age of participating horses was increased from six to seven years. However, the six years age limit was restored in 1999.

The removal of horses of lower ability in 1996 was partially revoked the following year, in order to increase the size of the field.

### **A recent and significant increase in the number of runners**

Since the race's inception in 1839 through to 1999, the average number of runners was below 29. The implementation, in 2000, of a set number of 40 runners represented an increase of some 38%. The race organisers suggested that they set a maximum of 40 runners in the interests of safety. But this is not credible when the history of the race is considered.

In 2011, crowding and speed were important contributory factors to the early deaths of two horses – especially that of Dooneys Gate, who was killed by a horse falling on him at Becher's Brook.

In November 2011, more changes were announced by the British Horse Racing Authority to the structure of the course and to the rules governing which horses can take part. Though much-trumpeted by pro-racing journalists, the changes fail to tackle the inherently lethal nature of the event. The drop on the landing side of Becher's Brook will be reduced by four to five inches. The drop element will be eliminated altogether from the first fence. The fourth, 5 foot high fence will be reduced by 2 inches. The orange-coloured board that highlights the base of each fence will be increased in height to 14 inches. In addition, the minimum age of horses eligible to be entered in the race has changed once again – back from six to seven years. Another stipulation was that all horses must have previously finished 4th or better in a steeplechase of three miles or further.

## Horses Killed on the Grand National Course in the Fox Hunters' Chase and the Topham Trophy

<b>Additional Deaths</b>		<b>Name of Horse – Name of Race</b>	<b>Where Killed</b>
2002	1	Anubis Quercus – Fox Hunters'	Fell at what is Fence 1
2006	1	Terivic – Topham	Becher's Brook
2007	1	Lord Rodney – Topham	The Chair
2008	2	Time To Sell; In The High Grass – Topham	The Chair / Becher's Brook
2009	1	Mel In Blue – Fox Hunters'	Becher's Brook
2010	2	Plaisir D'Estruval; Prudent Honour – Topham	Valentine's Brook (both)

### Conclusion

The Grand National is, by design, an extraordinarily challenging and dangerous race that routinely kills horses. Various changes have been made to the course and the event itself over the decades – not always aimed at minimising the risks. Taken together, these changes have failed in their prime objective: to reduce the rate of horse fatalities. The death rate has actually increased over the last 50 years. The evidence strongly suggests that the Grand National will remain a deathtrap for horses unless the key features by which it is known – fences like Becher's Brook, Valentine's Brook, The Chair and Canal Turn – are removed. In addition, both the length of the race and the number of horses entered need to be significantly reduced. If these changes are made, the race would then become a typically lethal jumps event – of the kind that kills, on average, 136 horses on British racecourses every year. And even this figure falls well short of the truth. An authoritative industry source has provided Animal Aid, in confidence, with data indicating that our total is nearly 30 per cent short of the true figure.