

PAUL BLACKBURN SUBMISSION

I am a former trainer of Tennessee Walking Horses. I write this letter with personal reluctance, but also with hope for the future of this community. You see, many years ago, abuse of horses in the walking horse industry was prevalent. To win, trainers tried all sorts of things, some of which harmed or "sored" the horse. Last October, I pled guilty to doing one of those things and violating the federal Horse Protection Act.

I am not proud of what I did. But don't let my actions or the actions of a few bad actors detract from what the walking horse industry has done to rid the system of soring trainers. I am an example of how recent reforms are working. I am not showing horses today, because the industry is truly self-regulating. The accusation that all horses must be sore in order to compete is simply untrue.

The inspection process run by the SHOW Horse Industry Organization (HIO) stopped me. And last year, the leading Horse Industry Organization (HIO), which is as comprehensive and stringent as they come, issued even more violations than the USDA ... including my own. The horses inspected by SHOW were 98% compliant with all federal regulations, and I know that these reformers are continuing to increase efforts to eliminate soring in the industry.

But SHOW is not alone. Tennessee Walking Horse HIOs have instituted aggressive reforms, many which go well beyond what is required by federal regulators, such as videotaping all inspections, creating a hotline for reporting abuses, and identifying and sanctioning numerous people for violating their inspections. The industry has done so much to enhance its inspection process that the USDA has replicated some of their actions. Many trainers, breeders, and exhibitors from across the country are committed to ridding the system of soring trainers.

The most recent step forward within the industry is the swabbing initiative by the Tennessee Walking Show Horse Organization (TWSHO), a new organization recently formed to advocate for and implement reforms throughout the walking horse industry. TWSHO is funding this objective, science-based inspection initiative to swab the feet of horses in competition, in order to detect substances that harm the horse or mask substances that have harmed the horse. They will punish those found guilty and publish the results. This initiative, begun by the Walking Horse Trainers' Association, has been adopted by all the major HIOs which inspect performance horses. I believe this step is the most important step the industry has made toward eliminating soring as it will punish offenders and will prove that the horses which enter the ring are not masked and they are not altered in order to compete. I also believe that to achieve the goal of eliminating soring, the USDA should focus its enforcement efforts at events where swabbing is not occurring.

It has been my experience that there are two primary methods used to alter the gate of a Tennessee Walking Horse in competition, both of which violate the Horse Protection Act. The first is the application of caustic chemicals to the front legs of the horse to cause sensitivity. This type of activity causes temporary discomfort or pain to the horse depending on the severity lasting from several hours to a couple of days. It is this type of activity which the new swabbing initiative is targeted to prevent and to punish those who attempt to continue the practice. Also, in rare cases, shoeing methods are used to cause sensitivity in the horse's feet which also alters their gate. While I do not believe this practice occurs often, it causes the horse to experience temporary or long-term pain, depending on the severity, and can cause long-term damage to the horse's hoof. It is my experience that this type of soring is used primarily in flat shod horses and not those who wear pads. These soring techniques are still used by some participants in an attempt to make a lesser-talented horse competitive or by individuals who have refused to change with the times.

Are there still soring trainers in the walking show horse industry? Yes, I am living proof. Can we clean up the system? Absolutely. It is happening right now.

I did not change with the times, and I am being punished for doing so, as I should be. I am deeply regretful and wish that I had not forgotten why I got into this business in the first place: because I love these horses and this sport.

The majority of trainers in the walking show horse industry care deeply about the horses they train and are in the business because they love this majestic and beautiful animal. Those who don't should be put out of business. But, we shouldn't end an industry that generates hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity for small communities across the country, raises money for many worthwhile local charities, and serves as an activity where young kids can spend time, meet new friends and learn to compete because of the bad actions of a few.