

Union Humane takes over Walking horse show

Sponsorship of event stirs debate

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The Union Humane Society is the new sponsor for the annual Tennessee Walking Horse Show July 12-13 — and there are a few people who are not happy about it.

“It’s extremely contradictory for a humane society to associate itself with an organization where there is known animal abuse,” said director for Community Action for Animals (CAA) in Memphis, Tenn., Cindy Sanders. “If there is even a hint of impropriety, they shouldn’t want to be involved.”

Over the past several years “soring” and “pressure shoeing” have been contentious issues for the Tennessee Walking Horse Show industry.

Soring is the illegal act of applying caustic chemicals to the ankle area of the horse, burning that area and then allowing the chains to dig into the area. Pressure shoeing is placing nails, broken glass, etc. under the shoe, causing the object to go into the frog of the hoof causing pain, like stepping on a tack. The reasoning behind both of these methods is to produce a “big lick” or high kick during the walking horse performances.

Sanders, a former federal officer and current animal legislator, said she was in disbelief upon first hearing that a humane society would be sponsoring a walking horse show.

“Coalition of Louisiana Animal Advocates (COLAA) sent a letter to the Board of Directors of the Union Humane Society and CAA sent a letter to the board also,” Sanders said. “I spoke with Ms. Fontana who is on the board and a very nice lady. She confirmed the board received our letters and was fully aware of the problems associated with the “big lick” performance classes and that despite it all, they will proceed as planned.”

Fontana admitted there has been abuse going on at walking horse shows, but said those guilty of abuse have been caught and she does not believe there will be a chance of any abuse at the Union Parish show.

“We have a list of names of all those who have been sanctioned and they will not be at our show,” she said. “A few abusers in a breed, race or sport do not make the entire sport bad.”

Fontana said in nearly every sport, there is potential for abuse, but that it is unfair for one to assume everyone is liable.

“We probably cannot stop the abuse from happening completely,” she said. “But we will do everything we can to monitor our show and make sure it doesn’t happen there.”

Scotty Aulds has been involved in with walking horse shows for more than 30 years and has been announcing at the Union Parish walking horse show since it began in 1990

“The whole thing has been blown way out of proportion,” Aulds said. “The horse is scrutinized for every step it takes. There are inspectors at every show who examine these horses to make sure no abuse is going on. I won’t deny there may be a few bad apples but the percentage rate of those who show compared to those who are sanctioned for abuse is extremely low. We need to get rid of the people who abuse horses, true. But I’ve been doing this a long time and most trainers I know treat their horses with the ultimate respect—heated stalls, fresh bedding... the works.”

Aulds also said the walking horse show in Union Parish has always been associated with charity and progress for the area.

“This is a positive event,” Aulds said. “The proceeds always go towards a good cause like scholarships for local youth, and different projects around town.”

In the past, Aulds said the walking horse show has paid for the lights underneath the Highway 33 bridge, maps for Union Parish Tourists and equipment for the Union Parish Sheriff’s Office Reserve, to name a few.

“And the show brings in business,” Aulds said. “People who come for the show eat in our restaurants and shop in our stores.”

However, Sanders argues that a good cause is not enough reason for these shows to continue and if the Union Humane Society wanted to be clear of controversy they would consider having a “sound” performance rather than a big lick.

“A sound show is natural,” Sanders said. “It doesn’t allow the action devices or chains and many walking horse shows who have begun this method have been just as successful as when they were doing big lick shows.”

Furthermore, Sanders claims that the HIO (Horse Industry Organization) which is responsible for mandatory inspections at shows, is currently in violation of the United States Department of Agriculture, which appoints HIO inspectors.

Although contacted several times, the HIO was unavailable for comment on the matter.

Regardless of the controversy, it is clear that the Union Humane Society will proceed with the show as planned. However, there are still some unanswered questions surrounding the event. Since the shows beginning, the Union Parish Chamber of Commerce has sponsored the event, which was held at the D’Arbonne Range Riders Arena.

This year, not only will the sponsor be the Union Humane Society, but the show will not be held at the DRR arena. Instead, it will be at the North Louisiana Exhibition Center in Lincoln Parish.

Chamber member and show organizer Jayne Green said the chamber decided to give the walking horse show to the Union Humane Society in an effort to help them with funding.

“Other things were taking precedent with the chamber and we also knew the Union Humane Society is in need of a facility so we turned the show over to them,” Green said. “They were extremely happy and grateful for the opportunity.”

For whatever reason, when the new sponsorship was presented to the DRR board, the board voted against it.

"It was a personal decision, that's all I can say," Fontana said.

Despite facing obstacle after obstacle the UHS is not giving up and will continue to work towards its greater goal of establishing an effective animal shelter in Union Parish. In a post on social media outlet Facebook the UHS wrote:

"Thank you for the comments and concerns regarding our upcoming Tennessee Walking Horse Show. We will be continuing to sponsor a Tennessee Walking Horse show hopefully for many years in the future. We believe the best way to combat a wrong is to shine a light on it - that can't be done if you aren't there... no animal should be harmed by a human. Unfortunately, that is not going to stop happening, especially if organizations like ours are underfunded and/or shut down. Our best way to combat the problem is to be there - watching, watching, watching. Our members have owned horses and other animals for many years and we will continue to do anything possible to prevent abuse from happening to them in a private setting or a public one. Thank you for your support."