

Sore WINNERS

An ASPCA veterinarian takes a closer look into the abuses suffered by Tennessee Walking Horses.

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In the shadows between horse trailers on the show grounds of middle Tennessee, trainers and stable hands attend to their horses' feet. Leg wraps are removed. Skin is checked for scars and sores. Some feet are numbed with anesthetic spray so they won't be too sensitive to the touch. Why? Because before entering the show ring, inspectors will examine the horses' feet for signs of "soring," a violation of state and federal law.

Soring causes the horses to pick up their front feet briskly and hold them in the air longer and higher than they normally would. This movement, known as the "Big Lick"—an exaggerated parody of the breed's natural way of moving that is practically impossible to achieve without soring—is desired by many trainers because it is considered the ultimate in mainstream Walking Horse competition. The horses lower their hindquarters as they snap their front feet off the ground. They wear circular chains that hit their ankles with every step. Thick pads on the shoes in front raise their heels unnaturally high.

The horses are "sored" in a number of ways: by chemical irritants that are left to "cook" under plastic wraps and bandages, or by over-trimming the hooves, improper shoeing or other methods of making the front feet hurt when they hit the ground. Chemicals used include kerosene, diesel oil and more noxious substances such as crotonaldehyde and mustard oil, which is related to the poison gas used in World War I. They may be applied several days before the show.

In the summer of 1999, Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH), one of a handful of groups trying to expose abuse in the Walking Horse industry and offer alternatives, asked The ASPCA for help. I was sent to Tennessee to get a better idea of what was going on. For three days I attended shows and visited training barns.

At the mainstream industry shows I attended, some horses appeared to be struggling just to make it around the ring. A FOSH representative explained that many of these horses get little exercise. Soring is used instead of real training and conditioning. When at last the horses were lined up along the rail for judgment, several appeared distressed, glistening with sweat, their eyes wide and their nostrils flaring as they caught their breath.



Inhumane

Sored horses who perform at mainstream Tennessee Walking Horse shows may exhibit some of the characteristics shown here: the horse's knee rising above the shoulder level, chains that strike the horse's ankle at every step, unnaturally thick hoof pads, crouching in the hindquarters, over-reaching of the hind legs, flared nostrils and a frantic look in the horse's eyes.

Humane

Everything about this Tennessee Walker conveys a more natural way of moving: the knees are not raised higher than the shoulders, the hind legs are not over-reaching, no padding or chains have been placed on the feet, and the horse's eye has an alert but calm expression. Anti-soring shows like this one are slowly gaining in popularity.

Elsewhere in central Tennessee, I attended an alternative show promoting the sound, naturally gaited Walking Horse. Soring is taboo. Inspections are tougher than at mainstream shows. Chains and thick shoe pads are not allowed.

The same horses entered class after class, taking it all in stride. They moved easily, gracefully, without the strained and crampy motion often seen at regular shows. They displayed the natural talent of this extraordinary breed.

One man watched with his family as a farrier shod his horse for the evening program. He spoke calmly of the difficulty of competing in an industry where abuse and corruption seem to be widespread. A trainer once told him his horse had talent, but could only win big with soring. Did he try it?

"No," he replied. Seconds later, he confessed. One night, years ago, he applied the caustic chemicals, wrapped his horse's front legs in plastic and bandages, and went to bed. Unable to sleep, he returned to the stable in the middle of the night, undid his handiwork and washed his horse's legs. "Horses," he said with tender conviction, "are God's gift."

Big Lick, Big Lie

Soring changes the odds. It maintains the existing balance of wealth and power in an industry based on competition. The most naturally talented Walking Horse, with a perfect running walk, does not move correctly if sored. It is not just how high his feet go, but the way he moves them that changes.

Soring is not simply cheating, it raises the prestige, value, and breeding prospects of horses who are not the best of the breed. In a quote from *The Tennessean*, Nashville's daily newspaper, trainer Mickey McCormick denied the practice of soring. He questioned the economic sense of putting caustic chemicals on horses worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. A similar refrain is heard across the spectrum of sport and commercial animal abuse: "Nobody hurts these animals; they are too valuable." But what if the horse is worth less without soring? What if other horses never receive their due, never get the recognition they deserve no matter how beautifully and naturally they exemplify the breed?

Walking a Crooked Path

The official breed registry, later called the Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders and Exhibitors Association (TWHBEA), was formed in 1935, and the National Walking Horse Celebration, the culmination of the Walking Horse show season, started in 1939. That year, the breed competed for the first time at New York City's Madison Square Garden. Their popularity exploded, and the value of top horses rose as much as tenfold.

A recession in the 1950s reduced demand, and prices took a dive. When the industry needed a shot in the arm, someone gave it a hot foot. The origin of soring is often attributed to an accidental discovery—a common but painful treatment for a hoof problem caused such an impressive step that the other, healthy front foot was treated the same way. Before long, others were trying this new way of making the horses lift their feet faster and higher. Spectators loved the animated high-stepping horses, and enthusiastic fans kept the trainers soring and the judges rewarding them. They still do.

What is a Walking Horse?

Tennessee Walking Horses can be traced to the finest Thoroughbreds, Standardbreds, Morgans and American Saddlebred horses, with early contributions from Canadian and Narragansett Pacers. Breeders in turn-of-the-century Tennessee combined speed, endurance, a gentle disposition and a ride so smooth that it feels like you're gliding through the air into this versatile breed of horse. Plantation owners and village doctors rode them for hours without fatigue, and they were raced and shown at fairs in Tennessee and neighboring states. The way they move distinguishes them from other breeds. In the "running walk," their characteristic gait, the hind feet move in long flat strides while the front feet step high and the head nods in time.

Congress Steps In

In the 1960s, the situation had deteriorated to the point where horses' feet could be seen bleeding in the show ring. Congress passed the Horse Protection Act (HPA), which outlawed soring, in 1970. Enforcement was entrusted to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Veterinary Medical Officers (VMOs) of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) were empowered to inspect the horses at the shows. But rather than provide the USDA with enough money to fully enforce the law, Congress attempted to meet the need by amending the HPA in 1976 to allow industry organizations certified by the USDA to train their own lay inspectors, called Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs). Their job is to inspect horses at the shows and write tickets for sores, scars, sensitivity or other evidence of soring.

Still underfunded, VMOs from the USDA attend only about 50 out of 600 shows a year. Therefore, most HPA violations are detected and penalized by the industry's DQPs and do not become federal cases. A 1997 USDA Horse Protection Enforcement report noted that in the presence of federal inspectors, DQPs found three times as many violations in the same number of inspections as when VMOs were not there.

In an attempt to improve enforcement, the USDA consulted with industry and humane groups and developed the 1999 Operating Plan, which was adopted at the start of last year's show season. Inspection procedures were clarified and penalties increased. But at the same time, the industry was given a larger role in enforcement.

Craig Evans, chairman of the National Horse Show Commission (NHSC), said in a TWHBEA news report in April 1999 that the USDA will "take a secondary role in enforcement," which "leaves the industry in control of its own destiny in regulating itself." The NHSC is the largest certified industry organization and provides DQPs to major shows, including the National Celebration.

A draft of the USDA Operating Plan for the 2000 show season, which was released to certified Walking Horse organizations for comment at the end of 1999, is clearly an attempt to make enforcement stricter and penalties more effective. Six of the nine organizations have refused to sign the plan unless it is changed. If they do not agree to it, they risk having their

shows subject to frequent government inspections and stricter federal penalties for violators. But there's a catch: APHIS may not have the resources to police many more shows than it does now. The USDA is under pressure to compromise with Walking Horse groups such as the NHSC, which would rather keep the 1999 plan in effect.

Stealth Soring

Soring techniques have become more sophisticated and harder to detect, giving the appearance that progress is being made in eliminating the practice, even though many violators fly under the inspector's radar. Crude irritants causing open sores and scars have largely given way to the selective use of more potent and dangerous chemicals, such as crotonaldehyde or mustard oil. Dimethyl Sulfoxide (DMSO) is added because it allows the chemicals to penetrate the skin better. Knowing where, how much and how long before a show to sore each horse has become a sinister science.

Painful trimming and shoeing methods that cannot be detected without removing the shoes have replaced nails hammered through hoof walls and cut off at the surface or metal objects wedged between the shoe pads and soles that are gouged to the quick. Some horses are subject to mock inspections and beaten severely if they show signs of pain. Salicylic acid is used to burn off scar tissue and dyes or tattoos hide discoloration. Topical pain-killing sprays numb the skin before inspection, but wear off while the horse is in the ring.

Culture of Cruelty

In 1998, *The Tennessean* published several articles on the Walking Horse industry. They interviewed defectors from the world of soring and the Big Lick. Pamela Reband, a former TWHBEA director, admitted in print to "sanctioning torture for 30 years." By her estimate, more than 90 percent of the horses at major shows were sored. "You don't have to tell most trainers to sore a horse," she told me last fall. "You have to tell a trainer *not* to sore a horse."

Don Bell was NHSC director of judges for four years, until 1997. When I spoke to him in October 1999, he stuck



Many Tennessee Walkers endure stacked shoes and sored pasterns.

with his estimate that "80 percent to 90 percent of the horses shown in some areas of the Southeast are sored to some degree" and pointed out the importance of proper judging. If NHSC's own rules were followed, judges would "eliminate sore-looking horses that walk with a crampy gait." But few, if any, do.

Many in the industry claim that soring is no longer a problem or that it's limited to "a few rogue trainers." At a forum on equine welfare in December 1999, Dr. Ron DeHaven of the USDA pointed out that nine of the last 10 presidents of the Walking Horse Trainers Association and

nine of the last 16 Trainers of the Year have federal cases pending or convictions for soring. Additionally, a member of the NHSC board resigned after being ticketed at the 1998 Celebration for showing up with what the USDA called a "very sore" horse. His letter of resignation claimed that the horse's hooves became tender after riding on a hard road.

Home Is Where the Hurt Is

Most of the soring doesn't occur on the show grounds. It takes place in the training barns. At one such barn in Tennessee, which my guide called typical, something seemed very wrong. In the dim light, I noticed many horses standing with their front legs wrapped in plastic covered with bandages. Their hind feet were placed well forward to take weight off the front. They barely moved. The distinctive odor of DMSO was in the air.

At another stable—not far in distance but worlds away—all the horses were friendly and calm. There were no strange wraps, no chemical odors, no chains or pads. While I watched, four horses were led into a large paddock where they ran and played. The horses are trained and conditioned on a regular schedule. This, I was told, is part of the routine. The owner is not openly critical of other trainers, but believes strongly in his methods. Unlike soring, naturally developing the horse's innate ability into an award-winning gait takes time and effort.

Stepping Out, Standing Up

In Anna Sewell's classic novel *Black Beauty*, one character says to another: "If we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt."

There are 360,000 registered Tennessee Walking Horses in the United States. About 10 percent go to horse shows. Many of those are made to suffer greatly in their owners' quest for blue ribbons. Ignoring them is turning our backs on all horses. If we act to change their world, turn this industry around and stop the abuse, every sport, every business, every pursuit in which horses are mistreated for selfish gains will be on notice. And then the days of hiding poisons and tools of torture in the stable shadows will be over. **AW**

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