Standing in a stall one late winter day in 2005, John Henry captured his future owner's heart with his kind eye. But otherwise, the Tennessee walking horse sure was a mess.

Another horse had chewed off most of his tail. The heels of his hooves had been cut out. And three lines of scars marked his ankles, a telltale sign he'd been a victim of soring—a practice whereby trainers cause intense pain in an effort to exaggerate the breed's high-stepping gait and gain an unfair edge in shows.

But in the case of John Henry, there were other scars that took much longer to surface.

Three years after purchasing the abused, underweight animal, Hal Bowden took him to a North Carolina show as part of the rehabilitation process; he wanted to see how John Henry would react to the setting. After leaving the barn to have dinner, Bowden returned to find him cowering, covered in a cold sweat.

"To tell you the honest truth, I just cried. And I just went and held him for awhile," Bowden says, adding: "I'll never forget that big old horse, standing in the corner of that stall, trembling in fear."

It was a tragic sight—the very sort that Congress had aimed to prevent four decades ago when it passed the Horse Protection Act to crack down on soring.

Yet the illegal practice persists today.

Just last year, inspectors observed more than 400 violations of the law at the 71st Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration in Shelbyville, Tenn. Another 243 were recorded at this year's event, representing 9 percent of the inspections conducted.

The twisted goal of soring is to make stepping down particularly painful, so that horses will quickly lift their front legs back up high in an unnaturally animated gait, known as the "big lick." Some trainers spread caustic chemicals like mustard oil or diesel fuel just above the hooves, then wrap the legs in plastic so the chemicals cook into the skin for days. During practice and competition, a metal chain slides up and down the blistered skin, exacerbating the pain.

Others use a method called pressure shoeing: cutting hooves down to the sensitive quick before tightly nailing on the shoes. Sometimes, hard or sharp metal objects like marbles or nails are inserted between the hooves and the heavy stacks of pads the horse is forced to wear.

The abuse can lead to chronic health problems, even fatal cases of colic, says Keith Dane, HSUS director of equine protection.

"Because of the intensity of the suffering that's inflicted, and the longevity of the time that it's inflicted on them—which is essentially their entire show ring careers—it's one of the most egregious forms of equine cruelty that we've identified," says Dane.

The practice continues in part because funding shortfalls prevent the USDA from sending inspectors to more than 5 percent of shows. Advocates have serious concerns about what happens at the other 95 percent, where industry insiders conduct the inspections.

In March, a bipartisan group of 40 senators and 131 representatives supported President Obama's request for an additional $400,000 to enforce the Horse Protection Act during fiscal 2011, bringing the total to $900,000; House and Senate committees later gave preliminary approval. And in August, The HSUS and several other organizations petitioned the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to enact new regulations.
The Miracle of No Births  Controlling elephant populations through darts, not bullets

A decade ago, a herd of elephants in South Africa's Greater Makalali Private Game Reserve was predicted to become so big its members threatened the very habitat upon which they and other animals depended. Approaching 55 members, the population was expected to more than double in 10 years—in a country where elephants have been killed, or "culled," to keep their numbers down.

Then arrived a vaccine that uses female elephants' immune systems to prevent sperm from fertilizing their eggs. By 2002, the reserve had achieved zero population growth. Later, even with a few select females allowed to get pregnant, the number of elephants increased just 3 percent annually, versus an average growth of 9 percent before contraception began.

Now, after 10 years of careful observation and refinement, researchers have presented a paper calling the vaccine a safe and proven way to manage populations in reserves with as many as 500 elephants—and avoid culling.

"We know that this works," says Teresa Telecky, director of wildlife at Humane Society International, which with The HSUS helped fund the research. "The results are clear."

The method used at Makalali involves darting females two times the first year, then annually afterwards. By contrast, culling in South Africa has involved herding elephants together with helicopters and shooting every animal in the group dead—any survivors would likely be too traumatized to function normally. Because culling doesn't stop elephant populations from continuing to grow, it must be done again and again.

To encourage the adoption of contraception, work is under way on a "one-shot" vaccine that would only have to be delivered once every other year, potentially cutting the cost in half. This would make contraception more economical for protected areas with large herds, such as Kruger National Park, which has 13,000 elephants. But researchers at Makalali argue parks like Kruger shouldn't wait for the one-shot vaccine to start contraception.

Says Audrey Delsink, field director at Makalali, "The sooner you implement it, the sooner you start to have this contraceptive effect ... The longer you wait, the greater your problem becomes."

— Karen E. Lange

A month later, at the national "Celebration" event, Dane found reason for both concern and guarded optimism. On one hand, more stringent protocols were in place, including the USDA's rule that any horse identified as a soring victim be disqualified for the remainder of the show. On the other, large tarps kept the inspection area hidden—a change from previous years.

"The question is: If you think you're doing a great job and you're really improving, then why do you need to shield the public from your work?" says Dane. "Based on this year's Celebration, there's certainly the potential for progress. And I liked some of the things that I saw. It needs to be sustained, and even more progress is needed."

John Henry has made some improvements of his own: His hooves have almost grown back to normal. He's become more trusting of people, and he's befriended an old show horse named Boo. A year ago, he returned to competition in the National Walking Horse Association, which Bowden helped found in an effort to move away from soring and instead celebrate walking horses' naturally smooth gaits.

— Michael Sharp