

More Than Sore

Compiled by Rhonda Hart Poe



The crowd roars as a singular beast.

Spectators are on their feet, screaming for more.

The objects of their frenzy sweat, strain – and suffer.

But the crowd realizes only the thrill.

Like fans of the old Roman Coliseum, they ignore the

plight of the “entertainment” in their raw lust

to witness the outcome.

Welcome to the world of the sored show horse.

Many gaited horse trainers have built solid careers training sound horses, the old fashioned way – lots of wet saddle blankets, time and skill. Plenty of exhibitors know some competitors sore their horses, but nothing could compel them to do it. Most owners would clobber anyone who hurt their horse. In fact, the vast majority of gaited horses are trained, shown and owned by people who would never stoop to soring. But when they compete, they never know when they might be up against those who don't mind taking the low road when it comes to getting a competitive edge. Soring is cheating. But it is also inhumane and illegal.

Grab a flashlight. We're going over to the dark side.

A Sore Subject

THE CONCEPT OF SORING - or fixing, or burning - is enough to make any decent horseman cringe. According to the USDA, “The application of any chemical or mechanical agent applied to the lower leg or hoof of any horse that causes pain, or, can be expected to cause pain, for the purpose of “enhancing” the horse's gait for show purposes is strictly prohibited under The Horse Protection Act, as amended (15 U.S.C. SS 1821 - 1831).”

There are many ways to sore horses. In some barns, those secrets are as closely guarded as Grandma's Pecan Pie recipe. But in short, **it's hurting the horse to alter his gait.**

Admittedly, the effect is dramatic. As a sore horse tries to escape the pain in his front feet and lower legs, he snatches them up quickly, which gives the “desired effect” of tremendous lift in the front. Meanwhile, he tries to take as much weight as possible off his front feet by shifting his weight to his back feet, squatting down in the rear as he reaches beneath him-





The instant his left foreleg strikes the ground, the horse will pick it up quickly. Meanwhile, the hindlegs reach far beneath the body mass in an effort to take weight of the front feet.

self with his hind legs. The resulting gait has been described as “the praying mantis crawl”.

It All Started When...

THE ORIGIN OF SORING dates back to the early heyday of the Tennessee Walking Horse breed. Not long after the breed association was formed in 1935, Walking Horses shot to fame. Prices skyrocketed as the horses became an all American symbol for the media. But with recession in the 1950s, the Walking Horse industry hit a slump.

Stories differ, but it was around this time that a showman discovered that either mustard oil, being used to treat a hoof ailment, or kerosene used to clean some road tar off the lower legs, caused his horse to step livelier. Come the regular Saturday night show, this horse snapped his feet off the ground like they were on fire. Wild-eyed, he all but flew around the ring, barely setting a foot on the ground before snatching it back up again. The crowd loved it. Experimentation followed. Then imitation. Before long, “the fix” was in.

The spectators loved the action, the judges pinned the flinging feet, the show managers hired the

judges that kept the spectators coming and a vicious cycle was established.

False Impression

“THE THING TO REMEMBER here is that a horse's foot moves toward weight, and away from pain. So make 'em hurt a little, and add a little heavier shoe, and Voila! He steps a little higher and quicker than a natural, unsored horse! That's the sore advantage,” says one veteran of the show scene. Pain combined with long toes, heavy shoes, extreme bits, a rider sitting far back on the horse, and – **never forget the heart and substance at the center of it all – a horse that keeps on trying despite all of that**, creates the spectacle of the sored show horse.

According to USDA statistics, the highest percentage of abusers is among those who show “padded” or “Big Lick” horses. But before we cast all of our stones at those who train and show the horses in big shoes, be aware – they are not alone.

Soring of one type or another has infiltrated horseshows from the Big Lick/padded to Flat Shod (smaller, lighter weight shoes) in Walking Horses, to other breeds, including Racking Horses, Spotted Saddle Horses and Missouri Fox Trotters, and the Paso breeds. This is not just a Tennessee Walking Horse problem.

Soring happens just about anywhere horseshows are held. And that's why it is a problem for all gaited horse enthusiasts, even those who work so hard to put an end to it. It has spread to so many breeds and regions that, to the general public, gaited horses and soring go hand in hand. People not familiar with naturally gaited horses often assume that gait is trained in, nailed on or forced on.

Says a prominent horseshow judge, “It is important that violators

be recognized and punished severely enough to make change an attractive option for them. But media attention leaves the public impression that it (soring) is part and parcel of the industry. The truth is that **most people who show their horses do not sore,**

...soring is a problem for all gaited horse enthusiasts, to the general public, gaited horses and soring go hand in hand.

even though violators can be found at any show. They are aberrations of the gaited horse community, not representatives of it.”

Behind the Shadows

A FORMER INSIDER describes a typical scene. “The first thing you might notice about a sore horse barn is a strange smell. That is, if you're not distracted by a smooth talking barn employee or just run off altogether. Though the barn might have a “public area” much



Harsh, long shanked bits are common at shows in which padded or “Big Lick” classes are held.



of it is off limits. The barn may seem dark because stalls are kept shut up, to keep horses from view and to muffle the sound of groaning. Horses are down a lot. If you get close enough to look at the horses, look in their eyes. That pain shows through.”

Training often starts young. In the padded ranks, yearlings are fitted with a colt “package” - a pad, wedge pad and a keg shoe - to get them used to the shoes, or to compete in conformation classes. Horses are often under saddle before the age of two, years before their bodies have completely formed, before vulnerable bones have fused and before young minds have developed. “Training” may consist only of saddling and a quick lap up and down the barn aisle, then “fixing” to adjust the gait. But conditioning and regular riding are not always part of the program. Rather than spend hours a week over a period of years to develop the classic running walk gait of the breed, some settle for soring. The rationale is simple: “Time is money. Why take months to train a horse, when you can fix them in a fraction of the time?”

One outraged sound trainer put

it bluntly, “... these trainers are only gimmick men, the real trainers died out a long time ago. The owners are as much to blame as the trainers. Everyone wants things done quick. They have no understanding that **time, consistency, and patience are the real trainers.**”

A Little Dab’ll Do Ya

METHODS TO THE MADNESS are plentiful, but because chemicals are the quickest and most predictable, they are the most common form of soring.

Probably the most popular soring agent is **mustard oil**, or *allyl isothiocyanate*. Unlike the mild spice you ooze over hotdogs, this yellow liquid is *nasty* stuff. It is a highly toxic carcinogenic (cancer causing) mutagen (agent that causes inheritable genetic alterations). It absorbs through the skin and into the tissue beneath almost instantly, causing blistering and severe burning. Clever “trainers” combine it with Dimethyl Sulfoxide (DMSO, an absorption enhancer) to help it absorb through the skin even more quickly, and then wrap the area with

Signs of Soring

It is crucial to understand that there are different levels of “sore” from sensitivity to agony.

Here are some telltale signs:

- ❖ Tenderness or swelling on both front feet, or even the hinds. Soring is always bilateral.
- ❖ Scars or granulated bumps along the pasterns or near coronet band.
- ❖ Abnormal, wavy hair growth (following acid treatment) in pastern area.
- ❖ Horse resists handling of feet.
- ❖ Horse lies down frequently for extended periods.
- ❖ Horse shifts weight to hind feet, stands with all fours together, as if “on a quarter.”
- ❖ Exaggerated gait with characteristic pause at breakover (highest point of stride) as horse hesitates before returning sore foot to ground.
- ❖ Oozing of blood or serum from pasterns.
- ❖ Drags front toes, because of the pain on the concussion upon set down.
- ❖ Hocks carried low to the ground and twisting towards the outside when moving.
- ❖ Horse has difficulty walking, may fall, or is resistant to get up.



From the USDA handbook, *Understanding the Scar Rule*





Note the unnatural angles and long toes. In some instances, the bands used to hold on the big shoes have been used to hide screws underneath.

plastic wrap covered with leg wraps to let it “cook”, usually overnight. Exposure can cause convulsion, muscle contractions, gastrointestinal changes, rapid heartbeat to heart attack, fertility problems and fetal death. In people, a good whiff can cause coughing, pulmonary edema, headache, nausea, vomiting and worsen asthma. When a package of mustard oil was accidentally dropped in a post office, after having been illegally mailed by a trainer to farm, the building had to be evacuated and postal employees hospitalized.

Another soring agent is **crotonal or croton oil**, properly known as *crotonaldehyde*. Like mustard oil it is corrosive, toxic and mutagenic. Inhaling the vapor can cause severe mucous membrane irritation, sore throat, coughing, chest pain, nausea, vomiting, collapse or unconsciousness. Contact with the liquid can cause severe irritation with redness, pain and possible 2nd degree burns. Toxic if ingested, it can cause systemic poisoning, damage to the central nervous system and internal tumors and scarring when absorbed through the skin. A clear liquid, with a “tarry” odor, it turns yellow when exposed to air and water.

Crotonal is so strong that it is diluted with kerosene before being applied to horse’s legs and can dis-

solve away tissue to the bone when mixed with DMSO. Like mustard oil, it is quickly absorbed into the horse’s system, which can cause severe colic. What makes it so attractive as a soring agent is that it does its dirty work in the deeper layers of tissue, instead of the epidermis. Horses can pass through palpation at inspection, but still jerk their feet up in gait from the pain of inflamed tissue around the coffin bone. Since it generally takes a day or two to take effect, horses don’t even know what is happening to them as it is applied.

Salicylic Acid or *2-hydroxybenzoic acid* causes skin irritation and may permeate skin in sufficient amounts to cause systemic toxicity. Ingestion in people causes abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, black, tarry diarrhea and kidney damage. White or beige in color, the substance is odorless and soluble in turpentine.

Weak dilutions cause the skin to slough off, which is the preferred method of removing or reducing scar tissue on sored horses, with minimal affect to the regrowth of hair to the area. Since the “scar rule” went into effect, elimination (rather than prevention) of soring scars has become a prime concern of sore horse “trainers”. Horse’s lower legs are subjected to a soaking bath with salicylic acid in order to remove scars. The horse then lies, often for days at a time, in extreme pain while their skin disintegrates. The cycle of soring and de-scarring continues for the show life of the horse. Not all survive this scar cure.

Diesel Oil is a mixture of many chemical compounds. Overexposure can lead to weakness, headache, nausea, confusion, blurred vision and various effects on the nervous system. Inhalation may cause those symptoms plus

rapid breathing, impaired judgment, personality change, memory impairment, convulsions, unconsciousness and death. An aromatic liquid that is clear or light yellow in color, this is the oil of choice when soring with chains.

Fairly new on the soring scene is **collodion**, a mixture of *Proxylin 5-10 %*, *Ethanol 20- 30 %* and *Diethyl Ether 60-70 %*, also known as Proxylin Solution, Nitrocellulose Solution and Nitrocotton Solution. It can be absorbed into the body via skin contact, through the eyes, or by inhalation. A serious skin irritant, it must be handled with rubber gloves, safety glasses complete with side shields and, when possible, a respirator. Prolonged use in horses has caused nausea, colic, dizziness, narcosis (stupor, coma, then death), suffocation due to lack of oxygen, lowering of the blood pressure and damage to central nervous system. It is a light yellow, syruplike liquid.

Not soluble in water it is applied to a horse's legs, after the deeper burning chemicals, to form an airtight seal to keep the heat of the burning agents in the skin and tissue. It takes the place of plastic wrap now banned at so many shows. Rolls and rolls of plastic wrap in a barn are a dead give away of a sore trainer, but since collodion is not easily visible, clever sorers have found yet another way to cheat and continue to do harm. Labeled as a Hazardous Material (EPA Hazardous Waste Number D001), it can explode and release Nitrogen Oxides Hydrogen Cyanide into the air when improperly stored.

Long-term effects are yet to be studied, but those who apply these chemicals, often low-paid stablehands, may not even be aware of the risks. Learning just when, how, and how much to apply is an ongoing science of experimentation. Not enough results in a lack of “flash”,



Big shoes, long toes, exaggerated angles, chains and chemical soring agents all combine to alter the gait of the horse. Note the fine cannon bones of this young animal.

too much, can leave a horse lame, unmanageable, sick, colicky or worse. "Not surprisingly," one industry insider confides, "many sored show horses, if they live through the "training/stewarding" phase of their lives, wind up with severe, often fatal colic between the ages of 10-12." But despite all this, there are still those who believe the ribbons are worth the risks.

Mechanical Soring

OTHER METHODS OF SORING show just how creative animal abusers can be.

Known as "action devices," **chains** worn around the pasterns can range from the mildly annoying to the extremely painful. Alone, the six-ounce chains accepted in the show ring may not harm the horse, but horses sored with heavy chains or chemicals prior to the show date can suffer intense pain in the ring as the lighter chains repeatedly bang against the sore area.

Thankfully, one old standby is falling out of favor with sorers. Though **driving nails or inserting screws** into the hoof wall (up against the sensitive white line) then covering them with pads was once considered an undetectable means of soring, inspectors can now use a fluoroscope to detect

the metal through living tissue. Unfortunately, cheaters know that fluoroscopes are not yet in common use and that there are still plenty of ways to get through the DQP exams undetected. At one show, it was discovered that screws were inserted into the hoof wall



Feet of a victim of prolonged chemical soring. This view was taken after two years of post soring rehabilitation. The horn is almost completely disfigured. The horse is lucky to be standing.

under the band used to keep the heavy shoe on, backed off to get through the DQP inspection, then quickly screwed back into the hoof just before going in to the ring!

Other tricks include placing ball bearings or golf balls cut in half between the pad and the hoof, and placing "V" springs, wrapped with a wad of black electrical tape, over the tip of the frogs to bruise the soles, and removing them just prior to the show.

Unfortunately, **pressure shoeing** is a harder to identify, yet effective, method of torture. The hoof wall is filed down near the quick, which causes the sole to come into direct contact with the metal shoe, causing excruciating pain each time the horse puts weight on the foot. Another technique is to add a welded bead of metal to the under side of the shoe so that it digs into the hoof at each step. Pressure shoeing was actually abetted by at least one shoe manufacturer that made plantation shoes higher on the

inside than on the outside, causing uneven pressure and resulting soreness.

Similar to the above is **road foundering**. The hoof wall may be rasped away nearly to the quick and the shoe nailed on. The horse is then ridden up and down a hard surface, like the roadways on or near showgrounds, until its feet are sore. The next time you see an exhibitor "warming up" on the roadway, take note.

Stewarding

UNFORTUNATELY, SORERS think up deeds even more heinous than the original sins to avoid getting caught.

When a horse goes through the DQP inspection he is subject to visual and physical examination. Horses that flinch at palpation (firm handling of the feet and legs) raise red flags and may be disqualified from competition. So after enduring the pain of soring, horses are taught to deny it.

Techniques defy even the most sick and brutal imaginations. While one "trainer" palpates the painful area, another stands in the ready to steward the animal. The slightest flinch may result in anything from a severe blow to the head, jerking of a cord attached to a metal "alligator clip" clamped to the genitals or anus, a cigarette burn to the tongue or other ingenious method of inflicting even more pain than that of the palpation. The result is that the horse learns to stand still for the lesser of the two punishments.

By contrast, it is almost a blessing that topical anesthetics containing Lidocaine and Benzocaine (known as Hurricane Spray) and temporary freezing agents that numb the pain of inspection have become popular with sorers. Developed for the human dental industry, some of these sprays were "improved" with cherry fla-

voring and coloring, which shows up strikingly on white legs. Non-flavored varieties are the obvious choices for stewarding.

Sour Grapes

ONE OF THE SADDEST things to hear in response the question of soring is the pat answer that "all breeds have their issues". Another common dodge is that those who oppose soring are just losers who can't cut it in competition. Don't be distracted. Soring is still cruel, wrong, cheating and illegal - no matter what the Quarter Horse people do (or don't do), no matter what the Thoroughbred people do (or don't do) and no matter who wins or loses.

A former sore horse exhibitor confesses, "I used to show in the sore horse world and have recently "changed over". I just couldn't tolerate another day of seeing what goes on. I actually left a large Championship show last year after seeing a horse I had shown amateur (and loved) so sore he could barely walk on his own. This horse was turned down and not



A common sight at some shows, a vast and varied assortment of chains for each trainer.

allowed to show, but the trainer and owner put on an "exhibition" in the warm-up ring to many cheers from the crowd that gathered. They actually enjoyed seeing this poor horse, obviously in pain, perform a "wildly exaggerated walk." It is very sad that people will put a blue ribbon over the well-being of an animal...but to some winning is everything. I prefer to remain anonymous; as my goal is not to hurt any of the people I've been acquainted with in the past. I have told them why I quit showing and that I disagree with their methods of training and hope they someday will see the reality of what they are doing. I, however, am not out to "ruin them personally" just out to stop the abuse. I just let them know I'd be on the other side working just as hard at making things right as I did at doing things the wrong way. This is an industry where I grew up, lot of friends and family involved. I supported the industry for many years... advertising, showing, buying. I plan to work just as hard to promote the sound horse and end the abuse!"

It may be prudent to remember that **overwhelmingly, those who abuse children or partners often start out abusing animals.**

Horse Protection Act

FED UP BY THE INHUMANE treatment of horses, activists managed to get the Horse Protection Act (HPA) passed in 1970. This Federal law prohibits sored horses from participating in exhibitions, sales, shows, or auctions and prohibits drivers from hauling sored horses across State lines to compete. It does not prevent soring.

The responsibility to enforce the law fell to the Veterinary Medical Officers (VMOs) of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). But

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Congress failed to fund the USDA to carry out its duty and instead amended the law in 1976, allowing the very industry for which the law was written to train its own inspectors. People trained to detect soring, called Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs), are certified by the USDA to inspect horses at the shows and write tickets. They look for scars, swelling, tenderness, abrasions, bleeding, or oozing serum particularly around the coronet band, the area above the hoof, the front and rear pasterns, and the bulb of the heel. Some are more dedicated than others.

An attempt to alter the Act in 1999 called for an Operating Plan (OP) to clarify procedures and penalties. And another in 2000, and 2001. Each time the OP was opposed by the majority of Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs) that put on the shows, and the government repeated-



Violation List

WANT NAMES? The USDA keeps records of violators, but experts admonish that only a small percentage of sorers are caught. Says a DQP, "At shows where the USDA shows up as many as 60% or more of the exhibitors suddenly remember they had a dentist appointment that day. The showgrounds clear out in 20 minutes."

Enforcement funding is a curious problem. According to the USDA, even though only \$500,000 was allotted to enforce a Federal Law, nationwide, at over 600 shows each year, the most implemented in one year was \$300,000. The result is that only between 10 and 15% of the shows are attended by VMOs, which means that most violators are handled within the industry itself by DQPs and never become Federal Cases.

For more information on violators contact the USDA or visit www.aphis.usda.gov/ac/hpinfo.html

To learn more about HIO violations (those that never make it to the Federal level) contact SHO (see page 39) or visit www.walkinghorse.org/

ly negotiated. One hot issue in the OP is the "scar rule" which eliminates horses from competition that show obvious signs of having been sore in the past, regardless of whether or not they are sore at the time of exhibition. The law threatens violators with criminal or civil charges, up to two years in prison, fines of up to \$5,000 and disqualification from showing, exhibiting or selling horses for a year or more. Trainers could be disqualified for life. In addition, the HIOs can impose their own sanctions. In reality, many violators find loopholes and keep right on soring, the proof of which lies in the widespread practice with which we are faced today – more than 30 years after the HPA was enacted.

The Damned and the Damaged

THE SUFFERING caused by soring is multi-layered, beginning with horses that endure great pain from their caretakers. Beyond the physical pain, the emotional effects must be devastating. The accumulative effects of chemical exposure leave many horses damaged for life or dead. The same may some day prove to be true for those who apply these substances, day after

day, to horse after horse.

Horses that are "culled" from show barns are often sold to the general public. Some go on to thrive, but others never transcend their nightmarish experiences and prove to be poor examples of the breed at best, or dangerous ones at worst. And, as opponents of the scar rule

Among those unfairly hurt by the practice of soring are the sound trainers, exhibitors and owners.

often decry, a horse that has been sore is denied any future show career under a sound trainer because of the scars of the past.

Others unfairly hurt by the practice of soring are the sound trainers, exhibitors and owners; people whose lives and livelihoods are deeply entwined with the horses they love and respect; people who love their retired show horses; even people who go out of their way to rescue abused horses and provide them a safe haven. In the eyes of the public, the stigma of soring taints the entire gaited horse industry, with the beautiful, big-

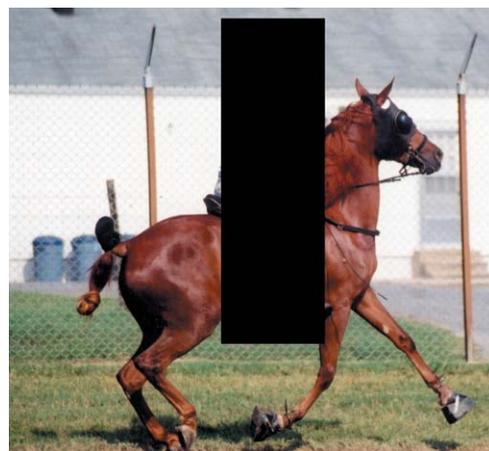
hearted Tennessee Walking Horse bearing the brunt of it.

Long-term effects on the breed include the change in character of the horses over time, both in terms of structure and gait brought on by the spectator demand for the sore version of the running walk. Interestingly according to USDA figures and recent reports from the Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' and Exhibitors' Association, entries in padded classes have dropped.

Those who have led the fight against soring have been harassed, threatened and intimidated by those with the money and influence to do so. But their ranks are growing everyday. Many people have committed to great personal sacrifice to abolish a practice that was outlawed by Federal law long ago. At the core of the problem is money. **Those that support soring have more money to fight the law than the USDA has to enforce it.**

What YOU Can Do

YOU CAN COPY THIS ARTICLE and share it. Seek out likeminded individuals and organizations. Encourage show groups to bring civil suits against proven offenders. Encourage your community to boycott sore shows, or invite



An instant of respite with both front feet off the ground. The gait seen here is not the traditional running walk of the breed.



your local news media to cover them - after explaining the facts of soring. Media attention may inspire your local elected public officials.

Educate children in your area, as soring has now passed through at least three generations. Support sound horse organizations. There is a tremendous grass roots effort promoting the sound horse and educating the public about soring, but they need your support. Don't turn away if you don't show. Join your breed association and vote for change in elections.

First and foremost, write your Congressman and demand that the law is enforced and that the USDA is granted, and required to use, adequate funding to eradicate the rewards of soring.

For more information contact the organizations on our back cover or visit:

rromanbooks.com/contact.htm

Publisher of *From the Horse's Mouth*, a novel on soring from the horse's perspective.

www.law.utexas.edu/dawson/cases/cruel/cruel.htm

University of Texas Law Library's website exposing horse cruelty legal cases

www.aphis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/fshpa.html

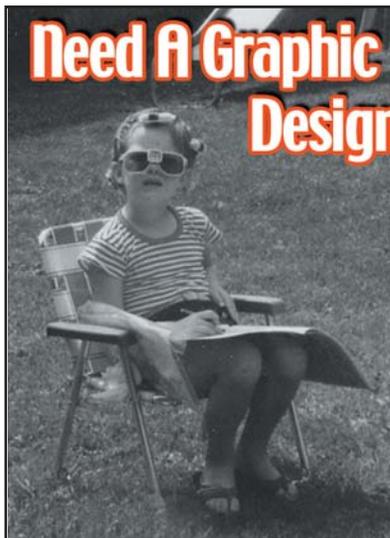
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www.aphis.usda.gov/ac/hpinfo.html

More on the Horse Protection Act



The Gaited Horse thanks the many devoted individuals who provided the information for this article, including Steppin' Out Magazine for the photos, as well as the many who requested not to be identified.



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Katie Pinkerton
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