



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

FACT SHEET: TENNESSEE WALKING HORSE “SORING” ABUSE

1. What is a Tennessee Walking Horse?

The Tennessee Walking Horse is a breed that originated in the South as an unusually gentle farm or plantation riding horse. Large landowners used them to survey their property from horseback, and appreciated their smooth, comfortable stride. But when the horses were taken off the farm and into the show ring to be flashy competition horses, they were forced to exhibit exaggerated, unnaturally high stepping gaits. Major competitions featuring Tennessee Walkers take place primarily in Tennessee, Kentucky, and several other southern states.

2. How are the horses abused?

Unscrupulous trainers accentuate the natural gait through “soring” of the front feet and legs. Soring is the practice of applying chemical irritants such as diesel fuel, mustard oil, and kerosene to the horse’s pasterns (ankles); inserting screws or other foreign objects into the sensitive areas of the hooves; or otherwise causing pain to the feet or legs of horses. To force penetration of the chemical irritants, horses’ lower legs are wrapped in plastic, and they are left to stand this way for several days. When ridden, a heavy chain is placed on both pasterns, which further aggravates the already painful tissue. Because of the pain, the horses raise their front legs immediately after touching the ground, thus producing the exaggerated, “Big Lick” gait rewarded in the show ring. A technique called “pressure shoeing” is also frequently used. A foreign object is inserted between the horse’s hoof and a stack of pads, then a horse shoe is nailed on and held in place by a tight metal band across the top of the horse’s hoof. Again, the object causes pain and discomfort when the horse’s foot touches the ground, thus causing him to reactively draw up his leg in an exaggerated manner.

Pressure shoeing can also involve cutting a horse’s hoof wall and sole down to the quick where it starts to bleed, and nailing a shoe to that surface. This makes for a very tender hoof that is especially painful when the horse puts his weight on it.

A less extreme, more natural motion can be attained through selective breeding and more humane training practices, but these require time and skill; those in the industry that are driven by profit want a quick shortcut.

3. Why isn’t soring outlawed?

It has been. In 1970, Congress enacted the Horse Protection Act (HPA), making it a federal offense to show, sell, auction, exhibit, or transport a sored horse. However, despite more than 30 years of government intervention and regulation, soring is still pervasive. In the early days of soring, horses would enter the show ring with raw, bleeding sores on their lower legs. Now the violators have simply become more adept at concealing soring in order to escape detection by inspectors. For example, they use short-acting topical anesthetics to numb the horse’s skin just prior to inspection, and salicylic acid to “burn off” the scars resulting from soring.

4. Why hasn’t the Horse Protection Act worked?

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is charged with HPA enforcement. When the Act was amended in 1976, a ceiling on funding for the program was set at \$500,000. Consequently, the USDA has never had the resources required for proper enforcement. Also in 1976, the industry pushed for, and won, greater self-regulating authority. This gave Tennessee Walking Horse show associations, called Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs), the authority to train their own inspectors, called Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs), to inspect horses for soring at shows. Unfortunately, the DQPs are employees of the show organizations, and have not been willing or able to responsibly enforce the Act. It’s a clear case of the fox guarding the henhouse.

This program was put in place, in part, because USDA does not have funding to send inspectors to every Walking Horse show across the country. Congress has rarely if ever funded the HPA even to the level allowed in 1976. Before the extent

of these abuses had been fully exposed, some felt that USDA was inappropriately enforcing the Act. That time has passed and as the horrors of soring have been more fully exposed, sentiment in favor of finally stopping it and not turning a blind eye has strengthened.

The biggest Walking Horse show of the year, The Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration, is held in Shelbyville, TN., where theoretically enforcement of the law should be at its best. However, inspectors historically have not patrolled the showgrounds (where many violations typically occur) and have confined their efforts only to designated inspection areas. In 2006, the USDA's presence at the annual Tennessee Walking Horse Celebration had a profound effect. In that year, the Celebration failed to name a World Grand Champion after most the finalists were disqualified for violations of the HPA.

5. Wouldn't the industry be better off if soring were eliminated?

Yes. The legacy of soring has turned many people away from the breed, and its popularity has been in decline. Yet the industry blames government intervention for its woes. Infighting within the industry has led to the formation of many new HIOs. A few HIOs are actively working to outlaw soring, but the largest and best financed HIOs have the greatest history of condoning the practice.

In August, 2008, the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) released a white paper titled "Putting the Horse First: Veterinary Recommendations for Ending the Soring of Tennessee Walking Horses." The HSUS applauded the AAEP's report, which recommended immediate implementation of a drug testing program at horse shows; the abolishment of the industry-run Designated Qualified Persons (DQP) self-regulation program, turning inspection duties over to qualified veterinarians; 24-hour security personnel and inspectors in the stabling areas of show grounds where violations are known to occur; and the establishment of much more severe penalties for HPA violations than in the past.

6. Why doesn't the industry ban the trainers who sore horses?

The sad reality is many people in the industry don't want to end soring. Soring is used by many trainers in the industry to gain an unfair advantage in competition. A vocal and

influential faction of the Walking Horse Show industry has successfully worked to undermine the USDA's efforts to stop soring and punish violators. In 1998, the USDA backed away from its Strategic Plan after the industry lobbied for cuts in HPA funding. The effectiveness of APHIS's enforcement has been sporadic and limited ever since its passage.

7. What needs to be done?

Congress needs to strongly support USDA in its efforts to enforce the HPA and provide more funding necessary for USDA inspectors to do so. If soring is eliminated, not only will horses no longer be subjected to cruel treatment, but the Walking Horse industry will regain respectability worldwide. The HSUS also advocates introduction and adoption of new regulations to ban the use of stacks and action devices, and eliminate self-regulation by the industry.

8. What is The HSUS doing to stop soring?

In March of 2008, The HSUS announced a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any violator of Tennessee's anti-soring law. Ads announcing the reward program were placed in newspapers and on billboards, in both English and Spanish. A toll-free, 24-hour hotline was offered to tipsters; to date several promising leads have been provided. In April 2008, The HSUS was a sponsor of the first annual Sound Horse Conference. There, The HSUS, other leading animal welfare organizations and Tennessee Walking Horse industry groups announced the formation of the Alliance to End Soring. The Alliance will work with USDA, Congress, and Tennessee Walking Horse industry stakeholders to promote increased enforcement of the Horse Protection Act and to raise public awareness of the pervasiveness of this inhumane practice in the industry.



Signs of soring are evident on the ankle of this Tennessee Walking Horse. The application of caustic chemicals has caused his skin to become red, inflamed and very painful.