

San Francisco Standard Articles – Chaparral Corporation

Broken horses: Investigation uncovers years of injuries, mistreatment at Golden Gate Park

After The Standard inquired about troubles at city-owned stables, a horseback riding company's permits were revoked in San Francisco and at Camp Mather.



Illustration by Clark Miller for The Standard; Photos by The Standard; Courtesy Rori Greene
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By [Gabe Greschler](#) and [Annie Gaus](#) Published May 17, 2024 • 12:22pm

Nestled within the greenery of Golden Gate Park and just a short trot to the Pacific Ocean lies a bucolic portal to the past. At Bercut Equitation Field, horses are the primary form of transport and the smell of manure overpowers the park's usual eucalyptus scent.

But the idyllic setting masks an uglier reality, as revealed by a three-month investigation into Chaparral Corporation, the horseback riding company based out of San Francisco's most beloved park.

After the Standard uncovered long-standing evidence of mistreatment of animals and workers and injuries that, in one instance, resulted in an ongoing lawsuit, the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department said this week it had revoked Chaparral's permits to operate in Golden Gate Park and Camp Mather, the family summer camp near Yosemite run by the department.

In interviews with The Standard, employees and volunteers described inadequate care and a grueling work environment for horses that may have endangered both the animals and riders at the sites run by Chaparral.

Workers and concerned members of the public said they tried to alert city agencies about problems with Chaparral and were baffled that the company was allowed to continue operating, even after employees submitted a 41-page whistleblower report to the city describing unsuitable conditions at the site and claims surfaced that the company could be putting children at risk.



Chaparral, which offered camps, lessons and trail rides at Bercut Equitation Field, was accused of providing inadequate care for its horses and running an unsafe operation. | Source:Morgan Ellis/The Standard

Complaints about the company did not stop Recreation and Parks from renewing Chaparral's permit multiple times over about five years until The Standard reached out in May to the city with questions about the company's track record.

In response to The Standard's inquiries about Chaparral, the parks department said this week it revoked the company's permit. On Friday, the company informed its customers in an email that it will vacate the property within 10 days.

Chaparral will also be kicked out of Camp Mather and will no longer be considered for plans to bring horseback riding to McLaren Park, the department said. The city says it will try to find a new horseback-riding company starting in June.

"While an investigation determined Chaparral met the minimum standards for horse care under the law, we no longer believe they meet the high standards we expect from our park operators," parks department spokesperson Tamara Aparton wrote in a statement.

'The animals were there to make money ... and that's it'

Patricia Hontalas, who grew up riding horses with her sisters in Golden Gate Park, took a job helping run Chaparral's camp in April 2020, early on in the pandemic, when her day job as a real estate agent became difficult.

Chaparral, which began operating in the city in 2019, was the first horseback riding company to enter the park in years. Soon after starting the job, however, Hontalas observed filthy stalls, high employee turnover and punishing work schedules for the horses. In addition to long days carrying riders, many of whom were children, the horses were often taken out during the evenings and for private lessons, Hontalas said.

"Honestly, the horses never got a day off," she said. "And these are the end-of-life kind of horses, the ones that should be turned out and not ridden, you know, six days a week."

In September 2020, Hontalas was riding a horse named Beamer when a tree branch fell on a nearby car, spooking the horse and causing it to rear up. The animal fell on top of Hontalas, landing her in the hospital for three days with an injured ACL and leaving her with a \$6,400 bill and pain that lingered for months.

Adding insult to injury, Hontalas said Chaparral stiffed her on her final paycheck—a claim echoed in a class-action lawsuit filed in 2022 by former employees who accused the company of wage violations. (That lawsuit was settled in March for about \$151,000. Chaparral denied the claims in the filing and told The Standard it had settled to avoid expensive legal fees.)

Hontalas is one of 11 current and former Chaparral employees and volunteers—many with years of experience in the equestrian industry—who spoke with The Standard and painted a disturbing picture of a company that prioritized the bottom line above the care of its horses, staff or riders.

Some of the employees' claims were documented in an anonymous whistleblower report that was shared with the Recreation and Park Department and Animal Care and Control in 2021.

[The 41-page report](#), which includes photographic evidence and screenshots of emails, raised concerns such as a lack of shelter, equipment, hoof care and health care at the Golden Gate Park site. Among other issues, the document said that the horses were sleep-deprived and physically exhausted, sometimes falling asleep in the middle of riding lessons.

Pictures included in the document show horses with fungal infections on their foreheads and hindquarters, sores on their bodies from ill-fitting saddles and hooves that were chipping away.



Health issues documented by Chaparral employees in 2023 included a wound on the leg of a horse named Rex, left, and a saddle sore on a horse named Stetson, right. | [Source: Courtesy Sierra Healy](#)

“They were cheap,” said Sunny Hibbits, who worked for Chaparral for about a year starting in July 2020, in an interview. “They didn’t care.”

Some of the former employees and volunteers who spoke with The Standard said they resigned because of what they saw as neglect of the horses’ well-being.

“The animals were there to make money,” said Sara Esquivel, who worked at one of Chaparral’s South Bay locations for about five months in 2021 after about two decades of experience managing private barns, “and that’s it.”

Employees who resigned from Chaparral as recently as last month said conditions haven’t improved.

Sierra Healy, who joined the company in April 2023 as an instructor and said she has been working with horses her entire life, called Chaparral’s practices “really unethical.”

“They were forcing us to use these horses four to five hours straight very regularly,” Healy said. “And when I say working, I mean lessons with kids and rides on Ocean Beach. Intense work.

“Because of that, the horses weren’t able to keep any weight on. You can see their ribs. They have no muscle mass,” Healy continued. “We had a couple of horses that would lie down and start rolling with a kid on their back. It’s mind-boggling that they’ve continued to operate like this for so long.”

Chaparral’s owners, Susan Pennell and Shawn Mott, maintained that they tried their best to operate in a park that can sometimes present chaotic or difficult situations for an equestrian company.

“I don’t feel like fighting for it anymore,” said Mott about his business dealings with the city. “I’ve been doing it for 50 years. I know what I’m doing. All the professionals, veterinarians, doctors, animal control people, government agencies, entities, they asked us to be at these places.”

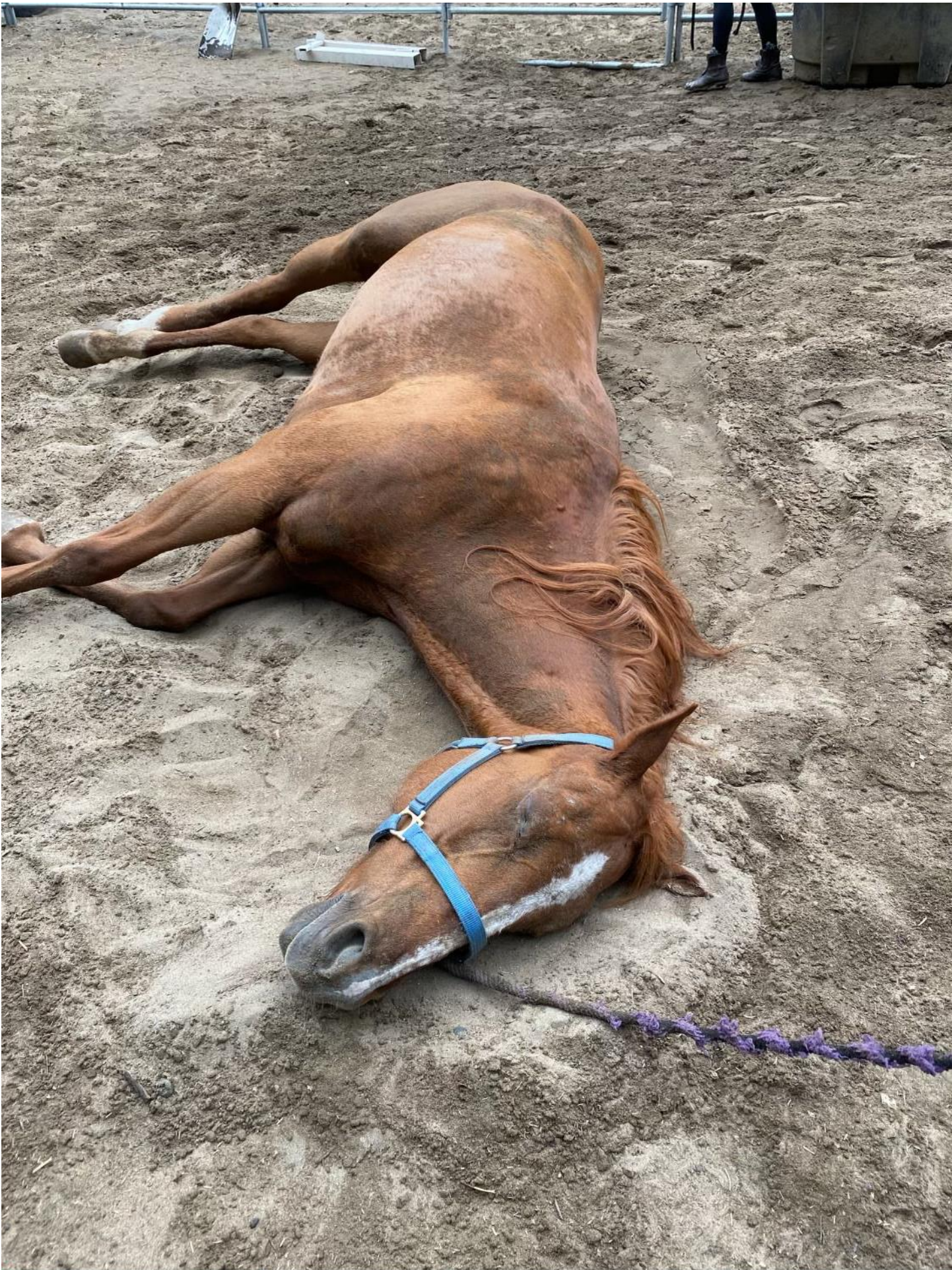
In a roughly hour-and-a-half-long interview, Pennell and Mott pushed back against the allegations levied against them, asserting that they have offered their horses adequate medical treatment and a caring environment with enough food, water and shelter.

Longtime employee Jenny Bryant backed Chaparral’s owners, saying the company gives the utmost attention to its animals. “We treat these horses like the employees that they are,” she said. “They deserve care. They deserve food. They love being ridden.”

‘The video, honestly, was quite disturbing’

Chaparral [was co-founded by Mott and Pennell](#) in 2009. Both of them said they have been around horses since their childhoods: Pennell’s father got her a horse when she was just 5 years old, while Mott has been in the business since he was 10. The company oversees a variety of riding experiences, including trail and pony rides, lessons and children’s camps. Aside from its soon-to-be-closed operations at Golden Gate Park and Camp Mather, Chaparral has three locations in the South Bay and one near Monterey Bay.

In San Francisco, the company operated out of the circular field just off Martin Luther King Jr. Drive and housed its animals inside stalls just a quick walk to the west. Rides and lessons can cost up to \$125, depending on length and type. Camps cost up to \$750 for the week. In San Francisco, the city collected 5% of the company’s revenue under the terms of the permit.



A horse named Beamer exhibited declining health during its time at Chaparral, according to employees. | [Source: Courtesy Rori Greene](#)

Not long after Chaparral began operating in Golden Gate Park in 2019, problems arose. Emails unearthed through a public records request show that multiple members of the public reached out to the city with concerns about the operation in 2020.

By 2021, a veteran animal cruelty investigator named Jennifer Hack was in touch with the city about Chaparral's track record after the whistleblower complaint came to light and a video surfaced involving a horse named Jack.

In the video, which was obtained by The Standard, Jack is seen repeatedly struggling to get up after lying down and defecating on himself. The videos and a two-page memo from a volunteer were sent to the city's Animal Care and Control department.

"The video, honestly, was quite disturbing," said Hack, who has been involved in animal cruelty investigations for over 40 years. She noted that Jack's elevated respirations, which are apparent in the video, indicate a horse in pain.

"I mean, there are some things—and I go back to Jack again—that definitely, in my opinion, fall within the animal cruelty laws," she said.

Documents show that Chaparral kept Jack working despite concerns about his health.

On Aug. 5, 2021, an unnamed animal control officer visited Chaparral and reported finding Jack wearing a saddle, indicating that he was working. They instructed an employee on-site to remove the horse from any duties. After the officer ordered Jack to receive veterinarian care, they inquired with Chaparral's Pennell about any of the other animals needing care.

"[Pennell] said, 'I don't know!' and told me how busy she is doing payroll," the animal control officer wrote in their report. On Aug. 8, 2021, emails show animal control officer Rebecca Fenson writing to Hack, "I am in touch with San Jose Animal Services and Peninsula Humane Society about Chaparral's Milpitas and Woodside facilities. My first concern is ensuring that Jack is not working anywhere."

Emails show that both Fenson and Brian DeWitt, a property manager at the Recreation and Park Department, expressed concerns about Chaparral after discovering Jack's condition.

On Aug. 13, 2021, Fenson wrote that she was "alarmed" to hear that Chaparral was trying to get permits to run a horse-drawn carriage operation in Golden Gate Park. A couple weeks later, Fenson emailed DeWitt saying she had unsuccessfully tried to get Jack's veterinarian records from Chaparral, describing the situation as "suspicious" and "absurd."

The city eventually received veterinarian records about Jack in September. The parks department also implemented a reporting system in which Chaparral was required to submit monthly health assessments.

Those assessments, which were reviewed by The Standard, included checklists for each of Chaparral's horses that were completed by the company's own staff.

When asked whether the self-evaluation system posed any conflict of interest, a spokesperson for Animal Care and Control said the department had provided the company with the University of California Davis Center for Equine Health's horse care guide.

"It is entirely appropriate for facilities to use for self-evaluation," wrote Animal Care and Control spokesperson Deb Campbell. "[The agency] refers to this document, for example, when scoring body condition. As a reminder, these guidelines are not laws, so we cannot enforce them."

When asked by The Standard about Jack, Chaparral's management said they did not recall putting the horse to work after the video of him on the ground was taken.

"What happened with Jack is this sand [at Golden Gate Park] is very deep," said Bryant, the longtime Chaparral employee. "So when he lays in it, sometimes it was hard for him to find footing to get up. All you have to do is kind of give him an extra pull. He was born in '87. So he was older than me."

Both Fenson and DeWitt deferred questions to their department spokespersons.

Animal Care and Control spokesperson Campbell said her department had visited Chaparral a total of 14 times between 2019 and 2023, most of the inspections unannounced. She said the department never found evidence that would result in a referral for an animal cruelty case to the District Attorney's Office.

Recreation and Parks spokesperson Tamara Aparton said her agency "immediately" got in touch with Animal Care and Control after the 41-page whistleblower complaint emerged and implemented the monthly health reporting system.

"We were aware they had some issues, but our understanding was deepened by the documents you sent and some of your reporting," Aparton told the Standard.

'It could have been so much worse'

It wasn't just employees raising concerns about the condition of horses in Golden Gate Park.

Since at least 2020, records show that members of the public lodged additional complaints about Chaparral after observing animals seemingly in distress and alarming incidents involving children riders.

In February 2020, an email with pictures [attached](#) from a resident claiming to be a former horse owner told Animal Care and Control they saw "inches of feces and urine" at Chaparral's Golden Gate Park stables and animals' food covered in their own waste.

In July 2020, a woman named Carole Holt emailed Animal Care and Control with [pictures](#) of a horse she saw in Golden Gate Park with an open wound.

"Please help these poor horses," she wrote. "It breaks my heart."

In 2023, a woman named Amber Santiago, who worked at Chaparral's Camp Mather location during the summer, reported that children as young as 3 had been bucked off horses and that a horse with a broken leg had been left untreated for nearly 24 hours, among other incidents.

In March 2023, a woman who brought her children to Chaparral sent a message to Supervisor Connie Chan's office and Recreation and Parks about two incidents she witnessed in Golden Gate Park.

The woman reported a young girl riding an out-of-control horse with "nobody at Chaparral" intervening until the child's father grabbed her off the animal. In another case, she said a group of girls who had been thrown off and abandoned by their horses in the park were discovered unsupervised by police officers.

Patricia Rossello, whose young daughter attended a Chaparral horse camp in Golden Gate Park in April 2023, described a similar incident in an interview.

Her daughter, who was 7 years old at the time, was on a trail ride with a group of other children when her horse got spooked and bolted, according to Rossello. Her daughter fell off the horse and into the dirt and was "abandoned" by the Chaparral employee leading the ride, she said. Bystanders discovered the girl and called the police.

"She was crying. She was shaking. It was terrible," Rossello said. "It could have been so much worse."

Chaparral's Pennell and Mott disputed the account, saying an employee did stay at the scene of the incident.

Rossello's daughter sustained a large bruise along her side but had no major injuries. Others weren't so lucky.

Christine Kendrick, who took a beginner horseback riding lesson in Golden Gate Park in May 2022, suffered a broken back and pelvis after a horse named Spirit abruptly took off running, according to a lawsuit filed in San Francisco Superior Court last year.

Kendrick was hospitalized for more than a week and is still undergoing treatment for her injuries, according to her attorney, Ryan Vlasak.

Kendrick's lawsuit accuses Chaparral of gross negligence and argues that the city was aware of dangerous conditions at Bercut stables but allowed the company to operate anyway.

“Rarely do we file a lawsuit and immediately receive so much support and corroborating information from the public,” Vlasak said.

“We learned Chaparral did not provide adequate rest, shelter, or veterinary care to its own horses, nor did they establish an adequate shelter where their horses could sleep. ... And when horses are not cared for adequately, they become much more dangerous to ride.”

Jen Kwart, the city attorney’s spokesperson, said the permit agreement the city entered into with Chaparral shields the city from any liability with regard to the horseback riding operations in Golden Gate Park.

“The City does not bear responsibility in this matter,” Kwart wrote.

The case is currently set for trial later this year.

Pennell said Kendrick lost her balance while riding the horse and alleged that she walked away from the scene and “claimed the injuries later.”

Pennell added, “We always check our clients. We don’t let them get off the ground or do anything until we know they’re OK. That’s super important.”

Hack, the longtime animal cruelty investigator, said that horses experiencing pain and discomfort can be more prone to bucking off riders.

“We’re dealing with a lot of horses with saddle sores or rubs from the girth, any of which obviously can cause pain,” she said. “It’s very possible that a lot of the issues of people getting bucked off have been also a pain-related response.”

‘I couldn’t handle the horse stuff and lying to the public’

Rori Greene, who took the video of Jack, volunteered at Chaparral’s Golden Gate Park site between September 2020 and June 2021. Greene saw it as a way for her to ride, get more experience around animals and support the return of horses to the park.

Greene said she was shocked by what she saw at the site, describing dirty stalls and infrequent visits by a farrier—the person responsible for trimming and shoeing the horses’ hooves—who are supposed to service the animals every eight weeks.

But the last straw for Greene involved Beamer, the horse involved in the accident with Hontalas.

“When I started, [Beamer] was beautiful and healthy,” said Greene. “Over a number of months, she looked worse and worse. She looked like she had stomach ulcers because she was getting thinner, biting at people when being tacked up [with a saddle] and struggling to perform during lessons.”

Greene said Chaparral’s owners “routinely dismissed” health concerns raised by staff and that Beamer was working seven days a week in the midst of her health issues.

Beamer’s condition started worsening in June 2021, after “several weeks of weight loss,” according to staffers’ written account of the incident. Then, toward the end of the month, workers witnessed Beamer collapse in the middle of a camp session.

“She laid down repeatedly, despite efforts to keep her standing and walking, which is evidence of extreme duress,” a staff account states.

Chaparral’s Mott said Beamer suffered from a case of colic, a term for abdominal pain in a horse. He said that Beamer was brought to a hospital after she collapsed but had to be euthanized shortly after.

“We’ve been doing this for a long time,” Mott said. “And these poor girls, they’ve just never seen death before. And God bless them. It’s not easy.”

When asked whether horseback riding should continue in Golden Gate Park, Mott answered in the affirmative, saying the animals had offered San Franciscans a vital resource in the middle of a city.

“I think it should be able to blossom and be shared,” he said. “I think there’s wonderful people here that need horses, and they need horses to better manage themselves and others, and these frickin’ horses can teach you that.”

But Greene said employees at Golden Gate Park left after feeling they were complicit in something wrong.

“I think the whole staff just felt guilty because, despite our individual efforts, we were part of a company that we felt was abusive towards the horses,” Greene said.

Fallon Ramirez, who quit her job with Chaparral in 2021, said she grew uneasy about questions from the public about why a horse looked skinny or whether an animal was a good fit for a beginner.

“I couldn’t handle the horse stuff and lying to the public and covering it all up for them,” Ramirez said.

For animal cruelty investigator Hack, the city’s decision to revoke Chaparral’s operating permits comes as a relief.

She wrote in an email this week in response to the news: “I’m glad they got shut down.”

‘Moving the problem’: Booted from SF, troubled stable relocates horses



A Standard investigation published last week found long-standing evidence of mistreatment of animals and workers at the Chaparral Ranch at Golden Gate Park. | Source:Jungho Kim for The Standard

By [Gabe Greschler](#) Published May 21, 2024 • 5:45am

Visitors to Golden Gate Park will soon no longer see horses in the arena at the Bercut Equitation Field, but questions remain over their future and whether horseback riding should even return to the park.

Chaparral Corporation, the company that provided horseback riding for almost five years in the park, is being kicked out of San Francisco after The Standard [uncovered evidence](#) that it allegedly mistreated its horses and employees and put children in danger.

On Monday morning, an employee who answered the company's main phone line said its 10 horses in San Francisco would be relocated to Chaparral's ranch at San Mateo County's Wunderlich Park in Woodside.

A representative for the county parks department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Susan Pennell, one of the co-founders of Chaparral, declined to discuss the company's exit from Golden Gate Park and Camp Mather, a summer retreat site in the Sierras owned by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department.

"I am not comfortable discussing any information with you," Pennell wrote in a text message on Monday.

Mikaila Garfinkel, a member of the city's Commission of Animal Control and Welfare, told The Standard she was concerned to hear the horses were being moved down south.

"I'm definitely glad they're leaving," Garfinkle said about Chaparral's San Francisco exit. "But one of my first thoughts is: Is this just moving the problem rather than solving it? I'm concerned they're not going to a sanctuary. I'm concerned they're going to be under the quote-unquote *care of Chaparral*."

The company, established in 2009 by Susan Pennell and Shawn Mott, started operations in Golden Gate Park in 2019. Recreation and Parks revoked its permit last week after the Standard inquired about Chaparral's checkered track record.



Shawn Mott, co-founder of Chaparral Ranch, has pushed back against the allegations levied against him and Susan Pennell, asserting that they have offered their horses adequate medical treatment and a caring environment. | Source:Jungho Kim for The Standard

Records show that despite multiple employees and members of the public reaching out to the city for years with warnings and photographic evidence of horse mistreatment at Chaparral, both Recreation and Parks, along with Animal Care and Control, allowed the company to keep operating. City workers even found Chaparral's conduct concerning at times, with one animal control officer describing a delay in retrieving veterinarian records as "suspicious" and "absurd."

Chaparral must close operations by May 25. The city says it will start searching for another horseback riding company in June.

Garfinkle, an animal rights and welfare advocate, said she doesn't think the city should take in another horseback riding company. "I'm very disappointed in Recreation and Parks and Animal Care and Control," she said. "They failed a lot of animals. And they failed a lot of people. ... I just hope they take it very seriously. I'm worried they're not."

'Extremely thin'

By Monday, passersby were still sending in complaints to the city about the condition of the horses.

On Saturday, former volunteer Rori Greene, who was also one of the authors of a 41-page whistleblower report describing unsuitable conditions at the site, reported a horse named Delilah to Animal Care and Control.

In a brief video of Delilah taken on Sunday by Greene, the horse is seen being walked by an employee inside the arena. In the video, Delilah appears thin and walks with a limp. Greene said she was told an animal control investigator would visit the park on Monday.

"She is extremely stiff walking (clearly does not want to move) and seems to be in pain," Greene wrote in an email to animal control.

"Her swayback and skin condition are also worse than in the past. She's also extremely thin with visible ribs and extremely hollow haunches."

Greene reported that staff had informed her that the animal had recently been brought back to the park after spending time at Chaparral's Woodside location "with the full intention of putting her to work per the instructions of the owners."

When asked about Delilah, Animal Care and Control spokesperson Deb Campbell told The Standard, "We will continue to respond to calls we receive. We only have authority in San Francisco."

A video taken by former volunteer Rori Greene on Sunday shows a horse named Delilah walking with a limp.

Stephen McHenry, a longtime horse owner who reviewed Greene's video, said the animal appeared to be "in a fair amount of pain." "I see horses walk every day," said McHenry, who is based in Morgan Hill. "That horse is not walking right. It is definitely lame."

Officials in Milpitas, where Chaparral also offers horseback riding, said they are looking into the company's operations. Santa Clara County Executive James Williams told The Standard on Monday he was referring the case to agricultural and parks officials.

Chaparral was [still operating](#) at Golden Gate Park as of Sunday, according to a Standard reporter who visited the park and observed lessons taking place.

As part of the investigation published on Friday, The Standard found multiple lawsuits filed against the company, including an ongoing case of gross negligence where a woman suffered a broken back and pelvis after a horse took off running in the park.

In addition, 11 current and former employees told The Standard about concerning conditions at the Golden Gate Park ranch, where animals were overworked, underfed and did not receive adequate medical attention. At the center of the claims was the whistleblower report, which detailed horses suffering from fungal infections, open sores and physical exhaustion from overwork and sleep deprivation.

Animal cruelty investigator Jennifer Hack previously told The Standard there's a link between animals in pain and riders getting thrown off.

Chaparral Corporation is being forced to leave Golden Gate Park by May 25 after the city revoked its permit.

"We're dealing with a lot of horses with saddle sores or rubs from the girth, any of which obviously can cause pain," Hack said. "It's very possible that a lot of the issues of people getting bucked off have been also a pain-related response."

Despite warnings from Chaparral employees and multiple members of the public who contacted the city with concerns, Chaparral Corporation had its permit renewed several times since 2019, most recently in December. The company's latest permit was due to expire at the end of June.

In response to the allegations, the city said Chaparral met the minimum requirements for keeping horses at Golden Gate Park but not the “high standards” it expects from operators, a parks department spokesperson told The Standard last week.

Animal Care and Control said it had visited Golden Gate Park’s ranch a total of 14 times between 2019 and 2023 but never found evidence of animal cruelty.

Fears about Golden Gate Park’s mistreated horses piled up for years—but were ignored

By [Gabe Greschler](#) Published May 24, 2024 • 6:00am

When the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department was presented with evidence last week of animal mistreatment, serious injuries and dangers to children during horseback rides at Golden Gate Park’s Bercut stables, it quickly pulled the plug on the activity.

The department—which continued to renew the Chaparral Corporation’s permit to operate riding lessons and horse camps over a period of about five years—said it wasn’t entirely aware of [the deep well of concerns](#) about the equestrian operation until reporters brought it to light.

But interviews and documents unearthed by The Standard show that warning signs were in plain view for years but largely overlooked by San Francisco officials who let a troubled horseback riding company operate in San Francisco’s largest park and at Camp Mather, the city-run family retreat near Yosemite.



Chaparral Ranch has been accused by former employees of neglecting the care of the horses. Documented injuries include a saddle sore on a horse named Stetson, left, and a wound on the leg of a horse named Rex, right. | Source: Courtesy Sierra Healy

In one instance, a woman with decades of experience owning horses repeatedly sounded alarm bells to a myriad of city agencies, including the Recreation and Park Department, the Recreation and Park Commission, the Parks Alliance, Animal Care and Control, the Commission of Animal and Welfare and Friends of Camp Mather, the nonprofit associated with the site.

In emails obtained by The Standard, Rosemary Passantino described a horseback riding company with a seemingly endless number of skeletons in its closet—warnings echoed by Chaparral employees and members of the public who spoke to The Standard as part of a [three-month investigation](#) into Chaparral.

In the end, the parks department continued renewing Chaparral's permits to operate on city land, most recently in December. "The can just kept getting kicked down the road," Passantino said in an interview. "Even after the Covid lockdowns ended. Even after the lawsuits. They just kept kicking that can down the road."



Rosemary Passantino says she repeatedly warned city officials about issues at Chaparral, but her concerns were ignored.
| Source: Juliana Yamada for The Standard

Chaparral and the city now face a gross negligence lawsuit from a woman, Christine Kendrick, who was thrown off a horse during a beginner riding lesson at Chaparral, breaking her back and pelvis. That case is set for trial later this year.

There were other warning signs that Chaparral's operations weren't up to par.

Records show that Chaparral's CEO, Shawn Mott, founded a now-defunct horseback riding company that was the subject of multiple lawsuits in the 2000s. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also found violations at Chaparral in 2022 after the death of an employee.

Recreation and Park Department spokesperson Tamara Aparton confirmed the agency knew about the OSHA violations.

"I think the Recreation and Park Department needs to stand up and take account," said Board President Aaron Peskin. "They're the landlord. They're the lessor and they're the permit issuer. This is what the Recreation and Park Department is supposed to oversee. They've got some answers that they need to account for to the media and to the city."

Chaparral must vacate Golden Gate Park by Saturday after the city revoked its permit last week. It also won't be able to operate at Camp Mather. The company still has locations in the South Bay cities of Woodside, Milpitas and Los Gatos, along with a site near Monterey Bay.

'I don't know how many complaints are going to need to come in'

Passantino, a Marin County parks employee who owns two horses, said her skepticism about the Chaparral Corporation began in February 2020 when she penned an opinion article in the San Francisco Chronicle titled, "[SF must protect horses in Golden Gate Park.](#)"

In the article, Passantino warned that the city was not properly equipped to handle horses in an urban environment, explaining that there was "no influential humane society or animal welfare nonprofit in San Francisco that is focused on protecting equines."

The Chronicle article was just the start. That same month, Passantino reached out to Recreation and Park's property manager, Brian DeWitt, raising questions about how the city would provide proper oversight for Chaparral's horses.

In an emailed response to Passantino, DeWitt said they had provided Chaparral with the University of California, Davis' horse care standards and that Animal Care and Control would be making at least two surprise inspections per year.

"We are not the agency that investigates animal welfare claims, and we are not experts in horse care—that's why we brought in the appropriate agency [Animal Care and Control]," Recreation and Park spokesperson Aparton wrote in a statement. "Their investigation did not find any laws were broken but, resulted in recommendations. We believed these recommendations had been implemented by Chaparral. Your story revealed they likely had not."

Virginia Donohue, the executive director of Animal Care and Control, deferred back to Recreation and Park when asked in an interview about her agency's role in allowing Chaparral to continue.

"I have no control over the permit," she said. "We can go out, we can inspect, you know, we can take an enforcement action if we've got enough. We can help move people into compliance. But we don't issue permits, we don't issue business licenses. That's not what we do. And what was going on [at Chaparral] was not enough to bring a criminal case."

Over the course of years, Passantino's warnings became more stark and ranged from calling out a lack of medical attention at Chaparral's stables to anecdotes about children being bucked off horses.

On July 12, 2023, Passantino began passing along the contact information for employees who had concerns about Chaparral to Animal Care and Control's Officer Rebecca Fenson.

"Is SFACC ok with Parks repeatedly re-issuing temporary permits to a corporation that chronically fails to comply with basic efforts to conduct some oversight over the animal welfare?" Passantino wrote to Fenson.

A day later, Fenson replied, thanking Passantino, and said the agency was "looking into this now."

That same year, Passantino also reached out to Friends of Camp Mather and spoke to its members at a monthly meeting. She said she was told to go to the parks commission. When she reached the parks commission secretary, Passantino said she was told the topic of permitting horses had never been discussed at a public meeting.

"I was sent in circles," said Passantino.

The Recreation and Park Commission had also received warnings in the fall of 2023 from a woman [who told its members](#) about Animal Care and Control having been called out to Chaparral's site "numerous times" and concerns about labor violations.

"A mother recently emailed San Francisco Park staff to let them know about two separate incidents that involved children as young as six being thrown by bucking horses uncontrolled by workers of this corporation," she said to the park commissioners. "Yet, this pilot permit was renewed again shortly after that warning and runs through the end of this year."

Recreation and Park Commission President Kat Anderson did not respond to a request for an interview, nor did Friends of Camp Mather. Park and Recreation's General Manager Phil Ginsburg did not respond to repeated requests for comment about his department's role in renewing Chaparral's permits.

Michael Angelo Torres, who heads the city's Commission of Animal Control and Welfare, said Passantino did reach out to him and his colleagues in June 2023 asking for a horse advocacy group to give a presentation. Torres said the effort didn't pan out since he didn't hear back from Passantino about organizing the presentation.

But the two continued to talk, and he said his commission had in the last few weeks inquired about Chaparral with the Recreation and Park Department and Animal Care and Control.

“Although the Commission was busy looking into a number of other issues at the time, I sincerely wish we would have looked further into the problems with Chaparral,” he wrote in an email to The Standard.

For Passantino, the frustration remains.

“It is like having a tiger at the zoo and you have a zoo keeper who knows nothing about a tiger,” she said about the city’s role in overseeing Golden Gate Park’s horses. “The zoo would never do that.”

Court cases and OSHA violations

Court cases dating back years show that Mott, Chaparral’s CEO, had a checkered history in the horse world.

Before starting Chaparral, Mott ran another horseback riding company called Sunol Wilderness Pack Station, which appears to have dissolved in the mid-2000s. The Standard found a handful of lawsuits dating back to the early 2000s against Mott’s prior company.



A gate and hiking path are seen at Sunol Regional Wilderness, where Chaparral co-founder Shawn Mott led a now-defunct horseback riding company. | Source: Courtesy Google Street View

Echoing the gross negligence claim the company is now facing, one of the lawsuits in 2004 described a woman falling off a horse and claiming the company wasn’t equipped to handle the animal.

The other lawsuits against Mott's company included an eviction notice and two breaches of contract where plaintiffs collectively sought nearly a quarter million dollars. In one case, the suit alleges Mott wasn't making payments on equipment he had rented. In another, a business partner said he hadn't protected him from liabilities arising from the Sunol horseback riding company.

The Standard also found at least six small claims cases against Mott, including instances where plaintiffs said he didn't pay for horse dentistry work or hay delivery.

"I believe, had these agencies done their due diligence, which they were supposed to do, many of these barns wouldn't be in this mess right now," Shelly Cannon, a South Bay horse owner, said of Mott's past. "To this day, we are still perplexed as to why they got to have so many locations—how they were able to spread their tentacles with the reputation that has preceded them for years. And it makes you really wonder, what's behind this?"

In August 2022, a dog walker in Golden Gate Park found a Chaparral employee lying unresponsive in the grass near the company's stables. The employee, who lived on-site in a Chaparral trailer, died at the hospital from cardiac arrest, an account of the incident by OSHA states. Upon an investigation of the company, OSHA [fined](#) Chaparral \$1,050 for a variety of health and safety issues.

Aparton said the agency's process for vetting permittees includes looking back a decade for any litigation.

"All of these are beyond that time frame," wrote Aparton in a statement. "Chaparral provided references from the other cities in which they operate, which we checked, and we also visited their operation before we granted their permit."

After Sunol Wilderness Pack Station dissolved, Mott and Susan Pennell co-founded Chaparral in 2009. In previous comments to the Standard, Mott and Pennell denied accusations of animal mistreatment and claimed they did the best they could operating in San Francisco.

Parks spokesperson Aparton said the department will implement new safeguards to ensure horseback riding can continue at Golden Gate Park.

For Passantino, the Chaparral debacle is a lesson in making sure city governments who want to offer horseback riding have knowledgeable people overseeing it.

"If you're bringing in live animals for whatever it is, recreation or therapy programs, you have to have animal welfare expertise to be able to supervise these operations," she said. "You have to have people with the skills and time and commitment."