

Shining light on a dark practice

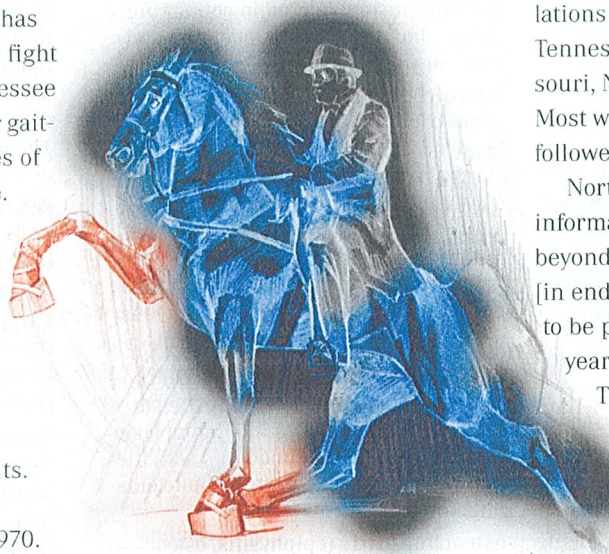
This year, an activist group has adopted a new tactic in its fight against the soring of Tennessee Walking Horses and other gaited horses: making public the names of trainers suspended for the practice.

Since January, Friends of Sound Horses, Inc. (FOSH) has used a database—www.hpadata.us—to publicize the names of those cited for soring, the application of caustic substances or mechanical irritants to the forelegs of show horses to exaggerate their gaits. Soring has been banned under the Horse Protection Act (HPA) since 1970. Horses are inspected before entering the show ring, and if evidence of soring is found, the horse is eliminated from the competition. Nonetheless, the practice persists as some trainers find ways to avoid detection.

By publicizing the list of violators, FOSH hopes to increase public awareness of the issue and drive business away from chronic offenders. “Let people be informed,” says FOSH President Lori Northrup. “If a person is looking to send their horse for training, they can make the value judgment on who they want handling him. It would help trainers change their methods if they saw their business dwindling.”

The database includes the name of the violator, location, suspension dates back to 1986 and type of violation. Most of the information in the database was given to FOSH by Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs), groups certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to inspect horses at shows. However, Northrup notes, not all HIOs have agreed to participate.

As of April, about 8,900 suspensions



An online database makes public the names of those who have been suspended for soring show horses.

By Julie Ruggirello

were recorded in the database; 947 people were listed with “multiple suspensions,” with a total of 4,301 repeat offenses, an average of 4.5 violations per trainer.

Violations of the so-called “scar rule”—exhibiting a horse with scars deemed to be the result of soring—were the most common cause of suspensions, accounting for more than 30 percent of all those in the database. Also common is the “unilateral sore,” meaning that pain had been detected in only one leg, as opposed to a bilateral sore, in which sensitivity is detected in both front legs.

More than 77 percent of all HPA vio-

lations listed occurred in six states: Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Missouri, North Carolina and Georgia. Most were in Tennessee (38.5 percent), followed by Kentucky (14.8 percent).

Northrup hopes that making this information public will have an impact beyond the show world: “The first step [in ending the practice of soring] has to be public awareness. In the last four years, public awareness has soared.

There is still a huge opportunity to have public pressure stop the behavior. The most powerful form of public awareness would be from sponsors not sponsoring people who sore. I think that would be very powerful.”

So far, Northrup says, FOSH has received some backlash from those listed in the database but not “anything very dramatic.” In fact, she says, “people say ‘thank you’ for making this data available. Most of it has been very positive; people really appreciate it.”

Looking to the future, Northrup is happy that the USDA may soon be publicizing HPA violations, too. “The USDA has been working for years on a database, which they have just previewed to certified HIOs, and that will start to be used during 2010. This will make the availability of information much more transparent and well organized, because all of the violations should be reported to the USDA,” says Northrup.

But, she says, there is always more to do. “There is a continuum of work to end soring. As that begins to wane, I think the efforts would be to encourage positive, sound alternatives to people. Our work will never be done.”