

WHITE PAPER

Putting the Horse First:
**Veterinary Recommendations for
Ending the Soring of
Tennessee Walking Horses**



As the world's largest professional organization dedicated to equine veterinary medicine, with a membership of nearly 10,000 veterinarians and veterinary students who dedicate their life's work to caring for the horse, the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) takes very seriously its responsibility when offering a position statement regarding the treatment of horses. The AAEP condemns the abusive practice of 'soring' and formed the Tennessee Walking Horse Task Force in 2007 with the goal of contributing the expertise of the veterinary community to efforts that will permanently eliminate one of the most significant welfare issues affecting any equine breed or discipline.

The Task Force recognizes that any effective change in the current culture of the industry must come from within, but we genuinely hope that, with this white paper, we can provide support to those within the Tennessee Walking Horse (TWH) industry who endeavor to end the continuing abusive practices specifically prohibited by the Horse Protection Act (HPA) enacted by Congress in 1970.

A Culture of Abuse

Soring is the practice of inflicting pain to create an extravagant and exaggerated show gait for both padded and flat-shod horses and includes but is not limited to the use of irritants; the treatment of the pastern region to remove the visible effects of irritants or scar/callus remnants resulting from previous irritants and/or action devices; pressure shoeing and excessive paring of the sole and/or frog; and any method utilized to induce pain or laminitis. Its continued practice is documented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) citation of 103 violations of HPA regulations during the 2007 Tennessee Walking Horse Celebration, the industry's championship event.¹

The failure of the HPA to eliminate the practice of soring can be traced to the woefully inadequate annual budget of \$500,000 allocated to the USDA to enforce these rules and regulations. In the absence of adequate governmental funding, it is incumbent upon industry participants themselves – owners, trainers, and all support personnel – to take full responsibility for developing a program which succeeds in eliminating the recognized abuses that are at the core of the problem. Continued reliance on the use of traditional techniques dependant upon the subjective response of the horse would appear a wasted effort and funding for the development of objective methodology for use by qualified veterinary inspectors must be provided.

¹ USDA Veterinary Medical Officer Horse Protection Show Report for 2007.

Improved Methods of Evaluation

Because the HPA has been in effect since 1970, no scarring, calluses or other skin conditions indicative of treatments directed at increasing sensitivity should be present in horses currently in competition and none should be tolerated. Likewise, no efforts to mask such treatments should be tolerated. The Task Force recommends the following specific objective methods for evaluation of the horses both before and after each competition (class, not event) to ensure the health and welfare of the equine participants:

1. Immediate institution of drug testing (plasma, serum and cutaneous swabs) based on the methodology and regulations established by the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF).
2. Prohibition of any medical treatments or syringes, therapeutic or otherwise, by any personnel in the make-up ring prior to each class, an area which should be supervised by trained stewards known to be otherwise uninvolved in the Walking Horse industry.
 - a. Limitations on the number of individuals and equipment which may accompany the horse into the make-up ring.
 - i. Forbid the use of any devices utilized to tighten the bands which secure the 'packages.' (Packages are defined as the pads and shoe.)
3. In recognition of the fact that many acts associated with soring occur in the stabling areas of the show grounds, it is recommended that security personnel and supervising inspectors be present in these areas 24 hours each day of the competition to ensure that no violations of the HPA occur.
4. Physical inspection, by a veterinarian, of the horses prior to entering the ring to include:
 - a. Visual inspection of the limbs and shoes.
 - b. Removal of saddles/girths to check for pain-inducing objects.
 - c. Thermographic screening of the limbs to assist in defining specific anatomical areas requiring additional clinical examination and/or surface swabbing to detect forbidden substances.
 - d. Palpation of the limbs including:
 - i. Routine evaluation of the limbs.
 - ii. Assessment of digital pulses.
 - iii. Critical assessment of specific areas suggested to be abnormal on thermographic examination.
 - e. Swabbing of the limbs for foreign substance testing.
 - i. Areas determined to exhibit an abnormal thermographic pattern should be included in the testing.
 - f. Examination of the horses in a standard pattern at a walk and extended walk, on a loose rein, in hand and under tack.

5. Observation by qualified veterinarians of the horses during competition for lameness while at work.
6. Re-examination of selected horses as they exit the ring (with horses held in the make-up ring while examinations are completed) to include:
 - a. Thermographic re-examination.
 - b. Removal of both front shoes of randomly selected horses or horses with abnormal thermographic patterns:
 - i. Visual and hoof tester examination of unshod feet for evidence of methods directed at inducing pain, such as pressure devices and excessive paring of the sole and frog.
 - ii. Weighing of shoes (flat-shod horses) or shoes and package (padded horses).
 - c. Digital radiographs of the feet, in randomly selected horses or horses found to have any physical or thermographic abnormalities, to detect:
 - i. Laminitis, acute or chronic, as manifested by either rotation of the third phalanx or sinking of the bony column within the hoof capsule.
 - ii. Sole thickness.
 - d. Drug testing including both plasma and urine for the presence of prohibited substances.
 - e. Swabbing of the limbs for foreign substance testing utilizing current standard methodology.
 - i. Areas determined to exhibit an abnormal thermographic pattern should be included in the testing.

Implementation

Drug testing can be implemented in similar fashion to that utilized by the USEF, with contract veterinarians responsible for collecting and submitting samples to the testing laboratory. The enforcement of the screening methods outlined above will necessitate the training of a corps of veterinarians, known to be independent of the TWH industry and certified by an organization created solely for the enforcement of regulations governing competitions. The Task Force suggests that the staff of Veterinary Medical Officers (VMOs) be utilized to supervise the inspection of the horses by this corps of trained veterinarians and to impose sanctions for violations. Training of both the VMOs and this additional corps of veterinarians must include more objective measures of detection such as thermography and digital radiography. Every event should be required to have veterinarians on duty during the hours of competition who, in addition to providing emergency medical treatment, could assist in these evaluations.

The Designated Qualified Persons (DQP) Program should be abolished since the acknowledged conflicts of interest which involve many of them cannot be reasonably resolved, and these individuals should be excluded from the regulatory process. The current duties of the program should be assumed by qualified veterinarians.

Many of the above recommendations will require significant financial resources to implement; however, if the industry is serious in its intention to end this cruel and inhumane practice and restore the reputation of its breed and the integrity of its leadership, funding must be provided. The expense of these measures must be borne by the TWH industry.

The Importance of Additional Research

The AAEP believes in and supports equine research. More research is needed to improve the methods of detection of soring. The Task Force recommends that additional research be developed in the following areas:

1. Establishment of objective methods to detect soring in order to eliminate the current practice of conditioning horses to tolerate pressure applied to the distal limb.
 - a. Thermography
 - i. Confirm the consistent thermographic patterns of normal TWHs with double blind, placebo-controlled studies.
 - ii. Confirm, with double blind, placebo-controlled studies, the consistent thermographic patterns associated with soring reported by Nelson and Osheim, 1975; Purohit, 1978-1983; and Turner, 1981 and 1986.
 1. Areas of increased temperature (circulation).
 2. Areas of decreased temperature associated with topical applications.
 - iii. Determine if thermographic patterns consistent with pressure shoeing are demonstrable.
 - b. Digital Radiographic Assessment of TWHs to determine:
 - i. The normal configuration of the TWH digit including thickness and radiopacity of sole.
 - ii. Hoof capsule distortions.
 - iii. Presence of laminitis – either rotation or sinking.
 - iv. Identify which foreign materials may be visualized between the shoe and sole, resulting in inappropriate sole pressure, and within the package, resulting in excess weight.

2. Determine the effect of shoeing alone and shoeing plus chains of variable weights in the development of pastern irritation and scarring on both young and mature TWHs.
 - a. Evaluate the necessity of the use of lubricants with chains.

Furthermore, the AAEP stands ready to participate in developing independent research protocols and in soliciting proposals for projects through the AAEP Foundation. Independent funding sources from within the TWH industry will need to be identified.

Putting the Horse First

In comparison to other equine breed and discipline associations with which the AAEP is familiar, the TWH industry has several glaring differences which contribute to the difficulty of achieving the goal of eliminating soring. In conclusion, the AAEP recognizes that it has no regulatory authority over the TWH industry but offers on behalf of the horse these recommendations regarding governance structure, uniform regulations and judging standards:

1. Establishment of a single organization that has governance responsibilities for the industry is critical for the effective resolution of conflict and the establishment and enforcement of uniform standards and regulations. The current arrangement of multiple Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs) fails to accomplish this vital need and has resulted in competing interests.

The USEF could serve as a model for such an organization, with fees collected from members and competitors to fund the organization, the regulatory personnel (veterinarians and stewards) and the drugs and medication testing program (systemic and topical).

2. The adoption and strict enforcement of meaningful uniform standards and regulations, combined with more stringent penalties, are the cornerstones of establishing fair and humane competitions. Penalties should be much more severe and consequential to owners, trainers and other support personnel than in the past. Lifetime disqualification of horses found not to be in compliance would penalize trainers and owners to a degree likely to mitigate against a second infraction. We believe that owners are the only individuals who can bring adequate pressure to bear on each other and their trainers to eliminate these intolerable abuses.

3. Establishing standards of judging which value the innate grace and beauty of this breed instead of rewarding the currently manufactured extravagant and exaggerated gaits will facilitate a rapid return to horsemanship and training devoid of the intolerable abuses of soring in all its manifestations.

The AAEP, in its mission to act in the best interest of the horse, remains willing to assist the TWH Industry in prohibiting these cruel and inhumane practices. However, the decision to develop realistic and effective means of eliminating individuals who perpetuate this culture belongs to the TWH industry alone.

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