

Walking-horse industry not ending abuse

BY TERESA BIPPEN

May 5, 2014



A Tennessee walking horse's padded and chained hoofs.

U.S. AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT

Soring is illegal. Soring is the deliberate infliction of pain upon a horse's front legs and hooves to achieve an exaggerated gait in the show ring. Unfortunately, you wouldn't know soring is illegal because the system is broken.

The Horse Protection Act (HPA), as written and amended in the 1970s to eliminate soring, is no match for the many clever soring and concealment methods now in play to achieve a big lick gait in the Tennessee walking horse world.

How do we know this? The HPA violation database holds over 12,500 violations. The board of directors of the Walking Horse Trainers Association, collectively, holds 160 violations — the leaders of the industry. There is serious defiance of law when the U.S. Department of Agriculture swabbing results at the walking horse's

largest 2013 show (The Celebration) comes back with a 67 percent rate of prohibited foreign substances on swabbed pasterns.

In just the past few years, the USDA has issued nearly 1,500 letters of warning to violators which carry no penalties. Sadly, some of those letters list over 10 violations on several horses on various dates so no one knows the full magnitude of soring abuse. So why does Jim Cortner of the Performance Show Horse Association say abuse has steadily been eliminated?

Although both flat-shod and big-lick performance horses are sored, the vast majority of sored horses are big-lick horses — those wearing stacks and chains. When 81 percent of all USDA-written HPA violations in 2013 were written on big lick performance horses, the problem is easier to identify and eliminate — which is precisely what the Prevent All Soring Tactics (PAST) would accomplish.

PAST disallows stacks and chains in the show ring, and thus, the sored, big lick performance horse. All other show divisions of the Tennessee walking horse are untouched. The bill also increases penalties for soring violations.

For 15 years, Friends of Sound Horses has searched for solutions to end soring. FOSH reviewed technology, research and studies; collected data and built databases; consulted with rural crime experts; held three national conferences; analyzed penalty systems; communicated and met with the USDA countless times, and has concluded that the PAST Act is the only hope for the walking horse to escape never-ending abuse.

Every state veterinary medical association endorses the PAST Act, including those of Tennessee and Kentucky. The 88,000-member American Veterinary Medical Association strongly endorses PAST as does the American Association of Equine Practitioners. The largest equine sports association in the United States, the Kentucky-based United States Equestrian Federation endorses the act.

These groups know and understand humane horsemanship practices and equine sports; they recognize that soring cannot be eliminated while stacks and chains are used in the show ring and the penalty system is weak.

The alternative legislation sponsored by Rep. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee is disastrous for building a humane future for the walking horse. Her bill provides for a single inspection organization comprised of representatives from Tennessee and Kentucky, the two states with the highest soring violation rates. Further, this group is to consult with the aforementioned Walking Horse Trainers Association, with its 160 soring violations, to select additional committee members for the inspection organization.

It is interesting that Cortner claims the industry is 96 percent compliant. That rate is for all walking horse events in the entire United States, including thousands upon thousands of flat-shod horses not enduring stacks and chains. Surely, there must be a reason that Cortner fails to divulge that, of the written HPA violations in 2013, the number of violations for big-lick horses is eight times greater than those written on flat-shod horses.

Cortner decries the demise of the industry if the PAST Act is passed. However, that has already occurred as thousands have left the breed because of the stigma of soring abuse. When the sored big-lick division is eliminated from the show ring, there is no doubt the popularity of this wonderful breed will soar.

For decades, the walking horse has suffered the worst cruelty of any breed of horse in the United States. Isn't it time for it to stop?

Teresa Bippen is president of Friends of Sound Horses, a nonprofit based in St. Louis.

Read more here: <http://www.kentucky.com/2014/05/05/3227578/walking-horse-industry-not-ending.html?sp=/99/349/#storylink=cpy>