

Why is there no 2006 World Grand Champion Tennessee Walking Horse? By Misti Seppi, Wasatch Humane Horse Rescue and Adoptions

Eleven days prior to Labor Day, Shelbyville, Tennessee filled up with Tennessee Walking Horses and people to attend The Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration. During the Celebration, 20 World Champions and 1 World Grand Champion are named. The portrait of the World Grand Champion hangs in the Tennessee Governor's Mansion and the name of the WGC horse goes down in history as one of the greats.

This year was different: for the first time in 68 years, there is no World Grand Champion (WGC) Tennessee Walking Horse. Nine horses were scheduled to participate in the WGC class; eight horses were presented to the USDA inspectors, five were turned down for violations of the Horse Protection Act. Three horses passed the inspection and were ready to show. Mike Walden, an owner whose horse was widely expected to win the WGC but was turned down at inspection, offered each of the remaining three owners \$10,000 not to participate. From there, accounts vary about what happened, but those approved to show say they wanted to show their horses but could not get to the ring because of an angry mob scene. In the chaos that ensued, the class was canceled before the three could enter the ring. Twenty Tennessee Highway Patrol officers were there to provide an escape for the USDA inspectors from the crowd. The crowd was not justifiably angry at those who had sored their horses, but against the Veterinary Medical Officers who stopped those horses from going in the ring. Apparently a horse in pain is Saturday night entertainment in Middle Tennessee.

Why were the five cut from the competition? Soring: the intentional infliction of pain to a horse's pasterns and hooves through various chemical and mechanical means, to achieve a more elevated stride. Soring is such a problem that in 1970, the US Congress passed the Horse Protection Act (HPA) specifically to combat soring of Tennessee Walking Horses. The USDA enforces the Horse Protection Act (with an annual budget of \$500,000) by sending USDA veterinarians (Veterinary Medical Officers) to randomly check shows for violators. That budget has not been adjusted for inflation since 1970. With hundreds of Walking Horse shows and sales occurring in any given season, and not enough budget or staff, the USDA adopted the Operating Plan.

The Operating Plan allows show industry representatives (HIOs) to meet with the USDA on a regular basis and define how the HPA will be enforced. There is a great deal of discussion about what exactly a sore horse is and how many criteria a horse must fail before being declared sore and what the penalties for various types of soring will be. Some of the HIOs have the horses' best interests at heart and are leaders in the "Sound Horse Movement". These HIOs include: FOSH (Friends of Sound Horses), HPC (Horse Protection Commission), and NWHHA (National Walking Horse Association). Some HIOs however are known for having a much higher rate of ticketed HPA violations when the USDA is present versus when there is no USDA presence.

The HIOs and the USDA train inspectors (DQPs) to inspect horses before and after entering Walking Horse classes. On occasion, the USDA will be present but usually the DQP is the sole enforcer of the HPA. Is this “the fox guarding the hen house”?

One would think after 36 years, sore horses would be a thing of the past, or worst case, something done by “Backyard Bubba” who “Ain’t Much of a Trainer”. Sadly this is not the case; as reflected by the fact that the majority of the horses presented for inspection prior to the most prestigious class of the most prestigious Tennessee Walking Horse show of the year, could not pass inspection. According to statistics provided by the HIO inspecting the Celebration (NHSC) there were 249 ticketed violations, a 29% INCREASE in violations from last year!

This isn’t limited to Middle Tennessee. There are individuals in Utah who have been ticketed for violations of the HPA. Individuals can make the difference, either for better or for worse. If you want Utah to be a better place for Tennessee Walking Horses, get involved: Insist that the HIO hired to inspect Tennessee Walking classes is a sound HIO; one who will strictly enforce the HPA rather than look the other way unless the USDA is present. There are four FOSH DQPs in Utah and yet the TWH classes are usually inspected by a DQP from another HIO that has to be flown in from out of state at considerable expense. Ask yourself why that is.

If you are at a show and the USDA shows up, notice who removes their horses from the show ground before inspection and ask them why they are leaving.

Given the choice of attending a “Sound Horse Show” vs. another show, support the sound show.

If your horse is in training, ask the trainer if they have ever been turned down at an inspection and if so, when and for what violation. Ask the trainer how they will train your horse. Specifically, ask if they will be applying any chemicals to the horses’ pasterns for any reason. I was told by one well known Utah TWH owner that Copper-Tox® added to the chain grease helps keep the pasterns soft! You might want to check that kind of advice with your veterinarian. Ask the trainer if they use action devices. Action devices are loose chains or wooden rollers placed around the horse’s pasterns to cause the horse to snap his feet up higher. The claim is that they are as harmless as a ladies’ Rolex watch. Most ladies’ Rolex watches do not bounce up and down on your ankle bone as you are jogging down the street. The extra weight of the action device does not cause the action; it is the discomfort/pain from the chain bouncing on the sensitive, thin skin of the pastern.

Otherwise, the weight of protective boots for barefoot horses would also cause a horse to snap his leg up. Ask the trainer who is going to pay the fine if your horse is turned down by a VMO or DQP.

Contact the TWHBEA (breed association) Director for Utah and let him know that you want strict enforcement of the HPA, strict inspectors at the shows and an end to the abuse of Tennessee Walking Horses. Utah’s director is Sidney Baucom, 2248 Logan Ave. Salt Lake City, UT 84108.

The most important thing a person can do is educate him/herself from reliable sources such as: USDA APHIS web site, veterinarians, farriers, reputable horse publications, sound horse trainers, equine chiropractors, equine physical therapists, equine message therapists and sound HIOs. A rule of thumb used by equine veterinarians is that 75% of lamenesses occur from the carpus (knee) down and 75% of those lamenesses are in the hoof because this is an area very susceptible to injury. Be very protective of that area. Don't jeopardize your horse's long term soundness for short term fixes...or prizes. Laminitis (however mild) from delayed breakover and contracted heels are pathologies of the hoof and should not be a normal part of a TWH's life.

The majority of Tennessee Walking Horses are owned by pleasure riders who use their horses for trail rides, 4H, versatility classes, jumping, parades, working cattle, dressage, PNH, field trials, and sound showing. It is time for sound TWH owners to stand up and protect the horses that do so much for them; shun those that sore horses (trainers, breeders, and owners), shun shows attended by sore horse trainers, shun clubs that elect officers with HPA violations. Support sound shows, hire sound HIOs to inspect shows, support sound training techniques and sound trainers. People who oppose abuse, but are unwilling to stand up against it, give implicit approval to those who will continue to abuse horses and call it a valid training technique. Thirty-six years have passed since the HPA. How much longer will horses have to suffer because they have no voice?

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Courtesy of www.TWHBEA.com