



The American Veterinary  
Medical Association

# Soring: Unethical and Illegal

## What Is Soring?

Soring is the unethical and illegal practice of deliberately inflicting pain to exaggerate the leg motion of gaited horses (such as Tennessee Walking Horses, Spotted Saddle Horses and Racking Horses) to gain an unfair advantage in the show ring. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has condemned soring for more than 40 years.

## How Soring Is Done

*Chemical methods* involve applying caustics (such as kerosene or mustard oil) to the horse's lower leg; the leg is then covered with plastic and a leg wrap for several days to allow the chemicals to penetrate the skin. The chemicals cause the horse's leg to be sensitive to action devices and their hoof to be sensitive to striking the ground. This method usually leaves obvious scars, which may be burned off using a chemical stripping agent (causing the horse additional pain).

*Physical methods* result in pain when the horse's hoof strikes the ground. This causes the horse to lift its legs faster and higher. Methods of physical soring include grinding or trimming of the hoof and/or sole to expose sensitive tissues or removal of the

normal support structures of the hoof wall; inserting hard objects between the pads and the sole to place pressure on this sensitive area of the hoof; over-tightening of metal hoof bands to cause excessive pressure; improper shoeing techniques that violate the Horse Protection Act (HPA); and purposefully causing laminitis (founder), which is an extremely painful condition of the hoof.

## Why Soring Continues

Unethical trainers and owners use various tricks to avoid detection including application of numbing agents that mask pain during inspection, but wear off by show time; use of harsh and/or painful training methods (stewarding) at practice inspections to teach the horse that flinching or reacting will cause worse pain; application of something painful in a location other than the hoof (distraction device) just before inspection; and providing a substitute horse for inspection (horse switching). In addition, some judges continue to use judging criteria that encourage soring practices. Allowing sore horses to win in the ring gives their owners and trainers recognition and cash awards as well as future breeding and training fees. Finally, due to budget constraints, USDA inspectors attend only a small percentage of shows held. This has led to a system of "self-policing" by Horse



Gaited horses, particularly Tennessee Walking Horses, may be shod in stacked shoes with metal bands tightened across the hoof with or without chains around the pastern. This is not a violation of the Horse Protection Act. *Courtesy of Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH)*

Below Left: A USDA veterinarian examines a Tennessee Walking Horse during a competition. *Courtesy of USDA*

Below: Sole bruising (pink/red discoloration) from possible pressure shoeing. *Courtesy of USDA*



Industry Organizations (HIO), which is often compromised 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.

## How Soring Is Detected

Soring may be detected by visual inspection of the horse's posture and legs and by palpation of the horse's lower leg. Signs of pain include excessive time spent lying down, unwillingness to move, and an abnormal posture while standing or when in motion. Inspection and palpation of the leg may reveal swelling, pain, abraded skin, or other signs of inflammation. The hair of the horse's lower leg may be wavy, rippled or curly, and there may be cording scars. Sore horses may also move forward very slowly with short, choppy strides.

Other methods used to detect soring include gas chromatography to identify chemical agents applied to the leg; thermographic images, which can identify excessively warm and excessively cool areas; blood tests to detect drugs used to mask pain; iris scanning for horse identification; hoof testers to determine if laminitis (founder) or other hoof pain is present; and 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 pads and hoof to cause pain.



Radiographs (x-rays) may show surplus nails or screws added to increase the weight carried by the hoof or place pressure on the sole. *Courtesy of USDA*

Below left: Thermographic image showing excessive warmth, which may be caused by inflammation from soring. *Courtesy of USDA*

Below right: Scarring on the heel bulbs due to soring practices. *Courtesy of USDA*



A Tennessee Walking Horse "standing in a bucket" due to forelimb pain from soring. *Courtesy of USDA*



### Report Soring to USDA:

- Document soring incidents observed at barns or shows
- Report barns, trainers and owners engaging in soring
- Report scheduled shows organized without licensed HIO inspections

### United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

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### To Learn More:

- United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) on Horse Protection  
[www.aphis.usda.gov/animal\\_welfare/hp](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/hp)
- American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)  
[www.avma.org/soring](http://www.avma.org/soring)
- American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP)  
[aaep.mediamarketers.com/position-practice-soring-i-329.html](http://aaep.mediamarketers.com/position-practice-soring-i-329.html)