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Soring Concerns Continue, But Changes Are Coming

Too many gaited horses are still being sored to gain a competitive edge in the show ring

By Frank Lessiter, Editor/Publisher

While progress has been made in dealing with soring issues since American Farriers Journal produced its four-part series on this illegal practice 3 years ago, there's still plenty of room for improvement. (To read these four articles, go to www.americanfarriers.com/fi/soring.)

But as was pointed out by numerous speakers at last fall's Sound Horse Conference, progress is being made. This included possible increased federal government funding for horse show inspections and increased emphasis on bringing violators to court under the Horse Protection Act (HPA), which was enacted in 1970 to eliminate soring.

Sponsored by the Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH), speakers at this event maintained that more stringent government enforcement and demands to ban soring by the equine industry are essential to eliminate this long-time problem.

What Is Soring?

There are many ways to sore horses, with the tricks often being as closely guarded as Aunt Jean's pecan pie recipe.

When in motion, a horse that has been sored by chemicals or mechanical means responds by quickly lifting its front legs to relieve the pain. Irritating or blistering a horse's forelegs by injecting or applying chemicals may give this result — but can also lead to permanent painful scarring. Inhumane trimming and pressure-shoeing techniques are other painful and illegal methods used to obtain the high-stepping "Big Lick" gait.

One Tennessee Walking Horse (TWH) veteran trainer, who didn't want to have his name used, sums up the perceived advantages of soring this way: "A horse's foot moves toward weight and away from pain. So make them hurt a little, add a little heavier shoe and the horse will step a little higher and quicker than a natural, unsored horse. And even though he's suffering from the pain, has long toes, heavy shoes, extreme bits and a rider sitting far back, a horse with heart and substance will keep trying to create the spectacle of the sored show horse."

What's Needed?

Keith Dane, director of equine protection for the Humane Society of the United States, says eliminating soring will require:
- A change in TWH show ring judging standards.
- Better Horse Protection Act enforcement.
- More funding for barn and show inspections.
- Stronger enforcement regulations.
- Additional scientific research on identifying its illegal use.
- More state laws with enforcement.
- Additional public awareness of the problem.
- Making the act of soring more socially unacceptable.

Along with trainers, Dane says...
owners must share in the responsibility and liability for the condition of their horses. Owners should be required to sit out when their horses have been found to be sored and should suffer severe financial penalties.

With trainers, he says, harsher and more meaningful penalties need to be put in place. Trainers found to be using soring and numbing agents should be banned for life. In addition, barns should be open for inspection and to the general public.

Dane says a real key is determining which gaits can be produced soundly, then seeking a change in the judging standards. "The flat-shod horse should be promoted since the 'Big Lick' gait can't be produced without soring," he says.

**Inspection Changes Recommended**

In late 2010, the federal government's Office of the Inspector General recommended that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) abolish the designated qualified person (DQP) program carried out in recent years by about a dozen equine groups. Instead, they recommended independently, accredited veterinarians be hired by the USDA to perform inspections at sanctioned shows since the current program does not adequately keep horses from being abused.

The federal agency's report indicated too many members of the horse show industry don't regard the abuse of horses as a serious problem and resent USDA inspections. As a result, soring has been ingrained for decades among many trainers and owners as an acceptable practice.

In thousands of soring inspections conducted by USDA representatives, 87 foreign substances have been identified as counterirritants, masking agents or numbing agents, such as lidocaine or benzocaine. Laboratory tests showed 60% of these substances found during inspections resulted in positive results.

"Random drug testing has already begun in 2011 at selected horse shows to see if medications are being used as soring agents," says veterinarian Rachel Cezar, the USDA Horse Protection Program national coordinator that is part of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) agency. "USDA has also begun a working relationship with the U.S. Equestrian Federation drug testing program."

Recent changes require independent DQPs to be licensed and disciplined by USDA. Horse show managers will also be required to identify people on suspension because of previous HPA violations and prohibit their participation in show events.

**Major Inspection Differences**

In the fall of 2010 and early in 2011, USDA staffers felt a $900,000 Congressional appropriation to tackle soring issues was a done deal. The White House had requested it, and both the House and Senate Appropriations
subcommittees had approved it. But when Congress failed to pass a fiscal year 2011 budget, the increased HPA funding never came to a vote.

The continuing resolution that Congress passed last spring to cover all government funding through September 30 held HPA enforcement funding at the fiscal year 2010 appropriated level of $500,000, rather than the proposed higher level of funding.

For the 2012 fiscal year, the Presidential budget again calls for $900,000 to support HPA enforcement. As you might expect, numerous equine groups working to eliminate soring are applying pressure to urge members of Congress to support the request.

With the anticipated increase in funding, USDA had expected to send inspectors to approximately 100 horse shows this year, which may now not happen. This would have been an increase from 60 shows in 2010 and 40 events in 2009. Research on finding effective diagnostic tests for identifying soring would have also been funded through this increased budget.

It was anticipated that the increased number of USDA inspections would result in more violations being detected than by previous volunteer programs carried out by a dozen horse groups.

The increased USDA support would likely have meant that qualified inspectors would turn up more violations rather than what was previously done with the volunteer program carried out by various horse groups — some with a definite conflict of interest.

Researchers at Eastern Kentucky University analyzed data from the USDA website and compared violation rates over 3 years for horse shows. They compared results from shows that were inspected by USDA veterinary medical officers (VMO) with those inspected by the DQPs.

This analysis included data from 1,400 shows and 240,000 horse inspections. The data indicated that VMOs found 12 to 30 times more violations at shows than those determined by DQP inspectors. If VMO inspectors had made all of the inspections, there would have been 62,387 violations rather than the 3,932 that actually were made.

The data also demonstrated that out of 9,090 total HPA violations, 50% were for 1,157 repeat offenders.

Flat shoe horses should be promoted since the big lick gait can’t be produced without soring...

Time To Eliminate Soring

Farrier Jim Crew says soring must stop and that the TWH industry must clean up its act. The former gaited horse owner, trainer and shoer who splits his time between Ocala, Fla., and Pagosa Springs, Colo., urges trainers to work together to save the TWH show horse. The first step, he maintains, is for everyone to quit violating the HPA.

“You don’t have to worry about going to a horse show and passing inspection if your horse is completely sound,” he says. “And it’s not going to be very long until all of the unsound horses will be on the truck back home and you’ll be collecting ribbons.”

Crew’s long-term goal is for his young grandchildren to get to ride a TWH someday. But at the rate that we’re going, he says there will likely be fewer TWH horse shows and numerous trainers on lifetime suspensions.

Crew wants to see only completely sound horses enter the show ring. He believes it’s possible, as the TWH folks have incredibly improved these horses and are breeding a horse that’s coming very close to going completely perfect.

“We need to get rid of that big long bulky shoe,” he says. “We need to clean up the looks of that shoe, along with the size and the style.

“Morgans and Arabians don’t have these problems. I shoe some Saddlebreds, and those shoes are not nearly as long or as big as with the TWH, but they still get a lot done.”
Who’s Responsible?
Eric Gray maintains the responsibility for soring needs to be expanded.

With chemical soring, a trainer is assumed to be directly responsible for how a horse is presented for inspection. As a result, both the trainer and owner must share responsibility for a horse that is found to be non-compliant or sore in the eastern region.

“If your name is on the show sheet, it doesn’t matter why the horse responded to palpation or didn’t lead,” says the veteran flat shod TWH farrier from Cumming, Ga. “The horse is found in violation, and the name on the show sheet gets the ticket.”

With pressure shoeing, the intent to do harm must be established in order to suspend or fine a trainer. Plus, proving who was the last person to work on the hooves can be nearly impossible, says Gray.

Before suspension for pressure shoeing can be administered, the cause of the hoof lameness must be determined. The foot may be sore because the horse was intentionally pressure sored, the farrier was careless or the horse had a lameness issue beyond the control of the farrier.

Gray says leaving the sole longer than the hoof wall or not properly relieving sole pressure are typical methods used with pressure soring. Placing a foreign body between the hoof and the shoe/pad combination can also lead to excessive pressure on the sole or frog.

He adds that certain types of pressure shoeing are undetectable even with X-rays. Certain types of hoof packing that are meant to be therapeutic can also be used to cause intentional pressure.

“For instance, using a piece of dried hoof trimmings as a foreign object can be nearly impossible to detect even if the shoes are pulled,” he says. “The use of a removable mechanical device can be used days in advance and doesn’t have to be in place when the horse arrives at a show.”

“Even if the horse was to have the device in place while on the show grounds, it would be removed before the horse was presented for inspection. Pressure shoeing can also be accomplished by intentionally road foudering the horse.”

Tougher Indictments
With recent HPA soring violation cases against trainers and owners, the courts are looking at additional charges. As an example, four Tennessee residents who were alleged to have sored horses between 2002 and 2010 recently had wire fraud and money laundering added to the charges.

A March 2011 indictment alleged that the trainers placed bolts in horses’ feet, taped blocks to the feet and applied other soring techniques prior to competition. The indictment alleged that these external devices were removed prior to pre-performance HPA compliance.
Thermography Shows Abnormal Hoof Balance

In 2007, Minnesota equine veterinarian Tracy Turner utilized thermography to evaluate 15 Tennessee Walking Horses (TWH) shown in performance competition. Among these horses, five had an abnormal pastern, three had abnormal hooves, five had both abnormal pasterns and hooves and one had an abnormal cannon bone.

A practicing equine veterinarian in Elk River, Minn., Turner says many of the unusual thermal patterns he's seen are related to abnormal hoof balance. Here's what he found with different types of horses:

- With TWH horses wearing a pad and shoe package, 57% had a negative solar angle, 50% had a hoof wall length disparity of more than 1/4 inches, 86% had a medial lateral angle of more than 3 degrees and 7% had a rotation of over 5 degrees.
- Among flat shod TWH equines, 22% had a negative solar angle, 67% had a hoof wall length disparity of over 1/4 inches, 67% had a medial lateral angle of more than 3 degrees and 15% had rotated by more than 5 degrees.
- Looking at hoof imbalance in a normal TWH, Turner found none had a negative solar angle, 35% had a hoof wall length disparity of more than 1/4 inches, 7% had a medial lateral angle of more than 3 degrees and none of these horses had a rotation of over 5 degrees.
- With gaited Saddlesbreds, 33% had a negative solar angle, 40% had a hoof wall length disparity of more than 1/4 inches, 20% had a medial lateral angle of more than 3 degrees and 3% had rotated by more than 5 degrees.
- With normal horses, 3% had a negative solar angle, 36% had a hoof wall length disparity of more than 1/4 inches, 17% had a medial lateral angle of more than 3 degrees and none had rotated by more than 5 degrees. Turner says hoof imbalance causes numerous problems with movement and other physical issues. "Horses that move better don't need to be fixed," he says.

His analysis suggests dorsal hoof wall thickness should be at least 16 mm. Sole thickness at the top of the coffin bone should be at least 10 mm.

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inspections and that the horses were injected with pain reducing drugs to limit the horse's reaction to inspection procedures. They were also charged with using other individuals as nominee trainers to obtain trainer licenses and that they falsified horse show entry forms and other documents that indicated others were training the horses.

But in a late April indictment, wire fraud and money laundering charges were added to the indictment by a federal grand jury in Chattanooga, Tenn. It is alleged that the defendants defrauded out-of-state clients by collecting payments based on false representations that their training methods would be HPA compliant. However, these funds were used to support training techniques that applied non-HPA compliant training methods, including both mechanical and chemical soring procedures.

On the money laundering charges, clients were instructed to make checks for training payable to one person, which were later endorsed and cashed by the actual trainer.

New Regulations Proposed

The HPA has been grossly under-enforced since it was passed by Congress in 1970. Over the past four decades, there has not been any
significant reduction in the cruel practice of soring horses, maintains Keith Dane of the Humane Society.

But in May of this year, the USDA proposed to tighten up the rules with a clarification that was published in the Federal Register. Under the proposal, any of the Horse Industry Organizations (HIO) certified by USDA to inspect horses under the HPA can be stripped of that certification if they fail to comply with the HPA regulations.

Although the proposed new regulations would establish mandatory minimum penalties to be imposed for violations of the HPA, some equine groups believe the proposed penalties are far too lenient for some violations.

For example, the USDA proposed only a 2 week suspension from showing for a violation of the “scar rule,” which means a horse’s legs have been scarred in such a way that provides clear evidence of painful and cruel soring.

“However, the USDA has taken the first of many steps necessary to fix the problems that have for 40 years prevented its Horse Protection Program from bringing an end to soring,” says Dane. “Mandatory penalties, if enforced, will provide a deterrent to those who would cripple horses just to get a competitive advantage. The USDA must ensure that the penalties are commensurate with the violation.”

New Soring Reference
To help with HPA enforcement, the FOSH group recently compiled a database of over 400 court and administrative cases. These records cover over 700 case depositions that interpret and enforce the HPA. The records indicate that despite being illegal, soring continues to be a common practice with the TWH and some other gaited breeds.

Information has been collected on each case, with details regarding soring violations and source information for each case citation. Besides covering case decisions from 1972 through 2010, more records are continually being added.

“We are extremely grateful to the attorneys and volunteers who have donated hundreds of hours of legal research to complete this catalog of HPA cases,” says Lori Northrup, president of FOSH.

“This listing, and the analysis done on each case, will be invaluable for attorneys, humane animal organizations, the USDA or the Justice Department when seeking stronger enforcement of the HPA, either through litigation or rule making.”

Check Award-Winning Series On Soring
It's been 3 years since American Farriers Journal produced the award-winning series on soring. To view the four articles, go to www.americanfarriers.com/tt/soring to begin with the first installment of this series.