The “Big Lick”: When Will it End?

BY DUTCH HENRY

Neal Valk, DVM, speaks candidly about “Big Lick,” flat-shod, soring, Tennessee Walkers and the PAST Act

Most people believe, and are encouraged to believe, that soring—the act of inflicting pain to a horse’s front feet and legs as a means of “training”—is limited to a few bad apples in the “Big Lick” world. Those in the business of torturing horses for fame and profit insist it is a small minority of Tennessee Walking Horse owners and trainers. Thankfully, for the horses’ sake, the light of public awareness is shining brightly and the incidence of soring, as it is commonly known, has been reduced. However while way too much of it remains in the big-lick world, it has become rampant in the flat-shod show world.
And such practices are even more horrible for the horses, as to accomplish the dastardly deed of seeking the unnatural gait and keep soring hidden, the horse must suffer even more pain than with conventional soring, if that is even possible to imagine.

**WHAT IS BIG LICK, AND WHAT IS FLAT-SHOD?**

“Big Lick” began sometime in the late 1940s and early ’50s. If you are ever able to see the videos of Tennessee Walking Horses strutting their stuff in the ’30s and ’40s, you would scratch your head and wonder why anyone would want to change that. But change it they did. At first just a few folks discovered they could create a higher swinging gait by tweaking shoes; then weights, pads and chains were added. Soon “stacks,” that is, pads between the shoe and the hoof often stacked so thick a metal strap must be run over the hoof wall to hold them on, were common. Somewhere along the way, “trainers,” as they are euphemistically referred to, realized that by adding pain in the form of chemicals, irritants and chains applied to pasterns and legs, the horses thus being forced to carry themselves on their hind legs because they could not bear to touch down their front legs, would do a hideous dance of anguish. That is Big Lick.

“Flat-shod” refers to show classes that allow heavy shoes, some up to five pounds, but no pads and stacks. When the spotlight became too bright for some in the Big Lick world, they moved over to flat-shod. Sadly, it did not take long for their old practices to follow as they, unfortunately for the horse, brought with them their idea that if they could make a flat-shod horse exaggerate their movements, it would catch the judge’s eyes.

So the horrible practice known as pressure-soring migrated to the flat-shod classes. Devices such as bolts in the big shoes applied to give pressure on the sole and soft tissue to create swelling within the hoof capsule, with no means of relief, accomplishes the insanely sought-after pressure-soring. And once the bolts are removed, there remains no evidence of illegal activities, but the edema within the hoof capsule remains, as does the pain. The horse is free to struggle in indescribable pain to go for ribbons, and put money in the owner’s pocket. Money washed with the tears of the suffering, voiceless horse. This insanity is at least as rampant in the flat-shod world as it ever was in Big Lick. There turns out to be a lot more than a few bad apples in the world of show Tennessee Walking Horses.

Neal Valk, DVM, an equine veterinarian for 25 years and practicing the last 15 on his home turf of northeast Tennessee, is a vocal supporter of equine welfare. He was witness to the practices of soring for years before he had to make the decision to give up working for performance horse barns and trainers.

Dr. Valk grew up in Tennessee with horses and ponies at home and always enjoyed a love

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of horses. Upon graduating University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, he worked a brief time in a small clinic in Georgia, then took a position in a clinic in Charlottesville, Virginia. Four years later, he returned to the University of Tennessee for another three years to study to become a board certified large animal surgeon. He then accepted a six-month position at the University of Florida while he studied for the board exam. Upon his certification, he returned to Tennessee prepared to serve the equine community in his hometown. At that time, he could never have imagined all that the future held.

Even though he had heard of soring, he did not really understand it, nor did he have any idea how widespread and universal it was, until he came face to face with it. What always confused him was they would call him for a lameness exam for a horse they had crippled, and ask him how to fix it. The answer to Dr. Valk was simple—quit soring it. He coined a phrase for what he saw: "Pathology as a performance enhancement."

**PATHOLOGY AS A PERFORMANCE ENHANCER, AS WITNESSED AND TOLD BY DR. VALK**

"When I began practicing in gaited-horse training barns, I was not surprised soring was done but was shocked to find how widespread it was. Every trainer sored their horses. No exceptions. Methods varied from trainer to trainer and barn to barn, but soring itself was universal.

"Upon entering the barn, I could generally detect the acrid smell of chemicals. Kerosene, diesel fuel, oil of mustard and common hand cleaners were ever present. I have never been in a training barn that didn't have Go Jo prominently displayed. In poorly ventilated barns it caused irritation of my eyes and respiratory tract. No attempt to hide these products or their use was ever made, and trainers as well as grooms were very open about what was being done. It wasn't uncommon to find myself performing an examination of a horse while a groom was busy soring another horse in the cross ties next to me.

"Common soring techniques included the application of irritating substances to the skin of the pastern region, especially the area between the heel bulbs ('the pocket'), followed by wrapping the legs in plastic cling wrap. A standard leg wrap was then applied, and the horse returned to the stall. After several days of this, the horse
The Way We Were
By Theresa Bippen
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The Tennessee Walking Horse of the past moved differently than what is rewarded in the sore horse show rings of today. Unfortunately, “animation inflation” has monopolized and as we all know, more is not always better. Let’s get technical first: a sound and natural Tennessee Walking Horse should exhibit three characteristics at the flat walk: a bold, ground-covering gait that is even and four beat; overstride (back feet stepping over the track of the front feet) and a head nod in rhythm with the cadence of its feet. The signature running walk should be the same even footfall as the flat walk but with an increase in speed and stride. Speed should not be rewarded over form. Further, the running walk should be executed freely showing “a looseness in motion” and appear to be a pleasure for both horse and rider. The gait is natural to the breed and must not appear to be artificial in execution.

Compare this definition to what is seen today in some flat-shod show rings: high front knee action with no reach, horses held tightly in a frame with harsh bits, severe ventroflexion, bumping and pumping of the reins and riders’ hips, horses laboring at the running walk and squatting hind ends—all evidence of an artificial gait.

Actually, when you look into the past (Midnight Sun, Merry Go Boy) and compare those horses to sound horses of today, you will find very little gait differences than what is described above for a sound and natural horse. However, when an artificial gait is compared to the past, there is a huge difference. Bottom line: breeding cannot produce an artificial gait; it has to be manmade. Sadly, it is usually a byproduct of soring.

ABOUT FOSH....

For 15 years, FOSH has worked to end soring in the world of gaited horses and has dedicated thousands of volunteer hours and dollars to that goal. FOSH studied technology, constructed a database of 12,500+ Horse Protection Act (HPA) violations (www.hpadata.us), attended numerous meetings with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), created and organized four national Sound Horse Conferences, operated a USDA-certified Horse Industry Organization (HIO), developed an online database with over 700 archived articles on soring (www.stopsoring.com), met with USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, presented at veterinary medical universities, created a humane show ring and rules for Tennessee Walking Horses, inspected thousands of horses and testified before the US House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Based upon these efforts and findings, FOSH concluded that enactment of PAST is the only solution to end soring. PAST amends the Horse Protection Act (1970) by 1) increasing penalties; 2) abolishing the pads and chains used to enhance the soring process on the horse; and 3) eliminating the conflict-ridden HIO system.

Within FOSH, importance is placed on education regarding the humane care, training and treatment of all gaited horses for their emotional, mental and physical well-being. Much of this education is delivered via its magazine, The Sound Advocate.

To promote gaited horses and their athleticism, FOSH implemented the only known recognition programs for Gaited Horses in both Distance and Dressage (www.FOSHGaitedSportHorse.com). Recognition of members’ continuing equine education efforts is realized through the FOSH Gaited Horse Journey program.

FOSH relies heavily on donations and membership fees to continue its work to fight soring. To support FOSH in its initiatives or become a member, visit www.fosh.info

"Horses were commonly tied in their stalls to prevent them from lying down, regardless of the soring technique employed. It was not unusual during the middle of the week to see horses, forced to stand, with their hind feet under their chests, front feet barely touching the ground."
-Alan Valk, DVM
would be obviously lame, and the treated area very sore to the touch.

"Flatshod horses were ridden for long periods of time on a hard surface, such as asphalt, in order to induce "road founder," a painful condition characterized by inflammation of the laminae of the hooves. A form of intentional laminitis, it is very effective for animating the gait, and horribly painful.

"Bolting" entails wedging a thin metal plate between the hoof and shoe across the toe region of the sole. A threaded hole through the center of the plate for placement of a bolt, which can then be tightened in order to apply focal pressure to the sole. Left in place for days at a time, this device can be used during training. Unfortunately, the horse cannot escape the pain induced by the bolt, even when lying down. The device is easily removed prior to inspection, leaving no visible evidence.

"Blocking" involves the use of firm blocks, either wood or purposely shaped hard plastic pads, which are duct-taped to the bottom of the front feet. Positioned so that the block contacts only the sole and frog, not allowing the shoe or hoof wall to contact the ground, the blocks result in constant sole pressure while the horse stands. Tying the horse to prevent him from lying down increases the effect. Some trainers work the horses with the blocks in place. As with bolting, the pain and inflammation created by blocking persists long after the blocks are removed. Again, no appreciable visible evidence of soring is present once the blocks are removed.

"Soring is an ongoing process, generally begun early in the week, on Monday if the horse was scheduled to show on the weekend. Through the week, the pain inflicted by soring intensifies day by day, until the horse hit his "peak point," or the maximum level of pain."
chronic founder was an asset to the gaited performance horse trainer, as the pain caused by the condition resulted in an animal that is always "show ready". These individuals required no planning or premeditated soring in order to perform. Lacking overt visible signs of soring, these horses would generally pass inspection without a second glance. Many hoof diseases we veterinarians view as serious medical conditions were welcomed by the gaited performance horse trainer.

"Perhaps the most egregious aspect of soring the flat-shod horse is the fact that most techniques are applied temporarily but have long-lasting effects. Removal prior to inspection leaves no evidence of soring. Neither visual examination nor the use of advanced diagnostic techniques such as digital x-rays can consistently identify the practice of soring. An experienced equine veterinarian can detect clinical evidence of inflammation on a routine examination. However, it would be impossible to determine whether such inflammation was intentionally inflicted, or the result of a naturally occurring disease process."

"While I no longer practice in performance barns, the evidence that soring continues are the horses moving in unnatural gait at the shows themselves. The desired gait is not at all natural, and big lick trainers resort to soring in order to induce it. Flat-shod trainers are soring to achieve a more than natural gait as well."

The ethical dilemma of being the attending veterinarian in those "performance" barns began to take a toll on Dr. Valk. He needed to get away from it, but those horses also needed care other than lameness, and who would provide it? It tore at his gut and heart to see horses he knew suffering from purposely inflicted pain and not be able to help them. Finally, he and his wife had a deep philosophical conversation and he began to back away. He would no longer accept those kinds of clients, and many of those he already had began to go out of business due to the downturn in the economy, and the fact the light had begun to shine on the practice. So in his area, far from the epicenter of soring, Shelbyville,
Thoughts On the PAST Act

My opinion regarding the PAST Act is mixed, though I personally support its passage. While I see it as a step in the right direction, it is certainly not a panacea for ending soring. Eliminating stack pads and action devices will curtail the ability of some trainers to hide evidence of soring, but there are many considerations not addressed by the Act. Soring is not limited to padded horses, and the act does little for the flat-shod horse.

I believe that other approaches, used in combination with the PAST Act, could have a greater impact on eliminating the practice of soring. My personal preference would involve the use of qualified equine veterinarians not affiliated with the gaited horse industry to perform examinations during shows. These individuals would look for clinical evidence of inflammation of the lower limbs in addition to observing the horse while moving. A determination of a horse’s fitness to compete would be made, and any horse displaying evidence of inflammation, lameness or soring would be eliminated from competition. This could be similar to the way in which FEI (Federation Equestre Internationale) horses are evaluated.

My heart tells me there is a much simpler solution to the problem of soring, but the gaited performance horse industry would never support it. If I were in charge, I would change the criteria by which these animals are judged. As long as gaited horses that move like sore horses (think big lick) win ribbons, trainers will always have a reason to sore them. Let the horse perform a natural gait, as it was bred to. The artificial gait of the big lick horse is an anomaly. You will see untrained horses at liberty jumping, doing piaffe and passage, canter pirouettes, even sliding stops. But you will never see an untrained gaited horse at liberty hitting a big lick. Ever.

Think about it.—Dr. Neal Valk, DVM

Tennessee, those barns began to close.

Dr. Valk is not a man who throws out exaggerated facts just for impact, but he is not a man who does nothing, either. For over 10 years he has been speaking up, sharing his firsthand knowledge and doing whatever he can to help stop soring. He has several times been a featured speaker at FOSH’s annual Sound Horse Conference. His practice specializes on equine podiatry, and promotes, teaches and practices natural barefoot equine care.

He supports and lobbies for the passage of the Prevent All Soring Tactics (PAST Act) now in Congress. It will surely help, but Dr. Valk does not believe it will totally stop soring (see sidebar above). “As we see in the transition of ex-Big Lick trainers and owners to flat-shod and the devious tactics to sore there, as long as the violations are based on finding evidence of soring, there will be soring,” Dr. Valk asserts.

“We need to move in the direction of other equine competitions and adopt the standard, ‘The horse must be sound to compete.’ And the judges need to change what they are looking for in a gaited horse.”

“If I could play God for one minute, I’d say let’s go back 70 years to what the Tennessee Walking Horse looked like originally,” Dr. Valk said.

“...We need to move in the direction of other equine competitions and adopt the standard, ‘The horse must be sound to compete.’ “

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Dutch Henry is a novelist and writer who writes about “People & Horses Helping Horses & People” and resides in Virginia with his wife of 36 years, Robin, along with one horse, dogs, cats and chickens. Dutch also does free “Therapy For Therapy Horse Clinics” at therapeutic riding centers across the country to help horses maintain proper posture, free-and-easy movement and body carriage. You can reach Dutch at dutchhenry@hughes.net He would love to hear from you. Join his blog at, http://dutchhenry.blogspot.com His novel “We’ll Have the Summer,” is available on Amazon and Dutch’s website www.dutchhenryauthor.com