The War on Soring

For those outside the Tennessee Walking Horse industry, the exaggerated high, stepping gait and stacked shoe pads of a performance Walker appear unnatural at best and abusive at worst. But for a core group of breed fans, that gait is seen as a mark of a royalty bred and trained equine athlete. The disconnect between the die-hard of the Walking Horse show industry and most of the rest of the world has been the heart of an ongoing controversy for decades.

In the mid-20th century, unscrupulous trainers began to employ cruel techniques now known as soring in order to achieve an even higher, more exaggerated gait that drew throngs of spectators and won blue ribbons. By 1970, the problem had become so widespread that a federal law was enacted to try to put an end to it. The Horse Protection Act has been in place ever since, but according to the agencies charged with policing the Walking Horse show circuit, the abuse still occurs.

Earlier this year, Rep. Ed Whitfield, R-KY, and 102 co-sponsors introduced H.R. 1518, the Prevent All Soring Tactics (PAST) Act. This bill amends the Horse Protection Act to prohibit action chains, padded shoes, hoof bands and other devices for non-therapeutic purposes. While pads are used to aid in some non-competitive horse shows, the PAST Act would remove them from the Tennessee Walking Horse breed.

Padded shoes aren’t necessary, and a flat-shod Walker is just as effective, so the rule changes are intended to eradicate the practice of using inspecting shoes. Before they ever came into being, the Walkers were known as 'hot walkers' to their fans and breeders, and the association has spent a great deal of money and resources to change that image.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is one of those organizations who have been active in support of the PAST Act. Their statement suppor the law.

"TWHBEA and AVMA don’t want the public to think of our reputation as being a peddled show horse. We’ve been telling the world that nobody outside of the breed is going to abuse our horse. And when you abuse our horse, you lose the public."

The reality is that the only way to compete sound and persona, and still maintain an image of the Walking Horse that the general public can enjoy is to put an end to the abuse. The PAST Act is the tool to make that happen.

One-Year Countdown to the 2014 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games

After the success of the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games (WEG) held in Lexington, Ky., Alltech will be the title sponsor of WEG for the second time in 2014. The games will be returning to Europe, in the highly equine-centric region of Normandy, France, with eight disciplines: dressage, jumping, eventing, reining, driving, para-equestrian, vaulting and endurance.

Visit the official ticketing website, ticket.jmfestivaltech2014normandie.fr, for all the latest information. Tickets will be available to the general public in November 2013, or you can book ticket/travel packages through Equestrian Tours at www.equestriane.com.
are used to a lesser extent in shoeing some non-gifted saddle seat breeds, the PAST Act only limits their use in three breeds with a history of soring: Tennessee Walking Horses, Spotted Saddle Horse and Racking Horses.

Padded shoes and chains alone aren't necessarily indicators of soring, and a flat-shod horse can still be sored, so the rule change alone would not eradicate the problem. The system of inspecting show horses for soundness before they enter the show-ring would continue, and violators would face increased penalties.

The American Association of Equine Practitioners and American Veterinary Medical Association, longtime opponents of soring, came out in support of the bill immediately, but a surprise endorsement of the bill came in May 2013 when Tracy Boyd, president of the Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' and Exhibitors' Association (TWHBEA), released a statement supporting the Act.

"TWHBEA has lost members in droves, and the brutal emails I have received tell me why," said Boyd. "It is our reputation. It is soring. It is our image. I believe our modern-day padded show horses are cleaner than they've ever been. The problem is that nobody outside our industry believes it. And when you've lost the public, you have lost it all—and we have clearly lost the public."

The reality of the breed may be a sound and personable trail mount and family companion, but its public face is still the padded show-ring horse that the general public has come to associate with cruel training methods. Boyd acknowledged that this perception would have to change if fans of the Walking Horse want their breed to continue.

"No matter what happens with [the PAST Act], proposed legislation or future versions... the pads and chains do not define this breed," he said. "Just imagine the possibilities that exist for us if we could rid ourselves of this black cloud, this stigma once and for all." 

— Leslie Potter

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