



Soring in Horses

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WHAT IS SORING?

Soring is the unethical and illegal¹ practice of deliberately inflicting pain to exaggerate the leg motion of horses to gain an unfair advantage in the show ring. The chest-high stride achieved by soring is known in the industry as the “big lick”.

WHAT BREED(S) PRACTICE SORING?

Tennessee Walking Horses commonly suffer from the practice of soring. Other gaited breeds, such as Racking Horses, Spotted Saddle Horses Rocky Mountain Horses and Missouri Fox-Trotters, may also suffer from soring.

HOW IS SORING DONE?

Soring is done by irritating or blistering the horse’s forelegs through the injection or application of chemical irritants or painful mechanical devices.²

Chemical soring—Chemical soring involves the application of a caustic chemical to the hair and skin of the horse's lower leg, then covering the leg with plastic and a leg wrap for several days to allow the chemical to "cook" into the skin. Some of the chemicals used for this type of soring include: kerosene, diesel, croton oil, GoJo hand cleaner, WD40 oil and mustard oil. Once the chemicals have made the horse's skin very sensitive “action devices” are placed around the pastern. The action devices slide up and down as the horse travels further irritating the areas already made painful by soring. In addition to sensitive skin, the chemicals cause the horses hoof to become sensitive to striking the ground.

These chemicals can produce obvious skin scars and send up “red flags” to inspectors. As scrutiny on scarring violations has increased another cruel practice has emerged: owners and trainers apply a chemical stripping agent to the horse’s legs to burn off scar tissue caused by the original chemical soring. This chemical stripping is an additional painful process for the horse.

Action devices—One action device per limb is permitted by the Horse Protection Act.¹ The action device must be made of lignum vitae (hardwood), aluminum, or stainless steel and must have individual rollers that are smooth and uniform in size, weight and configuration. In addition, the device must not weigh more than 6 ounces.

Mechanical/Physical soring—This type of soring involves trimming the hoof or applying devices that cause the horse's hooves to be painful and force the horse to pick up its feet faster and higher. Some of the methods used include:

- Grinding down the sole of the hoof to expose the spongy, sensitive tissues underneath the sole;
- Making the hoof wall shorter than the sole. The hoof wall typically bears all of the weight on the hoof, removing its support causes the sole to bear all of the weight. This is called “rolling the sole;”
- Inserting hard objects between the shoe or pad and the sole to cause pressure and pain;

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- Standing the horse with the sensitive part of their sole on a block or other raised object for long periods of time (called “blocking”);
- Purposefully causing laminitis (commonly called "founder"), which is a very painful inflammation of the tissues within the foot. This is often called “the natural fix;”
- Over-tightening of the metal bands that wrap around the hoof. This causes pain from excessive pressure on the hoof wall.
- Improper shoeing techniques that violate the HPA including:
 - Extreme wedging with pads to cause an inappropriate heel/toe ratio;
 - Metal hoof bands placed too high on the hoof;
 - Excessive weight added to the pad/package (e.g., lead).

HOW IS SORING DETECTED?

Visual observation—The first indication of soring may be the horse's posture: a horse with front foot/leg pain often lay down more than usual; may be unwilling to move; or it may show a "standing in a bucket" pose, where its hind legs are pulled closely together and positioned more forward than normal in order to take weight off the painful front legs. As the horse is made to move forward, it rocks back and bears most of its weight on the hind legs. This is called a "praying mantis stance" because it resembles the posture of the praying mantis insect. This is the opposite of a horse's natural biomechanics; naturally horses bear 60-65% of their weight on their front limbs³. Sore horses may also move forward very slowly with short, choppy strides.

Physical inspection—Inspection of the horse's lower limb, especially the coronary band (the area where the hoof joins the skin of the leg), heel bulbs (at the back of the hoof) and the front and back areas of the pastern (the area of the leg between the hoof and the fetlock) is the key portion of detecting soring. If the horse has been chemically sored, the skin may be swollen, painful, abraded, or oozing blood or serum (a yellow fluid). The hair on the lower regions of the front legs may be wavy, rippled or curly, and there may be "cording," scars. Finger pressure over the sored area may cause a pain response where the horse tries to withdraw its leg, however stewarding (defined below) of horses may result in no visible response despite the presence of pain.

Additional tools—As the methods used to sore horses have become more sophisticated the use of new technological methods have become vital during HPA inspections. Thermographic images are taken with a thermal or infrared camera which measures the relative temperatures of an area.⁴ Both excessively warm and excessively cool areas indicate abnormalities and the need for closer evaluation. Excessive warmth may be due to increased blood flow, irritation, or inflammation. Areas that appear excessively cool may be due to decreased blood flow or the application of cooling substances, typically a numbing agent. Gas chromatography/mass spectrometry is a testing procedure that is used to identify the composition of chemical mixtures that may be applied to sore horses' legs.⁵ In addition to these advanced technologies USDA can perform blood/saliva tests to detect drugs used to mask pain; utilize hoof testers to determine if laminitis (founder) or other hoof pain is present; and collect radiographic images (x-rays) to determine if there are pathologic changes to the third phalanx (the bone surrounded by the hoof) or if nails, screws or other objects have been placed between the shoe or pad and hoof to cause pain.

SORING IS ILLEGAL

In addition to being inhumane and unethical, soring is a violation of federal law. The Horse Protection Act of 1970 (HPA) made soring illegal, punishable by fines and imprisonment.¹ The HPA makes it illegal for sored horses to participate in shows, sales, exhibitions or auctions. HPA also prohibits

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transporters from transporting sore horses to or from any of these events. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for enforcing the Horse Protection Act.

The HPA is enforced in several ways:

Designated Qualified Persons (DQPs)—USDA designates DQPs, veterinarians knowledgeable about the industry and trained by the USDA to detect evidence of soring. The DQPs are hired by the manager of the event to make sure that sore horses are not allowed in the ring. The DQPs physically inspect every horse before it can be shown, sold or exhibited. They are also responsible for reporting horses that do not meet the federal regulation.

Veterinary Medical Officers (VMOs)—USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) conducts unannounced inspections at horse events where soring may occur.

Horse Industry Organizations (HIOs)—USDA certifies HIOs which "self-police" the industry. The HIOs are approved to perform inspections for violations of the HPA.

WHY DOES SORING CONTINUE TO HAPPEN?

Soring continues to occur for a variety of reasons including detection avoidance by trainers/owners, judges rewarding sore horses in the show ring and budget constraints at USDA.

Avoiding detection: Detecting soring is not easy as unethical trainers and owners have a number of tricks to help them avoid detection.

- **Numbing agents:** Mask pain during inspection but wear off by show/exhibition time.
- **Stewarding:** The use of harsh and/or painful training methods (e.g., beating, electric prod) at practice inspections to teach the horse that flinching or reacting will cause worse pain.
- **Distraction devices:** Application of something painful in a location other than the hoof including (but not limited to): a bit burr under the saddle, hand twitch, alligator clips on sensitive tissues like the genitals, or surgical staples under the mane just before inspection.
- **Horse switching:** Providing a substitute horse for inspection under false paperwork followed by showing the sore horse in the ring.

Winning:

- **Judges:** Many judges continue to use judging criteria that encourage soring practices.
- **Monetary rewards:** Events that feature "natural" horses have much lower monetary rewards than events that have featured sore horses. In 2011 The Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration World Grand Championship class paid a 1st prize premium of \$15,000⁶ while the largest premium paid in a class at either the National Walking Horse Association's (NWHHA) The National⁷ or Friends of Sound Horses' (FOSH) North American Pleasure Gaited Horse Championship⁸ was \$300.
- **Future Income:** In addition to the immediate cash and recognition received by winners; owners and trainers are also awarded with future breeding and training fees from fellow showmen who wish to have a winning horse.

Budget constraints:

- USDA inspectors attend only a small percentage of shows due to budget constraints.^a
- “Self-policing” by HIOs is ineffective due to an inherent conflict of interest of many industry inspectors who are often actively involved in the industry as owners and/or trainers.
- Historically, even when ticketed, punishment of HPA violators has been lax. However, USDA took steps to strengthen its enforcement of the HPA in 2011.

WHAT IS THE AVMA'S POSITION ON SORING?

The AVMA has condemned the practice of soring for over 40 years. AVMA currently endorses the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) policy on "[The Practice of Soring](#)".

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT SORING?

Visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture website for more information about the Horse Protection Act (www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/hp).

For more information about the AVMA and AAEP policies on the practice of soring:

- American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)
www.avma.org/issues/policy/animal_welfare/soring.asp
- American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP)
http://www.aaep.org/soring_position.htm

Friends of Sound Horses Inc. (FOSH) (www.fosh.info) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to informing the public about the humane care, treatment and training of gaited horses and to promoting the exhibition of flat-shod gaited horses.

WHAT CAN I DO IF I SUSPECT OR KNOW SOMEONE HAS SORED THEIR HORSE?

Please report incidences of soring to the USDA: this includes incidents of soring at barns or shows; reporting barns, trainers and owners engaging in soring practices; and reporting "outlaw shows" organized without licensed HIO inspections.

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FOOTNOTES

^a USDA attended a total of 208 shows from 2008-2011. USDA estimates the total number of shows per year to be 700.

REFERENCES

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