

The CELEBRATION

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HEALTHY STRIDES

HSUS campaign builds momentum in fight to end soring

BY MICHAEL SHARP

Leana Stormont can't stop thinking about Ted. Every so often, she'll log into a database of Tennessee walking horses and search the stallion's formal name, "Pride's Mr. Williams." She keeps an eye out for him in trade publications and show programs.

The HSUS investigative counsel first learned of the stoic young horse while reviewing video clips and daily notes from an undercover HSUS investigator in western Tennessee.

To prepare him for the show ring, where Tennessee walking horses win prizes for an exaggerated high-stepping gait, trainers in his stable had resorted to a cruel practice known as soring. They'd wrapped his lower legs in cellophane to "cook" caustic chemicals into his skin and tissue. They'd smacked his head with a wooden pole. Yet, his spirit had never broken. He kicked back at his head trainer. "Ted," it was known around the barn, "doesn't forget."

But then, Ted was gone. The investigator was told he'd been sent away to be "tortured"—even worse than before. Occasionally, he'd resurface at a show. And then, nothing. "We look for him all the

time," Stormont says. "He's just somebody who's kind of burned into our brains."

Ted has yet to turn up. Perhaps his name has been changed. Perhaps his fate was far worse. But his story, his case, helped spark a watershed moment in the decades-long fight against soring. Last March, The HSUS helped seize eight horses from his old barn after a federal grand jury charged Hall of Fame trainer Jackie McConnell and three others with conspiring to violate the Horse Protection Act, which bans the showing and transportation of sored horses.

McConnell pled guilty to a felony count and to state cruelty charges and now faces a year of house arrest, four additional years of

supervised probation, and \$100,000 in fines. He can't own or train horses for 20 years.

"I really do believe that the case was the first domino, if you will, that set what is going to be an ongoing cascade of actions and progress in place," says Keith Dane, HSUS director of equine protection.

Consider the events of this critically important past year:

◆ A spotlight was cast on a problem that's historically been brushed aside by the industry. ABC's *Nightline* exposed a national audience to scenes from the McConnell investigation: Ted being smacked in the head; another horse shocked with a cattle prod; another writhing in his stall. And former trainer Barney Davis told of widespread cruelty at his sentencing hearing for violating the Horse Protection Act: "Everyone does [it]—I mean, they've got to be sored to walk. ... That's the bottom line." Davis later gave The HSUS a court-ordered interview further revealing the scope of soring.

◆ Industry-affiliated organizations and companies quickly distanced themselves. The U.S. Equestrian Federation, the nation's

THIS PAGE: CHAD SISNEROS/THE HSUS. OPPOSITE PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE HSUS; LANCE MURPHY/FOR THE HSUS; THE HSUS (2). ILLUSTRATION BY: SHANNA LIEBERMAN/THE HSUS

largest horse show sanctioning body, banned devices typically associated with soring. And Pepsi and Ford withdrew sponsorship last year from the sport's biggest event, the annual Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration in Shelbyville, Tenn.

◆ Legislators took notice. Tennessee added a felony penalty for aggravated cruelty to livestock, including practices used to sore horses. More than 130 U.S. representatives have cosponsored the Prevent All Soring Tactics Act (H.R. 1518), which would make the actual act of soring illegal, ban soring devices, and end the industry's suspect system of self-policing—exposed at the 2012 Celebration, where industry inspectors found evidence of illegal soring substances on two horses, compared to the 145 flagged by the USDA.

◆ Authorities have stepped up enforcement. Last June, the USDA established minimum penalties for Horse Protection Act violations. And this April, The HSUS helped local law enforcement remove 19 horses from trainer Larry Wheelon, a show judge and member of the ethics committee for the Walking Horse Trainers Association. He was charged under Tennessee's new felony cruelty provision.

Dane doesn't hesitate when asked if this is the greatest momentum he's seen since he began campaigning against soring in 1988: "Absolutely. Than at any time, ever. And the thing is, there have been flare-ups where the media would give it attention, and then it would sort of be forgotten. I don't think there's any turning back. I really feel like

Riders line up at the 2012 Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration (top left). As this year's show opens Aug. 21, the industry is reeling from a public and legislative backlash against soring, largely set in motion by an investigation of noted trainer Jackie McConnell's barn (below). □ ON THE IPAD: Watch a video of the investigation.

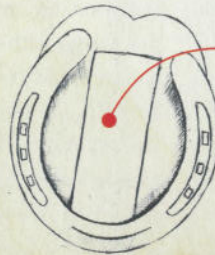
THE SCOOP ON SORING

Trainers have devised a number of cruel methods to force Tennessee walking horses to exaggerate their high-stepping gait in competitions.



Caustic chemicals like mustard oil and diesel fuel are applied to a horse's pastern, which is then wrapped to "cook" the agents into the skin.

A wedge can be jammed tightly and painfully between a horse's hoof and his stacks. The wedges are then removed before competitions to avoid detection.



Flat-shod horses, who compete without the stacks, can sometimes be forced to stand on a wooden block jammed inside their shoe.

Heavy chains rub up and down the irritated skin, causing horses to lift their legs higher in reaction to the pain.



Tennessee walking horses spend years on end standing on the large, heavy stacks, which force them to throw out their front legs when they walk. Horses in stacks are confined to their stalls. They can't run free, for fear of injury; their only exercise comes with a rider on their back.

"Blue putty" is inserted between the stacks and hooves. When the putty hardens, it can mimic the feeling of walking on rocks—pain that's exacerbated by cutting a horse's hooves back to the sensitive lamina.

we're at a tipping point."

The goal behind soring is, quite simply, pain: causing so much of it that walking is like stepping on hot coals. The resulting quick rise and flick of front hooves produce the showy gait known as the "big lick."

But the cruelty doesn't stop there: Some horses are beaten until conditioned never to show pain during inspections; their tails can be painfully cut at the base or strapped into a brace to produce a showier, more arched look; most are confined to a life in their stalls, heavy stacks affixed to their hooves, like high heel shoes from hell.

Stormont remembers the cost of that hell. She remembers, on the day the horses were removed from McConnell's barn, one named Mucho Bueno. By the time his turn came,

his sedatives were running low. The pain was returning. Time and again, he resisted walking up a ramp into an awaiting hauler.

But flash-forward six months: Finally free of his stacks, of his pain, Mucho Bueno gallops across a practice ring. His hooves, constantly churning, kick up clouds of dirt as he races to one end and back again.

"It was like he had remembered what he was—a horse—and that he was meant to run, like a horse," Stormont says. "Just to see him run, that's why we did this. And we will fight 'til the end to make sure that all of those horses are never again put through what they were put through."

▶ **TO URGE** your representative to support the Prevent All Soring Tactics Act (H.R. 1518), go to humansociety.org/soringbill.

