Show-Ring Cheaters
Some will break the rules to bring home the victory.

By Patrice D. Bucciarelli

In October 2010, a junior exhibitor at the U.S. National Arabian and Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show in Tulsa, Okla., was saddling her horse for an upcoming class when she noticed that someone had sheared off the animal’s long, flowing tail right up to the tailbone. On closer inspection, she discovered that the tailbone had been neatly shaved to prevent her from using a false tail to restore her horse’s appearance.

After an investigation, Arabian Horse Association (AHA) officials ruled that the incident was a deliberate act of sabotage designed to keep the young woman and her horse out of the show-ring that day. But the vandal’s plan backfired when AHA officials convinced her to participate in the class anyway.

“We instructed the judges not to consider the horse’s tail in their scoring,” recalls Glenn Petty, executive vice president of the AHA.

At the end of the day, the young woman and her horse placed among the class’s top 10 exhibitors. But officials never determined who was responsible for the incident.

“If we had found a suspect, he or she would have gone before our disciplinary council and the animal cruelty council of the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF),” Petty says. “This was, at the very least, unsportsmanlike conduct.”

According to Petty, such acts of sabotage are rare in the Arabian horse world. Even so, the incident demonstrates that within the equine industry, there are those willing to do whatever it takes to gain a competitive edge.

High Stakes
The temptation to cheat exists at every level in equine sports. But according to Midge Leitch, VMD, member and former chairperson of the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) Equine Welfare Committee, the motivation to win at all costs is strongest at championships and other upper-level events, where prize purses are high and reputations are made.

“People don’t risk cheating for a $100 prize,” says Leitch.

Still, the show-ring is just one stop along a trail paved with financial incentives. The willingness to do anything to win begins at breeding barns and training facilities, where trainers are eager to cultivate their reputations, and owners ponder the quickest way to capitalize on their equine investments.

“It’s all about money,” says Kari Sullivan, who trains Saddlebreds, Tennessee Walking Horses and other gaited horses in Kentucky. “Owners want their [stallions] to win because stud fees for champions are high. And
if a trainer wants to attract those top horses, he or she has to do what the owner wants in order to win." Some gaited horse trainers violate federal law to please certain clients.

Other trainers risk their reputations when they apply their "win at all costs" training techniques without owner authorization, says Teresa Bippen, vice president and spokesperson for Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH), an advocacy organization that promotes humane training and treatment of gaited horses, and operates a sanctioned gaited show circuit and judging program.

"I have heard of several individuals who removed their horses from the trainer when they learned the horse was being [inappropriately trained]," Bippen says.

Tennessee Walking Horses have long been appreciated for their natural, smooth four-beat gait. But especially in the championship showing, the horse that goes home with the top prize is the one that's most able to perform the exaggerated "big lick" gait. Some trainers deliberately injure horses' feet and legs to make them more sensitive and achieve this exaggerated gait. This practice, commonly known as "soring," became illegal under the Horse Protection Act (HPA) of 1970.

Intended to protect all horses from inhumane treatment—particularly Tennessee Walking Horses—the Act sets down penalties for anyone convicted of engaging in soring, and places the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) in charge of enforcing the law.

Under its legal mandate, the USDA-APHIS certifies Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs) that present horse shows, and trains Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs) to inspect horses for signs of soring at shows. Agency officials also attend some horse shows in order to monitor compliance and oversee the inspection process.

Under the inspection system, DQPs are authorized to deny show-ring access to any horse found noncompliant with HPA rules. They may also issue citations to owners, trainers or handlers associated with the noncompliant horse. Individuals who are cited for alleged soring can...
face penalties, including fines and long- or short-term suspensions from taking part in equine-related activities, such as sales and horse show events.

The War on Soring
In recent years, thermographic and other technologies designed to enhance soring inspection techniques and promote objectivity have been incorporated into the inspection process. The USDA-APHIS has also increased its presence at shows where gaited horses are exhibited.

Thanks to the emphasis on increased enforcement, the agency has been able to identify and penalize more HPA violators, says USDA-APHIS spokesman Dave Sacks. But some members of the Tennessee Walking Horse industry argue that agency inspectors have been inconsistent in their use of inspections, and that the agency has unfairly singled out Walking Horse trainers, owners and exhibitors for undue scrutiny.

“We’re not saying that we don’t care about the HPA, or that we don’t care about horses,” says Sam Hamilton, director of Professional Regulation and Inspection for Dedicated Equestrians (PRIDE), a Tennessee Walking Horse HIO. “We just want the government to do its job fairly and consistently.”

Hamilton believes the Tennessee Walking Horse industry can rid itself of soring once trainers and owners understand, through experience, the commercial implications connected with the practice.

“The bottom line is that a trainer wants to get the horse into the ring,” Hamilton says. “And if a trainer’s horse is sent back to the trailer [by inspectors] time after time, he won’t be a trainer for very long.”

However, some equine welfare advocates refute Hamilton’s argument because they believe that the Walking Horse industry has little incentive to change as long as judges continue to reward big lick horses with show-ring wins.

“People in the industry know that if they go to a show clean, they may have to compete against someone who got into the show-ring and isn’t clean,” says Bippin. “If everyone else is doing

ABOUT THE HPA

Lawmakers passed The Horse Protection Act (HPA) of 1970 to protect horses of all breeds from soring, the deliberate injury to a horse’s feet and legs to achieve an exaggerated gait. The law puts specific emphasis on protecting Tennessee Walking Horses because historically, they are most likely to be sored to enhance their performance.

The legislation sets down specific penalties for trainers and others who practice soring, and places the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) in charge of HPA enforcement.

Last year, auditors from the USDA Office of the Inspector General made several recommendations that, if adopted, would enhance HPA enforcement.

Revision of the agency’s HPA inspection system topped the auditors’ recommendation list. Under the current enforcement system, the USDA-APHIS trains Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs) to inspect show horses for signs of soring. Horse show managers hire DQPs to conduct inspections during their events.

After their assessment of HPA enforcement protocols, auditors recommended that the DQP system be dismantled and replaced by a new system requiring USDA-accredited veterinarians to carry out animal inspections at horse shows and other equine-related events. Under the auditors’ recommendations, the inspecting veterinarians would also be authorized to issue citations for HPA violations.

Auditors also recommended that the USDA-APHIS develop and implement measures that would bar anyone who is suspended from horse-related events due to HPA violations from participating in future events, and to revise and enforce regulations that would bar horses that are disqualified due to soring from future exhibition.

Finally, auditors recommended that the USDA petition Congress to significantly increase funding for HPA enforcement.

USDA-APHIS spokesman David Sacks says the agency is currently working on implementing the auditors’ recommendations. “[Measures] that require regulatory changes can take from one to two years for implementation,” he says.

Also last year, the agency added a new regulation requiring horse show managers to adopt uniform minimal penalty protocols for soring, use of foreign substances on horses, and failure to pass equipment, scar rule and shoeing inspection violations. The regulation requires that all show managers incorporate the uniform penalty protocol in their 2011 horse show rulebooks.

Horse Industry Organizations (certified by the USDA-APHIS to present horse shows) that fail to adopt the minimum penalty protocol could face decertification, Sacks says.

it, they do it too if they want to win.”

Others believe the Walking Horse industry’s woes are largely cultural.

“There is a very negative stigma attached to violators of the rules in USEF competition, but this does not seem to be the case in the big lick Walking Horse world,” says Stephen Schumacher, DVM, chief administrator of testing programs for the USEF Drugs and Medications Program. “You can ‘test’ all you want, but if everyone is immune to the negative perception of the behavior because of their own habitation, nothing is going to change.”

Performance-Enhancing Drugs

Performance-enhancing drug use is another problem being addressed in competitions. It’s up to horse sport governing organizations such as the USEF and the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), the worldwide equestrian sport association of which the USEF is a member, to create a culture of fairness in competition that also promotes equine welfare, Schumacher says. That’s why the organizations have established strict rules of conduct for owners, trainers and riders, as well as regulations prohibiting the use of certain drugs to enhance human and equine performance.

According to Schumacher, there are 1,156 substances on the FEI’s list of prohibited substances. Of those, 966 are deemed to have no legitimate use in horses. “The remainder are controlled medications, which means they are still prohibited if found in the horse at the time of competition, but they do have legitimate therapeutic uses in the horse,” Schumacher says.

The FEI’s aim is to completely eliminate doping in FEI and member organization events.

But even organizations that adopt the strictest rules and sanctions can’t ensure that everyone will always follow them. During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, four show jumping horses tested positive for the substance capsaicin, a chili pepper derivative often used as a topical pain reliever in humans. It works by creating a heating sensation that soothes aches, pains and strains. The drug is also sometimes used to increase leg sensitivity in show jumpers during competitions. Use of the drug on horses in exhibition is prohibited under the FEI rules and those of its member organizations, including the USEF.

As a result of the findings, the four horses and their riders were disqualified. Ultimately, an FEI tribunal stripped Norwegian rider Tony Andre Hansen (and the rest of his team) of the team bronze medal after his horse, Camiro, tested positive for capsaicin. He was suspended from competition for more than four months.

To eliminate or at least dramatically reduce the use of banned substances—including performance-enhancing drugs, organizations must work to improve the horses’ health and performance naturally—by feeding properly, training effectively and providing the best care possible.
the presence of prohibited substances. All individual-medal horses and one equine member of each medal-winning team were tested, and random testing samples were taken throughout the event. In all, 140 samples were taken from 82 horses. Blood samples were drawn from all 82, and urine samples were obtained from as many as possible.

On Oct. 15, 2010, the FEI announced that results of all blood and urine samples taken from horses competing at the WEG were negative for all prohibited substances.

Human competitors also underwent testing for prohibited substance use at the WEG. Urine samples were taken from three athletes in each of the eight disciplines represented at the event. All samples taken from the total of 24 riders tested negative for prohibited substances, according to the FEI.

Overall, Leitch believes the USEF and FEI have been largely successful at establishing and enforcing policies that promote both fairness and equine welfare. That does not mean everyone determined to bend or break the rules in order to win will be caught and penalized, however.

“If you look at the USEF and FEI, things are pretty decent,” says Leitch, who worked for the United States Equestrian Team at the 1988, 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games and remains a member of the AAEP Equine Welfare Committee. “However, while there are members of the [horse] industry who transgress the rules to the extent that they get caught, there are some who don’t get caught. That’s the nature of the game.”

Even so, Jim Mann, former president of the Missouri Fox Trotting Horse Breed Association, believes it is in the horse industry’s best interest to do whatever it takes to keep competitions clean.

“No one likes to feel that they have been cheated or not given a fair chance to compete,” says Mann. “No organization or industry will survive unless its members feel that they are getting a fair shake and are being judged fairly.”

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