

A Culture of Tolerance

Soring Within the Tennessee Walking Horse Industry

By Anita Howe

Please bear with me as I veer away from training tips for just this one, brief editorial piece. I promise not to make it a habit...really! But after reading the Special Report published in Equus magazine on “Soring within the Walking Horse Industry”, I went to the publisher’s website where they had set up message board forums and there I found a great many walking horse people in heated e-discussions over this article and its implications to the breed. I saw the same tired disputes being made back and forth with many claiming they owned “sound” padded horses and that they would never consider soring them. At that point it became abundantly clear to me that there is really only so much that can be done to clean up this situation *from outside* the industry, and that there is a very real reason for the limited success of the USDA and the HPA (Horse Protection Act). I’m not saying that with more funding the USDA can’t do more, they can *and should*, I’m saying that I do not believe that anyone will ever make this problem completely go away from the “outside”. The real, and complete, change must come from within.

I see the heart of this problem as being the attitude of acceptance within the main-stream industry; because I believe that most of the trainers (as well as those owners who are very active) know exactly who, within their circle, sores their horses. That’s right; the industry “insiders” know exactly who is perpetuating this atrocity. Keep in mind that in many states *it isn’t a crime to sore your horse in your own barn*, and under the HPA it only becomes a crime to “exhibit or transport your horse in a sored condition” (such are the limitations of the federal statutes). I believe that it’s pretty much common knowledge to those within the heart of the industry who sores and how much they sore, but no one does anything to stop it. No one says anything; and no one tries to make sure the DQPs that are hired to stop it, actually do their jobs properly when the USDA is not present. Everyone takes the attitude that if a trainer or an owner wants to take their chances with the inspectors or the USDA VMOs they do so at their own risk, and so be it. Everyone looks the other way as those horses suffer tremendously. The judges then in turn do what everyone expects them to do and awards the highest stepping horses in the ring, no matter what that animation is a result of, and the stakes of game continue to go up.

What we must analyze and try to combat, are the reasons for this culture of acceptance. Why do these people seem so ready to tolerate the torture meted out by others even if they themselves are not willing to do the deed? Why? Because it *is* a culture! It *is* a tradition. It has been around for longer than many of them have been alive. Furthermore, most of them have either done it or at least tried it. Or maybe their fathers actively participated in soring; or possibly their grandfathers once taught them the fine art of soring when they were youngsters. Many of these trainers and owners are 2nd and 3rd generation sorers who literally know of no other kind of walking horse industry. It may be that two or three of their very good buddies are still hip deep into it, so who are they to go blowing the whistle? How can they buck this system, this tradition? Besides “isn’t that the way a walking horse is supposed to move!?!”

I know this may shock you, but many of these industry trainers actually believe in their hearts the big lick gait is the greatness of the breed. They are so misguided and should be truly pitied because they simply *cannot see* the beauty of the natural gait. Most of them have no hope of ever being able to train naturally because they cannot appreciate it, nor can they even recognize it when it *is* correct. So even if they were to decide they were not going to chemically or mechanically sore; say they make this great leap and decide not to sore any more horses and show “sound”; they still know of only one kind of gait to train for. They still only know what *those* judges are looking for and are going to be rewarding; the highest animating horse...period. So now they have the dilemma of how to produce it without soring for it.

The point of all this is to simply to point out that while stopping the use of chemical soring may be our immediate end goal, it’s just one ugly symptom of a bigger disease; *the manufactured and artificial gait being rewarded as the epitome of what is desirable in this breed being the true disease*. Tolerating any means of getting that gait is *the culture* that is currently in place in the mainstream industry. This, my friends, is no simple battle: as long as there are judges that are rewarding it, there will be people willing to do anything to produce it. While we can battle on many fronts, if we could manage to get the naturally balanced and fluid forward gait of the foundation breed to once again be recognized and rewarded foremost, the remaining battle would fade away, because you cannot fix that type of gait. You cannot manufacture a correct and naturally brilliant horse. He can be improved; he can be polished with patience and hard work, but never produced through the quick fix. Isn’t that the real reason we have seen this industry evolve in the direction it has; trying to short-cut to what they cannot train for quickly?

But this farce will not go away until those within the industry who do not sore have the courage to stand up and say, "Stop! We will not tolerate it any longer. We no longer want this black mark on our breed. We no longer want to be a pariah within the equestrian community, the outcasts from the multi-breed shows." To insist their DQPs perform their jobs, to insist their judges look beyond the high lift of the front feet; that their trainers be true equestrians and not just chemists or specialists of torture. Until that day arrives it will remain an uphill skirmish for those of us on the other side of the battle lines.