

## **McCONNELL, 2 OTHERS, PLEAD GUILTY**, by Roy Exum

Jackie McConnell, the notorious horse trainer who was videoed abusing and beating defenseless horses in a now-famous undercover tape, pleaded guilty to 12 of 22 misdemeanor counts of animal abuse in a west Tennessee court room Tuesday and the 61-year-old criminal was effectively removed from owning, possessing, training or housing horses for the next 20 years.

Additionally, Judge J. Webber McCraw sentenced the former Hall of Fame trainer to one year of house arrest, four more years of state probation, fined McConnell \$25,000, and gave the disgraced Tennessee Walking Horse trainer the next 120 days to divest himself of any horses he owns or has interest in. "Your rarely see such an outcome for misdemeanors," said District Attorney General Michael Dunavant. "We are pleased that justice has been served."

Two of McConnell's associates, Jeff Dockery and Joseph Abernathy, were sentenced to four and three years of probation, respectively, in Fayette County's Bill G. Kelley Criminal Justice Complex in Somerville. Dunavant and Assistant DA Mark Davidson skillfully kept McConnell and his two associates from asking for a diversion. All three defendants could have sought a first-time diversion under Tennessee law, which doesn't recognize earlier guilty pleas by the three or sentencing in Federal proceedings last year.

The state sentences will run concurrently with Federal sentencing after McConnell was declared a felon in Chattanooga last September. U.S. District Judge Sandy Mattice sentenced McConnell to three years of probation on Federal charges and fined him \$75,000 in an unrelated case while sentencing Dockery and Abernathy -- who worked for McConnell at his Whittier Stables in Collierville -- to one year of probation each.

The state court in Somerville was forced to charge McConnell with misdemeanors because the heinous tape, which appalled horsemen all over the world when it was shown on "Nightline" by ABC News, took place before animal abuse became a felony in the state on July 1, 2012.

McConnell also had to forfeit any ownership in the animals that were confiscated when his barn was raided shortly after the undercover video was made public by the Humane Society of the United States. There is ongoing litigation by the state to seize ownership of the horses that were being brutalized by McConnell from the owners who had originally placed the horses with McConnell at his Whittier Stables.

McConnell's second conviction brings further evidence that horse abuse -- called soring -- is rampant in the Tennessee Walking Horse industry. Another notable trainer, Larry Joe Wheelon, is facing aggravated animal abuse charges in Maryville, Tenn. Wheelon, 68, and two of his associates will now be arraigned on August 14 after 19 of 27 horses in his care were seized in a late April raid.

Wheelon, along with Randall Stacy Gunter, 43, of Louisville, and Brandon Lunsford, 31, of Walland, are facing felony charges, which under state law now calls for no less than one year or up to five years on each count. Prosecutors will seek additional counts on Wheelon and his associates after the Blount County Grand Jury acts on the case following the August hearing. At the time of his arrest, Wheelon was a board member of the Tennessee Walking Horse Trainer's Association and headed its Ethics Committee. He was also a three-star judge and a prominent member of the East Tennessee Walking Horse Association.

But according to U.S. Dept. of Agriculture officials, some horses in Wheelon's barn were so badly maimed "they could hardly walk." This was confirmed by video tape taken during the raid and it is believed laboratory analysis is "overwhelming." Caustic substances, including mustard oil, were confiscated from the barn during the April raid.

Wheelon has maintained he is innocent of the charges since his arrest but, according to USDA records, he has a colorful history of violating the federal Horse Protection Act in recent years.