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A horse track with no rules

On-track drug injections, shock devices and a dead jockey: A “bush track” in Georgia is one of dozens that profit outside the reach of regulation.

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Spectators take in a race at Rancho El Centenario in July. (The Washington Post)



By [Gus Garcia-Roberts](#)

On-track drug injections, shock devices and a dead jockey: A “bush track” in Georgia is one of dozens that profit outside the reach of regulation.

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MILNER, Ga. — In this population-800 town in rural Georgia, where residents along winding country roads fly the Stars and Stripes and Trump banners, there’s a horse track on a pecan farm that raises only one flag: that of Mexico.

The spectators show up for race days every couple of weeks, Latino cowboys and their families arriving in late-model pickup trucks with license plates from Georgia and Alabama, Guerrero and Monterrey. Admission at the door is \$100 per head in cash, collected before a cadre of armed guards search vehicles. Inside, Norteño music blends with the scent of tacos, and an announcer calls the races in profane Spanish.

But the prerace routines at Rancho El Centenario are a little different — or at least more transparent — than at a mainstream racehorse track.

One muggy day in July, when a young horse trainer in a patterned shirt and trucker hat sauntered onto the track with a syringe in hand, fans crowded the rail to get a glimpse. A jockey guided a quarter horse named Chiquibaby over to the trainer, who jabbed the needle into the horse's neck and pushed the plunger before jumping away.

"Bring another for me!" cried out a Modelo-clutching railbird in Spanish, referring to the syringe full of mystery substances, eliciting laughter from the other fans and the trainer.

When asked about the injection following the race, the trainer said the syringe didn't contain performance-enhancing drugs but medicine to prevent a horse from suffering a stroke or a heart attack.

But before another race that day, a reporter for The Washington Post watched a different trainer inject a horse named El Mago near the end of the 500-yard track. After that trainer tossed the syringe in the dirt, the reporter collected it and later submitted it to Industrial Laboratories, an accredited horse racing testing facility in Colorado. Its findings: The syringe [contained methamphetamine and methylphenidate](#), the stimulant sold as Ritalin.

A few hundred years ago, match races like Rancho El Centenario's were part of the genesis of the American quarter horse, a compact breed developed for its intense speed on a short, straight track. After racing commissions brought order to the sport in states where it was legal, unregulated "bush tracks" remained the norm in Mexico, popular among cowboys and narcos alike. In the United States, though, they existed only as a [wild but minor](#) foil to the rulemakers.

But now, experts and horsemen say, the bush circuit is quietly in a boom period, one in which animal abuse and doping go largely unchecked, hinting at deeper criminality and posing a potentially serious threat to the integrity of the breed.

Jockey Adrian "El Niño" Romero was observed by Washington Post journalists to have a shock device taped to his left wrist. He declined to answer a reporter's questions about the device.

Since a disbarred attorney named Arthur "Brutz" English IV had a red dirt track pounded into the land of his fourth-generation family farm nine years ago, Rancho El Centenario has showcased the chaos and the profitability of such an operation.

English's track is a scavenger of legitimate racing, in horses and personnel. A champion quarter horse that sold at auction for nearly half a million dollars regularly races at the track. A well-known jockey pushed out of regulated racing because of his serial use of banned electric shock devices also found refuge at Rancho El Centenario — until he died following an accident while racing there.



A horse skeleton was discovered by PETA investigators during one of several incognito visits to the ranch. (PETA)



A still from PETA footage at the ranch shows a jockey with a shock device on his wrist. (PETA)



Pictured are some of the syringes PETA investigators said they collected at Rancho El Centenario — including those that allegedly tested positive for cocaine and methamphetamine. (PETA)

For years, there have been hints that the horsemen of Rancho El Centenario are utilizing practices that would incur serious discipline at a regulated track. For instance: After deputies pulled over a horseman on his way to the track in 2019, a police report shows, they discovered boxes of amphetamines and anabolic steroids in the back of his Mazda.

Other times it's more than a hint. On a visit to the races last month, during which journalists for The Post witnessed horses being injected before races, they also observed the day's winningest jockey wearing a shock device of the sort banned in mainstream racing. And though betting on horses is illegal in Georgia, apparent bookies ambled along the track, calling out bets before races and distributing the winnings from stacks of cash afterward. Unbeknown to English and his Mexican cowboy clientele, however, there has been since last year a third party to the culture clash: animal rights activists.

Over eight visits to Rancho El Centenario between June 2021 and April 2022, undercover investigators for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) collected [hidden-camera footage](#) of all of this conduct and more: gambling, injections, shock devices, repeated whipping and horses dying on the track. A horse skeleton was discovered by PETA investigators during one of several incognito visits to the ranch. (PETA)

A still from PETA footage at the ranch shows a jockey with a shock device on his wrist. (PETA)

Pictured are some of the syringes PETA investigators said they collected at Rancho El Centenario — including those that allegedly tested positive for cocaine and methamphetamine. (PETA)

The group's investigators collected syringes following injections around the track and had them tested at the horse racing laboratory at the University of California at Davis, another of the nine facilities accredited by Kentucky's Racing Medication and Testing Consortium (RMTC). Some of them tested positive for cocaine, methamphetamine and methylphenidate, according to a letter that PETA's lawyers [sent this week, along with 17 pages of supporting materials](#), to the Lamar County Sheriff's Office and the local district attorney's office.

In the letter, PETA general counsel Jared Goodman alleged "systemic and repeated animal abuse, including whipping, electric-shocking, and drugging horses to push them past their natural limits, leading several horses to break down and be killed on the track, as well as extensive commercial gambling on every race." He called for a criminal investigation of the ranch's activities and some of its horsemen.

When told of the letters PETA sent out about his track, English criticized the group for "yammering to the DA and the sheriff" rather than coming to him so he could fix any problems they observed. "It's not about making it right," English said of PETA. "It's about making a spectacle with them." He doesn't tolerate shock devices, gambling or doping, he claimed, adding that he didn't trust the lab results provided to The Post because he hadn't tested the syringe himself: "My official position on whatever you claim that you found is I dispute that until I am given a chance to verify it with my own lab."

At Rancho El Centenario and other tracks on the bush circuit, the horses are managed by stables they call cuadras. The handlers who injected El Mago were from Cuadra Esquipulas. Contacted via its Facebook page and through English, the stable's horsemen did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

RMTC executive director Mary Scollay said there was no reason to inject a horse immediately before a race other than to influence its performance. She said the lab results from the tested syringe constituted a powerful, and potentially illegal, cocktail of stimulants for a horse. "I would imagine that methamphetamine in an injectable form would get the attention of the FDA, which is not always an easy thing to do," Scollay said. "It might get the attention of DEA as well."

English said he supervises nearly every event at his ranch but missed the race day in question because he had taken his family to Wales for a honeycomb exposition. Perhaps, he posited, the horsemen were acting up during The Post's visit because "they knew I wasn't going to be sitting there babysitting."

After this story published online earlier in the week, Rancho El Centenario [canceled the races scheduled for Sunday](#). English said that while he was "not concerned at all" by the contents of this story, his customers were worried "ICE was going to swoop in." He said, however, that future race days would go on as scheduled.

English argued the real reason he is being singled out is the same reason nearby residents have been complaining about his track for years. The operation regularly attracts hundreds or thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans to a town that is 80 percent White and where the most recent census put the Hispanic population at less than 4 percent — for a total of 29 people.

"We wouldn't be having this conversation if my customers were all White rednecks," English said.

Cash makes the rounds before and after races at Rancho El Centenario. (The Washington Post)

Angela Pelzel-McCluskey's first encounter with the bush circuit came in the form of a bony 7-year-old quarter horse brought to a veterinarian in Ocala, Fla., in 2008.

Pelzel-McCluskey is an equine epidemiologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture charged with keeping disease from spreading through the American horse industry. The horse in Ocala, lethargic and refusing to eat or drink, tested positive for piroplasmosis, an infectious blood disease rare in the United States but endemic in Mexico that typically dooms its carriers to euthanasia or lifelong isolation.

Investigators traced the infection and found a cluster of 20 other quarter horses with the disease — all of them participants in unsanctioned racing, according to a study Pelzel-McCluskey co-authored.

Piroplasmosis typically spreads via ticks. In this case, though, investigators found the disease's vector was unlicensed handlers using contaminated needles and other equipment to inject or blood-dope the horses. A year later in Missouri, another dying horse brought to a veterinary hospital led to a similar story, with investigators discovering a cluster of eight quarter horses connected to the same trainer who raced them on unsanctioned tracks.

Those cases led Pelzel-McCluskey to become the USDA's sole expert on unsanctioned racing. She has watched with alarm, she said, as the phenomenon has steadily grown — and as the diseases she tracks have spread.

There is no official accounting of the size of the bush circuit in the United States, but Pelzel-McCluskey said that, by using social media, she has found 89 tracks in 27 states. Clusters of piroplasmosis are now a regular occurrence in the United States, and since 2008, Pelzel-McCluskey said, 532 quarter horse racehorses have been found to be infected with the disease.



Security pins a man to the ground following a fistfight at Rancho El Centenario. (The Washington Post)

Equine infectious anemia (EIA), which also has no cure and results in euthanasia or lifelong isolation, has followed a similar trajectory. Last year, 103 cases of EIA were discovered — the highest total since 2008 — and 84 of them were quarter horse racehorses, Pelzel-McCluskey said. “Those are 100 percent preventable cases,” she said. “They should never occur, because it’s a human causing the transmission.”

Those numbers, along with the total known cases of both diseases since 2008 — 908 — are probably severe undercounts, Pelzel-McCluskey said, because bush track horses are rarely tested. In May, 26 quarter horses in California, [all of them linked to bush track racing](#), were discovered to have EIA and were euthanized.

Pelzel-McCluskey warned that if piroplasmosis continues to spread, the disease could be considered endemic in the United States, affecting the value of equine exports. “This is a huge potential trade problem for us,” she said.

The growth of the bush circuit is also problematic for horses on the regulated quarter horse racing circuit, the dustier cousin of thoroughbred racing popular in the American southwest and Mexico. Janet VanBebber, chief racing officer of the American Quarter Horse Association, the official breed registry, said a high percentage of the quarter horses racing on bush tracks wound up there after stints in regulated racing.

Among them are some of the top horses in the sport, including Trump My Record, which won [nearly \\$800,000](#) as a 2-year-old gelding in 2019. After Trump My Record was auctioned to a Texan horseman for \$460,000, VanBebber and others in the sport watched with dismay as the vaunted horse surfaced at bush tracks. “What I hear is that they made their money back in two match races just by the gate,” VanBebber said of the horse’s backers.

Social media promotions show that Trump My Record has made multiple appearances at Rancho El Centenario and is [scheduled to race there this month](#). Horsemen with Cuadra Cristo Rey, which races Trump My Record, did not respond to several attempts to contact them for comment.

VanBebber said the bush circuit cuts into the business of regulated quarter horse racing, which, like thoroughbred racing, is facing dwindling popularity and profits while reckoning with scandals of [synthetic cheating](#) and [horse deaths](#). The tracks also make it impossible for her association to do its primary job, which is keeping tabs on earnings and pedigree.

“We have areas of concern for the horse, for the industry and for what we’re missing out on as a breed registry,” VanBebber said. “It saddens us. It’s gotten to where a lot of our owners are hesitant to sell horses at auction because they can’t determine where the horse goes.”

The brazenness and apparent deep pockets of some horsemen on the bush circuit have led to suspicion that organized crime is involved. **Mexican drug criminals have a long history of obsessing over and spending wildly on quarter horses, both for private match races in Mexico and on the biggest stages of the American quarter horse circuit, which one drug family [infamously dominated for several years last decade](#).**

Speaking generally on bush tracks, District Attorney Jonathan Adams, who oversees prosecutions in Lamar County and two others, said that because of the many avenues of potential illegality — including gambling, doping, money laundering and smuggling horses across the border — “this is exactly the kind of operation that the cartel gets involved in.”

“It’s not a local crime,” Adams added. “It’s absolutely a regional, if not multi-county, multi-state, multi-national kind of operation.”

There have been sporadic police raids of bush tracks over the years, such as [the arrest of 100 people in Oklahoma in 2007](#) and syringes and shock devices being [seized alongside a spate of arrests at an operation in Texas in 2019](#). In both cases, the charges against the track operators included that they had broken laws involving unregulated horse racing. But such statutes don't exist in every state. A 2007 raid of a large bush track in Gillsville, Ga., roughly 120 miles northeast of Milner, [ended with its operator being found not guilty](#) of hosting illegal gambling.

Even English noted that the amorphous quality of the bush circuit makes it nearly impossible to police. "Part of the obstacle I face in doing this is ... these folks disband and then reassemble with different cuadras, different names and different people, regularly," English said. "There's no practical way to keep up with that." VanBebber said she has attempted to convince law enforcement authorities to lead a wider takedown of bush tracks, with little success: "I've had discussions before with different entities, and nobody seems to have the resources to pool their assets to go get them." Pelzel-McCluskey said the onus was on the quarter horse industry to agitate for unlicensed racing to become an illegal activity under federal law.

"You can sit here and say, 'We have sanctioned legal sport with oversight and medications monitoring and track surface monitoring and safety and health,' " Pelzel-McCluskey said in describing the regulated industry's dilemma. " 'And we have this other thing over here that does none of that.' "She added, "The industry has to kind of save themselves on this." When Brutz English said he first learned about the bush circuit from a hired farmhand over a decade ago, he happened to be in the market for a new way to make a living.

A trainer, holding a syringe in his right hand, injects the horse Chiquibaby at Rancho El Centenario:



A trainer, holding a syringe in his right hand, injects the horse Chiquibaby at Rancho El Centenario. (The Washington Post) (The Washington Post)

The Englishes are a local institution — and more recently a font of small-town intrigue. The 200-acre farm that is now home to Rancho El Centenario has been in the family for more than 100 years, dating from when, according to [its website](#), the primary production was tobacco, cotton and pecans.

But in 2005, Brutz's brother, John "Mac" English, was convicted of attempting to arrange for a friend to kill two game wardens so they couldn't indict him for hunting violations. As detailed in court records, his pal was wearing a wire when Mac offered him [some stolen four-wheelers](#) as payment for the double murder, which was not consummated. (Mac English, who served 15 years in prison, told The Post that his banter was not serious and the case against him "wasn't remotely true.")

At the time, Brutz English was the top public defender for four counties south of Atlanta, but he had his own criminal trouble. The same year as his brother's conviction, he was charged with vehicular homicide after he slammed his GMC Yukon into the back of a Ford Mustang, killing the former city manager inside. English, who recently blamed a "moment's inattention" for the wreck, pleaded no contest and was sentenced to probation and a fine of \$1,000.

He also was charged that year after police found in his possession a stolen four-wheeler and other property given to him by his brother, according to court records. He resigned as public defender and was ultimately convicted of receiving stolen property.

English served two years in prison before being released in 2008, and he was later pardoned by a state board that deemed him "fully rehabilitated." After researching his farmhand's suggestion and seeing the lucrative potential of the bush-track business, he opened Rancho El Centenario in 2013. Because Georgia doesn't have state-sanctioned horse racing, there are no corresponding laws banning unregulated races. "You can race butterflies and ostriches if you want to," English said.

English initially devised a novel system for charging admission by sitting at his ranch's front gate with a bucket of pecans. "I couldn't sell tickets to the races because I wasn't licensed as a commercial enterprise," he said. "But I could absolutely sell you a \$20 pecan, and you could absolutely come in and watch the races for free."

Ultimately, he applied for and, over the objections of some neighbors, received an "agritourism" exemption that allowed him to turn his ranch into an attraction. Lamar County Commissioner Nancy Thrash, who voted for English's exemption, claimed she and her colleagues were initially hoodwinked by English and what she described as his superior legal mind. "He said he was going to grow blueberries and bring schoolkids over and let them pick blueberries," said Thrash, who acknowledged English "kind of caught us with our pants down."

"The horse track was for training horses — that was the way it was originally presented," said Commissioner Robert Heiney, who also recalled plans involving blueberries and strawberries.

English denied deceiving the commissioners. "In truth, they didn't ask a lot of questions," he said.

At a county commission meeting in 2013, after it was clear English's primary business would not involve berry-picking, resident Julia Heidbrink described, in a warning that would prove prophetic, the hazards of an unregulated horse track. "He needs safety standards, ambulance support, insurance and a veterinarian," Heidbrink said. "There are issues with drugging horses to make them run a little bit faster. ... It's an accident waiting to happen."

Security pins a man to the ground following a fistfight at Rancho El Centenario. (The Washington Post)

In an interview, English insisted that the only reason some residents and public officials have turned against him is his client base. With Georgia's rapidly growing Hispanic population having topped 1 million in the latest census, English — who doesn't speak Spanish and refers to his stable hands as "my Mexicans" — said he has recognized a growing demographic that the less tolerant would rather ignore. "A few of my neighbors don't like the fact that I bring all of these Latinos to this town," English said. "They've said to my face, 'Hey, if you had a bluegrass event, I'd be there.' But when they hear that mariachi music, it drives them crazy."

A 911 call from a resident this spring supported that supposition. The resident, who said he lived a mile from English's ranch, yelled at a dispatcher, "We can't even sit down and enjoy TV or eat dinner with all that Mexican music banging around down here!"

It's not only the horses that end up on the bush circuit after being cast off from regulated racing. It's the horsemen, too. Roman Chapa, a frenetic former bull rider with a knack for surviving ugly spills, was for years one of the most prolific, and scandal-plagued, jockeys in thoroughbred and quarter horse racing, racking up nearly \$30 million in winnings for his horse's owners. But in 2015, he was suspended by Texas racing officials for five years after he was caught possessing a shock device for the third time in his career. The devices are banned in regulated racing because they are considered cruel to the animals, can lead to accidents and are deemed a form of race-fixing.

It was an open secret how Chapa, who owed a \$100,000 fine to regulators, made a living while banished from legitimate racing. Social media posts and [news reports documented](#) he had suffered severe injuries while racing at a bush track in Tennessee. Jockey Roman Chapa died following an accident at Rancho El Centenario. (Tom Fox/Dallas Morning News/AP)

In 2020, when Chapa attempted to regain his licenses, an Oklahoma Horse Racing Commission attorney asked him if he had participated in any unregulated races while suspended. "No, sir, I've been working horses," Chapa replied under oath. But Oklahoma regulators denied him, as did those in New Mexico, and the premier quarter horse track in Texas said he was no longer allowed on the premises, state regulatory records show. So Chapa headed to Georgia.

On March 21, 2021, videos and social media posts from that day show, he was racing in a 250-yard match at Rancho El Centenario. His horse tumbled. Both the animal and Chapa lay still in the dirt.

An off-duty sheriff radioed in the accident, records show, but Chapa initially declined to be taken away in an ambulance. Then English, who was at the track, made a follow-up 911 call. "The guy refused to go, but he is now losing consciousness again," he explained matter-of-factly to the dispatcher.

In social media posts, Chapa's wife described a litany of injuries he suffered, including a "broken jaw (both sides), broken clavicle, broken vertebrae, broken ribs, and multiple small brain bleeds." His months-long struggle to recover [included 45 days](#) in a medical coma.

He was discharged from the hospital in July 2021 but died of his injuries a few weeks later, [according to an obituary](#). He was 50. Chapa's widow and his most recent agent did not respond to multiple interview requests.

It was one of several serious racing accidents and breakdowns at the track in recent years, according to social media posts, police records and footage compiled by PETA.

“We got a horse fall over on somebody,” English told an emergency dispatcher following an accident in 2017. Two years later, supporters of a jockey raised money for his “[fractured spinal cord](#)” after a horse rolled over him. Other 911 calls described a man who broke a leg while bull riding and another who had a finger cut off.

In [its letter](#) to the Lamar County authorities, PETA cited more than a dozen accidents resulting in the deaths of horses since 2018 that the group said were either witnessed firsthand by their investigators or discovered by scouring social media and track video. Footage [captured in March](#) and cited in PETA’s complaint showed a horse struggling to stand with a broken front leg before being shot in the head and dragged off with a tractor.

English said the incident was handled in the most humane fashion possible. “The PETA folks would rather you watch it writhe on the track until you can get the vet down there with an IV, but we’d rather put it out of its misery,” English said. “We have done that more than once, and we will continue to do that, because horses get injured on the track all the time.”

English said injuries and deaths are a fact of all horse racing. But, he acknowledged, “Certainly there are things that would make racing a horse [at his track] more dangerous than elsewhere. We don’t have the facilities and infrastructure that a place like the Kentucky Derby does. Consequently, there is less security and less health and safety stuff.” He compared his track to the budget environs of a minor league baseball club. “And nobody wants to outlaw Triple-A ball,” he reasoned.

It wasn’t long after Chapa’s accident, PETA investigators said, that they received via email a tip about Rancho El Centenario, alleging illegal gambling and that horses were being abused, neglected and shot dead. The lead investigators — a husband-and-wife duo who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear for their safety — arrived at the track within a few months.

The investigators, White vegans who used high school Spanish to order elotes without cheese or mayonnaise from the concession stand, acknowledged that they stood out. They described skulking around to watch injections and then scooping spent syringes off the ground. In addition to using body-worn cameras, they said, the male investigator leaned into his gringo persona and openly recorded with a camcorder — until English drove up and asked him to put it away. Arthur “Brutz” English IV, the owner of Rancho El Centenario.

“You’re scaring my customers,” they said English told them. “They think you’re ICE.” English recalled the conversation similarly, adding that he was “pleasant as peaches” to the strange interloper.

The PETA investigators later called the operation “one of the most dangerous things we’ve ever done,” up there with infiltrating a crocodile slaughterhouse in Zimbabwe.

In the letter that PETA’s lawyers sent to the local authorities, the group called for criminal charges including cruelty to animals, illegal gambling, distribution of controlled substances, public nuisance and racketeering.

PETA also [sent a letter to authorities in Whitfield County, Ga.](#), making similar allegations about a bush track there, Rancho El Canelo, where many of the same horsemen operate. When a reporter dialed the number listed on its Facebook page, the person who answered the phone denied any knowledge of the ranch. Following the online publication of this story, that track canceled its weekend races, [according to a promotional page](#) — which in Spanish cited “personal reasons” and wrote, “no pasa nada,” meaning nothing was wrong.

District Attorney Adams, whose jurisdiction includes Rancho El Centenario, said that even before reading the letter from PETA, he knew of English’s bush track by reputation.

"I've not been to the ranch, but I've heard that there's inappropriate and illegal and horrible things that are going on, and I certainly don't condone any of it," Adams said.

And members of the sheriff's office have long had a good view of the goings-on at Rancho El Centenario. English hires off-duty deputies to help with security, and on the race day observed by The Post, they were on the property in department cruisers. Sheriff Brad White did not respond to repeated interview requests.

Adams suggested that he and the sheriff were constrained from cracking down on Rancho El Centenario because of an investigation "above both our offices" — hinting that federal authorities were involved. Adams expressed some impatience with the situation, remarking, "Sometimes you get really tired of waiting."

A spokesperson for the Department of Justice's Middle District of Georgia said the office "does not confirm or deny pending investigations."

English said he was unaware of any ongoing law enforcement investigation into his ranch, federal or otherwise. But following the online publication of this story, English cited Adams's insinuation of a federal investigation — and potential immigration scrutiny — as the reason for the cancellation of Sunday's races. "They don't care about the racehorse stuff," English said of his customers, meaning allegations of doping and other abuse — "It's all about that particular comment."

But before this interruption — which English insists is temporary — his business has been so good that it's inspired other operators in town.

In January, another Milner resident, former restaurateur Randolph "Rudy" Vaughn, held the first races on a track he built on his property, which he has named Rancho El Caporal.

Some neighbors complained in county commission meetings about Vaughn attracting crowds and loud music. Commissioner Thrash, who voted for a zoning exemption for Vaughn's property, said she again felt duped — she believed he wanted to host "birthday parties and family reunions" on his property.

But Vaughn denied deceiving anybody, being a nuisance to his neighbors or copying English's business model: "It's just like in any town: They got two McDonald's, you know what I mean?"

English said he's not concerned about his business being undercut by the new guy.

"Rudy Vaughn's not the competition," English said. "He's got a little itty-bitty track and won't ever have the facilities that I have. He's just a copycat."