

John C. Haffner DVM ABVP(Eq)
November 25, 2013

The Honorable
Ed Whitfield
United States House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Whitfield,

I have been asked to relate my experiences with the Tennessee Walking Horse industry to you. This is my opinion which was developed over many years of experience from several vantage points from within the industry. I have experience in the business as a farm worker, a horse show spectator, a local horsemen's association member, an exhibitor and seller of colts, a broodmare owner, an owner of horses in training, and as an equine veterinarian. I graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine in 1982, I am certified in equine practice by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, I am a member of the AVMA and AAEP and I currently serve as Vice-president of the Middle Tennessee Academy of Equine Practitioners. I would like to stipulate that this letter is written with no endorsement from any person or group other than myself.

My first experience with Walking Horses was at 15 years of age when I began working at Harlinsdale Farm in Franklin, Tennessee. This has been one of the preeminent Walking Horse Farms essentially from the beginning of the breed registry. In addition to the routine farm work I got to help in the breeding shed and breaking yearlings. During the first few years, my involvement with show horses was limited to showing yearlings and attending the shows as a spectator. I became a fan of the big lick show horses. During my time at Harlinsdale, I met many trainers and owners of walking horses. I also became enthralled with the veterinary care of horses primarily by watching equine veterinarian Dr. DeWitt Owen Jr. pregnancy check mares and provide veterinary care to the horses on the farm.

After working at Harlinsdale for a few years, I worked for Dr. Owen in his equine practice in Franklin. At the time, Dr. Owen was one of the most highly regarded equine veterinarians in the walking horse and thoroughbred industries. He served as president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners while I was working for him. He took care of many world champion walking horses, and during my time in his employment, I was in many of the breeding and training barns in middle Tennessee. On occasion, we would travel to Kentucky to work.

After graduation from veterinary school, I worked for Dr. Owen a year and then started my own practice in Spring Hill, Tennessee. I was very involved in the walking horse industry. I owned broodmares and raised and showed colts. I did work for many of the top trainers and was at the Celebration almost every night. I saw what went on at the shows on the weekend and what happened in the barns during the week. I was one of

them, so there was no need to hide anything from me. I saw the soring. I saw the treatments to remove calluses. I saw the efforts to get het horses “fixed” just right to get them past inspection and into the show ring. I saw the pain. I did not only see these things, I helped do them. Gradually I became aware of the inherent wrongness of the training required to achieve the big lick. I say gradually became aware, but that is not accurate. I think I always knew it was wrong, but because of many factors, I lied to myself. Factors such as; horse shows are fun, the big lick is exciting, I was making a lot of money working with the horses, I liked the people, it couldn't be all that bad because so many people that loved their horses were doing it kept me willingly blinded to the harm that was being done in the name of showing horses.

This came to a head in the early 1990's at the Columbia, Tennessee horse show. I was asked to examine a horse that had been turned down by the USDA. After I examined the horse and could find no problem with it, I repeated the exam with a videographer recording my examination. To make a long story short, about two years later the case was settled in favor of the defendant in Federal Court in Nashville. Part of the judge's decision stated that he had relied on my testimony to acquit the accused. I was unsettled by the ordeal because I thought someone would ask if soring was a common practice. It is. But the prosecution never asked. So although I told the truth about that horse, that night, a lie was promulgated. That lie is that Walking Horses are not routinely sored, and that only a handful of unscrupulous trainers resort to soring to get an unfair advantage.

The trial occurred in February, and it was a great victory for the industry. They had been exonerated, and the USDA was put in their place. The trainers became very bold that spring. I saw more open blatant soring in the months following the trial than I had ever seen in my life. I vividly recall a person in a training barn that walked by me carrying a can of their mix of mustard oil and kerosene, and the smell was strong enough to cause me to recoil. After that season, my blinders were removed and I could no longer be a part of helping to promote and benefit from a practice that I knew was wrong. I sold my practice, and I have stayed involved in veterinary medicine in different ways since. I have been removed from the daily routine of training for quite some time now, but I have remained in contact enough to know that nothing has changed the essence of the practice. It cannot change any more than a leopard can change its spots.

Shortly after I left practice, I was contacted by an individual involved with the industry. He asked me if I would be interested in being in charge of the DQP program. I asked him if they were interested in stopping soring or only wanted to get the government off their backs. I told him I would be interested in talking with them if they wanted to stop soring, but I had no interest if it was an attempt to merely get the government off their backs. He had other people call me to talk about it. Without exception, when I told them that I was only interested if they wanted to stop the practice of soring, not a single one of them wanted to continue the discussion. The fourth and final person to call me about it became angry and hung up the phone.

The fact is the big lick can only be accomplished by soring. When one soring technique becomes detectable, another one is developed. The big lick is a learned response to pain

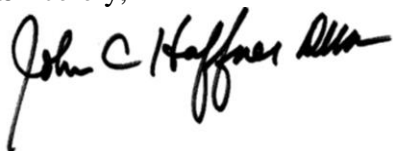
and if horses have not been sored, they do not learn it. It takes skill to be able to teach a horse the big lick and then determine the proper amount of soring and the proper timing to have a horse ready on a Friday or Saturday night. The horses must have the memory of the pain, but they must also be able to pass inspection.

It takes a combination of the built up pads for the weight and the chain to strike against the pastern that has been sored to produce the big lick. Other methods have been developed, but the traditional method is oil of mustard placed on the pastern and a chain put around the pastern to strike against it. The hair must be protected and this is generally done by applying grease on the pastern with a stocking over it. Calluses develop as a result of the chain rubbing against the skin. Later, the calluses are removed with a paste made by mixing salicylic acid with alcohol and applying it over the calluses and putting a leg bandage over it for a few days. This practice is also very painful to the horse. I have seen many horses lying in pain in their stalls on Monday morning from an acid treatment on Saturday.

I want to stress that the people involved in the walking horse business are no better or worse than people in any other walk of life. We all suffer effects of a depraved nature. The people who have these horses love them and take care of them many times to the extreme in expense and “good” care. They spend small and large fortunes on their horses. They provide the best of care, and they are truly remorseful when the horse is injured or dies. They spend money they know they will never recoup when the horse gets sick or needs surgery. They just don’t see anything wrong with the way the big lick is achieved, or they don’t think their trainer really sores their horse. I think they are blind to what they are doing and until they have a personal epiphany of what lies at the bottom of the big lick, they will be unable to see it. That is what happened to me, and it appears that it happens to others in the business from time to time.

Finally, I thank you for your bill to try to end soring. But you need to know, as long as a horse is doing the big lick, there will be soring. It will not be the few “bad actors” doing it. It is inherent to the gait and unavoidable in training. Unfortunately even without the big lick, there will still be soring. Flat shod horses develop a higher stepping gait if they have been sored. However, the techniques are different and it seems to be much less acceptable to the people within the industry. It is also more likely to be successfully policed. As long as there are people, there will be people trying to beat the system. The difference is that the flat shod horse has a natural gait which is not of necessity dependent on soring. There can be flat shod shows without soring. I think this is where the future lies for the walking horse industry, and the sooner that the big lick dies, the sooner the business can get on the road to recovery.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John C. Haffner DVM". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John C. Haffner DVM ABVP(Eq)