Equine Soring in the Tennessee Walking Horse Industry- A Dark History

Under the dazzling spotlights of the show ring, the horse's neck glistens with perspiration. His rider, clad in a metallic jacket and crisp black slacks, urges him into the running walk at the announcer's command. The whole audience trembles with anticipation as his weight shifts to his powerful hindquarters.

Performance equestrian competition is intended to be breathtaking for bystanders, but the pressure to win, particularly at the higher levels, can be overwhelming. One misstep, one flash of wrong judgment, and the façade of effortless perception crumbles, leaving you ribbonless. Each class at a show represents hours of practice, thousands of dollars, and a single dream that only one can win. The competition circuit of the Tennessee Walking Horse is no different, but continues to be plagued by a brutal practice known as soring, which at one point threatened to sink the entire industry. Despite the enormous strides made by animal rights professionals in reducing the frequency of this intolerable form of abuse, significant improvements must still be made in detection methods because many abusers have found ways to escape punishment through loopholes in subjective detection techniques.

Originating in 1886 with its founding sire, Black Allan, the Tennessee Walker is a relatively young breed, especially when compared with horses such as the Arabian, who have been around for centuries. The breed, originally a blend between Thoroughbred, Saddlebred, and Morgan blood, was created in the hopes of finding a smooth, comfortable horse that plantation farmers could ride while surveying their property for

hours on end without fatigue[1]. This was accomplished by the Walker because of their distinctive gait, the running walk, which covers ground without jarring the rider. The breed soon grew in popularity, and by the twentieth century had their own thriving show circuit via the Tennessee Walking Horse Breed Exhibitors Association (TWHBEA).

After a few decades of success and relative peace, the winds began to change. Don Bell, National Walking Horse Association (NWHA) director, explains this transformation: "As the caliber of horses steadily improved through the 1930's and 40's, competition began to heat up. Trainers sought 'new and improved' ways of eliciting bigger and more exaggerated gait from their horses."[2] With the emergence of the "big lick" performance horse, a new stylistic movement in the late 1950's, Walkers were expected to perform animated, showy gaits rather than the sweeping, ground-covering gaits of the breed's origin. Inevitably, a shortcut emerged to facilitate the animation of these "big lick" horses. Through the development of certain training aids, such as adding pads beneath horseshoes and placing chains around the coronet (the equivalent of an ankle), horses were trained to step out higher and with more precision. However, others in the industry devised a quick fix to fabricate the new trend: a practice now known as soring. Soring can manifest itself in a number of ways, each with varying degrees of pain for the horse. Essentially, it is defined as "the application of irritating chemicals or mechanical devices to the legs of a show horse to increase his animation."[3] By the

[1] "A Brief History of the Tennesee Walking Horse Breed." 08 Mar 2008 09 Mar 2008 <http://www.walking-horse.com/past/thebreed.html>.

[2] Hart Poe, Rhonda. "Into the Hurricane: Interview with Don Bell, Director of Operations, National Walking Horse Association." The Gaited Horse Magazine Feb/Mar 2006

[3] Meszoly , Joanne. "Special Report: Why Soring Persists." EQUUS Magazine Nov 2005

1960's, the practice had become as synonymous with the Walker as the running walk for which the breed was named. Soring "secrets" were passed through generations and owners: "When a person sold a horse to another trainer, as a courtesy, they would give instructions on how they fixed that horse," Bell recalls.[4]

Soring is indisputably a form of abuse. A recent article in *EQUUS,* an equestrian publication, reports on the most common method:

> *"A few drops of mustard oil, kerosene or another irritating substance are brushed on the horse's front pasterns, often along with dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) to increase the chemicals' absorption. Then the legs are covered with plastic wrap, bandaged and allowed to "cook" for a few days until they are tender to the touch.*
>
> *…In response, his gait becomes flashy: He picks up his sored feet more quickly and lifts them higher than normal, and he shifts some of his weight to his hind end to escape the pain up front."*

Worse still is apathetic opinion of those who engage in the practice. "Around Tennessee, it was an accepted thing and people didn't think much about it," continued Bell, a former sorer himself, in an interview. "Horses had to be whipped to rise, and it was not considered a horrible thing." Those who speak out against the practice or serve as inspectors at shows are frequently the target of vandalism, like Pamela Reband M.D.,

[4] Hart Poe, Rhonda. "Into the Hurricane: Interview with Don Bell, Director of Operations, National Walking Horse Association." The Gaited Horse Magazine Feb/Mar 2006

who openly speaks out against soring, who has received numerous death threats against "herself, family, and horses."[5]

With the advent of protective legislature, most notably the Horse Protection Act (HPA) of 1970, which prohibits the sale, transportation, or exhibiting of any sored horse,[6] regardless of breed (although it recognizes that Walkers are most at risk), public outcry about the practice seemed to be taking effect. The HPA, which requires inspection by either USDA officials or other Designated Qualified Persons (DQP), sustains penalties of up to two years in prison and $5,000 in fines, or even permanent disqualification from showing altogether. However, as time went on, soring methods simply became more sophisticated in order to evade detection. At first, before more thorough inspections were put in place, boots were placed around the sored area to cover the wounds. "If the judge couldn't see blood [from where he was standing], your horse passed inspection. Even if there was blood, [the groom] would just kick some dirt on it to cover it up," Reband recalls. Today, a wide range of techniques are used in order to evade detection, including training the horse not to flinch when touched, using creams to minimize scarring, and applying topical antiseptics such as lidocaine or benzocaine to numb the pain. However, the most common evasion of inspection is to leave shows when USDA inspectors show up to examine horses. It is not uncommon to see shows where only one person competes in a class, because all the others have left for fear of soring detection.[7]

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[5] King, Marcia. "A Sore Issue: The Debate on Soring." Horse Illustrated July 2004

[6] "The Horse Protection Act." United States Department of Agriculture 11 Dec 2007 26 Feb 2008 <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/>.

[7] Meszoly , Joanne. "Special Report: Why Soring Persists." EQUUS Magazine Nov 2005

Protectors of the soring industry often justify the practice as the only way to protect their livelihood. As former United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) veterinarian Tom James says, "As long as the big lick wins at shows, the trainer must produce it to stay in business…The day a trainer stops producing big lick horses is the day all horses in his or her barn are removed and taken to another trainer. The pressure is enormous."[8] A notable few have nobly stood up in the face of this prejudice, including the Jackson family, owners of Walkin' On Ranch. In the face of death threats and lawsuits, they showed their Walker, Champagne Watchout, during the 1999 Grand Celebration, the Walking Horse championship that grosses $38 million in annual revenue. The Jacksons refused to use heavy shoes or sore their horse, which sparked controversy and raised awareness. In 2006, no Grand Champion was crowned due to an abundance of withdrawals and disqualifications on the grounds of soring.[9]

The answer to finding the end to soring can be achieved in three stages:

1.) Expand the meager $500,000 budget for USDA inspections, which will allow certified veterinarians rather than DQPs (who are often biased in favor of protecting the industry[10]) to conduct inspections.

2.) Implement a zero-tolerance policy for owners found to be soring horses. Currently, after serving the punishment for soring, records are

[8] King, Marcia. "A Sore Issue: The Debate on Soring." Horse Illustrated July 2004

[9] "Controversy Postpones Walking Horse Celebration." News Channel 5 26 Aug 2006 <http://www.newschannel5.com/Global/story.asp?s=5429699>.

[10] King, Marcia. "A Sore Issue: The Debate on Soring." Horse Illustrated July 2004

wiped clean, which leaves no incentive for the perpetrator to stop the practice. A graduated system, much like that of United States drunk driving laws, on an escalating scale could give reason to not repeat the same offence twice.

3.) The third stage will be the most difficult to attain and least tangible to see. Just as a stylistic movement caused the evolution of the "big lick" mindset, a counterrevolution can bring back the natural trend of a century ago. When judges stop rewarding the flashy gaits, when more speak out against the violence and abuse, soring can gradually be moved to be a practice of a shameful past.

A wise horsewoman named Helen Thomson once reminded us, "In riding a horse we borrow freedom." However, to borrow freedom must never be to abuse it, or even to look away when we see others doing the same. It may be easier to pretend that a problem doesn't exist, but the problem will fester if left unattended. "The horses are still sore, but not to the degree that I saw in the 1960's and 1970's. Yes, the soring techniques are certainly more sophisticated; still, I believe I see less pain today, overall, than I saw 25-40 years ago." However, the question is not one of degree. Even one horse suffering from the effects of soring is one horse too many. Every living creature deserves the same chance at living a happy life free of pain. Sored horses cannot live that life.

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