

## Equine Welfare Issues within the Showing and Racing Industries

How does one go about defining the horse? If you were to ask people to use one word to accomplish such a task, you would receive a variety of answers such as: “power,” “majesty,” “beauty,” “freedom,” “loyalty,” and “magic.” Other people, those like my father, might answer with: “smelly,” “expensive,” and “dirty.” If you were to ask me, I would respond with “impossible.” Horses are not impossible, no, but it is impossible for me to define or describe the horse with just one word. You see, they are my happiness, joy, hope for the future, my safe and quiet home to return to, and they are the sources of my greatest sadness. It is impossible to outline all of the romantic ideologies surrounding the horse. In Greek mythology, Poseidon and Medusa had a son named Pegasus. Pegasus was challenged to make a beautiful land-animal as a gift to the humans. He called forth the waves of the oceans and the foam of the waves took the form of the horse as the waves broke on the shore. Other lore I have read throughout the years outlines similar stories in which a god or demigod gifts the humans with the horse. In Scotland, horses that come from the water are called ‘Kelpies’ and are shape-shifting sea-demons. In China, Japan, and other East Asian countries, the Qilin is a horse-like creature that only appears when the ruler of the country passes away and a new one takes control. While these are all beautiful and intriguing sentiments and, to a writer, worth telling, for the purpose of this discussion we are going to roll with the theory of evolution, in which horses developed into the creature we know over the span of a few billion years.

Horses developed as large, flighty, prey animals with more emotion than intelligence. They have powerful legs, square teeth, and wide-set eyes. At some point in our shared history, we discovered that we could tame, ride, and befriend these beasts. Throughout history, horses have carried us and our belongings, pulled our wagons, dragged our calves, and worked under and alongside us, and we have spoken and written stories, poems, songs, and records centered on them. Regardless of how you view the horse and its origin, ensuring their health and well-being is a necessary task and should be a priority for everyone involved in the equine industry. The American Veterinary Medical Association states that “animal welfare is a human responsibility that encompasses all aspects of animal well-being...”

The Animal Welfare Act – a law since 1966 – does not protect horses that are not being used in research, so it is up to the industry to protect these animal through rules, regulations, penalties, and fines. But, before we dive too deep into this, I have a funny story: my step-father

once worked with a woman that stated, “If God wanted us to ride horses, He would have them born with saddles already on them.” My response to her included a detailed explanation of how birth would go for a western-discipline horse. She didn’t have much to say after that.

Current issues surrounding equine welfare include soring in the gaited breeds, drug use in race horses, and various training techniques in show horses. Another, extremely hot topic is what to do with a horse at the end of its useful life, specifically: slaughter.

Soring is a collective term which includes a group of techniques used in gaited horses, especially Tennessee Walking Horses, to make the horses lift their forelimbs high with each step in a flashy, exaggerated gait. These techniques include: strapping heavy, unnatural, “high-heeled” shoes to the horses’ hooves, coating the lower limb in toxic chemicals such as kerosene, diesel, mustard oil, etcetera, forcing the horse to stand with his only his soles on something elevated for hours at a time, or cutting the hooves and lower legs and then nailing a shoe to the injured hoof. All of these methods of soring are done for one reason: cause the horse to feel pain when his leg is extended or is bearing weight. If it is painful to stand or step on the limb, the horse will jerk his leg up from the ground in the desired fashion, similarly to a human pulling his or her hand back after touching a hot stove. The gait is known as the “big lick.” The 1970 Horse Protection Act, according to the USDA, is supposed to disqualify sored horses from sales, auctions, shows, and/or performances, however, without the proper funding, the USDA is unable to dispatch officials to inspect horses at such events so it is left up to the industry to regulate themselves. This is a major bias that has led to the problem of soring horses to continue rather than diminish as it should. The “inspectors” hired from among people within the industry are supposed to make sure this law is being followed. While a few do have the interest of the horse in mind, many have investments in the big lick continuing to be sought after in the show ring. The AVMA, AAEP, and APHIS are all working towards finding a better solution to this problem.

Abusive training methods found more commonly in non-gaited breeds, particularly Quarter Horses, have better regulations. The majority of these abuses started as a way to force the horse into the “Perfect Show Image.” This image involves a relaxed or lowered head, a hanging-non-swishing tail, and a (more often than not) relaxed pace and speed. These methods include tying the horse’s head up at unnatural and uncomfortable angle to tire the muscles of the head and neck so that the horse will carry his head lower; wearing the horse out by lunging or

riding the horse to the point of exhaustion to ensure the horse will act calm during their time in the ring; extreme spurring, jerking on the reins, chain, or lead, or whipping; any kind of hit to the head, face, or upper neck; tying the head to one side or the other and leaving it for an extended amount of time; starving or dehydrating the horse to force the horse into submission; using whips or poles to hit the horse's forelimbs as he jumps over an obstacle to encourage a higher jump or neater tucking of his legs for a prettier jump; injecting deadening agents into the horse's tail to prevent raising it or tail-swishing; use of stun guns or any electrical-shocking device for any reason; hyper-flexing the horse's neck in either direction or towards the chest. All of these training methods cause either pain or fear, or both, and are gross violations of equine welfare. The American Quarter Horse Association, in an attempt to waylay these techniques, has made it clear, in their Official Hand Book of Rules and Regulations, that if the horse is not "...treated humanely and with dignity, respect, and compassion," then AQHA has the right and will to discipline via disqualification, suspension, or expulsion from AQHA and related events, as well as through monetary fines. Under their VIOLATIONS section, they outline even more inhumane acts, on top of those outlined above, including excessive spinning or fencing, tying without accesses to water for too long, attaching objects to the horse or tack in an attempt to de-sensitize the animal, practicing over jumps that are higher than four-feet, using any tack or equipment that causes unnecessary pain or discomfort (certain, harsh bits and spurs, hobbles, etcetera.), anything that constricts the blood vessels going to and coming from the tail, using substances to hide an injury, using anything that intentionally or unintentionally causes raw or bleeding areas on the horse, and applying too much pressure or jerking on the lead, chain, or lip cord. At the end, it states that the officials have an elastic-clause of sorts that allows them to punish any inhumane behavior not listed in the hand book. There are multiple entries involving the use of drugs.

The use of any medication or substance for the purpose of improving the horse's performance is prohibited. We see this more in racing than showing. Prohibited drugs include anything in Class I or II, any "stimulant, depressant, tranquilizer, or sedative," anything that could affect the detection of other substances listed, anabolic steroids, NSAIDS, clenbuterol (beta-2 agonist used to open up the airways in horses with heaves or inflammatory airway disease), anything that resembles any of the listed drugs, including metabolites and analogs. However, if there is true injury or illness, AQHA will "conditionally permit" the use of a drug or medication for the treatment of the horse. The permitted drug must be administered by a licensed

veterinarian. The horse may not compete or perform during the 24 hours after administration of the drug, unless the drug is Furosemide, Diclofenac, Flunixin, Phenylbutazone, Meclofenamic acid, Ketoprofen, Naproxen, Firocoxib, Acetazolamide, Isoxsuprine, Lidocaine, or Dexamethasone. Each of these has its own specific allowed dose and various administration-requirements. These rules cover all of the horses participating in AQHA racing, as well as showing. The Jockey Club (Thoroughbred registry) has similar regulations. They do not permit the administration of Furosemide anytime within four hours before post-time. Furosemide, also called Lasix, is a diuretic and is used to decrease the bleeding in the horse's lungs that occurs when the athletes run. An additional benefit of this drug is the amount of weight-loss due to excessive amounts of urination, thus less weight for the horse to carry around the track. This can lead to dehydration, which can cause muscle fatigue or failure, and then the horse may collapse. Other countries prohibit the use of Lasix during a competitive race, and a few, including Germany, have even begun to breed the pulmonary hemorrhage trait out of their horses, since it is a hereditary characteristic – albeit with multiple genes at play. If the genes are eliminated, the need for drugs like Lasix will decrease substantially. The United States has, for a long time, only been concerned with the winning bloodlines and this has led to a major issue with inbreeding, which will make it extremely difficult to get rid of the undesirable traits while keeping the desirable ones. Very few owners and trainers may use butterfly strips that open up the nasal passageways, which decreases the pressure in the lungs, thus decreasing the bleeding, however, not many use these because the weight-loss due to Lasix allows the horse to run faster. Clenbuterol, as mentioned previously, is used in horses with poor respiration, but the drug has a beneficial side-effect of acting similarly to steroids when over-used: the medication adds muscle mass, an obvious benefit in racing. Clenbuterol was once authorized, at specific doses, in the Jockey Club, however, when Skye Diamonds tested positive after winning a graded stakes race, the regulation changed and now clenbuterol is prohibited at any detectable levels.

The hottest of hot-topics: horse slaughter; it has been debated in government for quite some time now, flipping between legal and illegal a number of times. When slaughter was legal in the United States, the plants were ran just like cattle facilities are, the animals travel in an S-shaped channel toward a chute where they are stunned and killed with one quick shot to the forehead via stun gun. Once it is confirmed that the animal is dead, they are strung up and exsanguinated and then processed. Now that the slaughter of horses is illegal, the animals have a

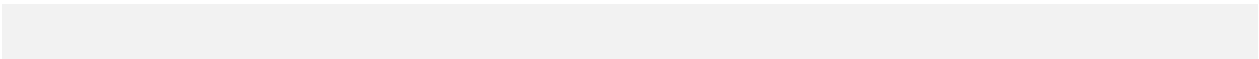
much harder journey. But I am getting ahead of myself here, let's go back a ways and discuss what horses are being slaughtered. The American Veterinary Medicine Association defines an unwanted horse as "...may be healthy horses that their owner can no longer afford to keep or feed; horses that are dangerous to handle and have injured people; horses with an injury, lameness, or illness for which their owners are unwilling or unable to provide care; or horses that are no longer able to perform as their owner desires..." Obviously this does not include all horses as my horses will never see the inside of a processing plant; my horses are not unwanted. Some unwanted horses are bought and are, therefore, no longer 'unwanted.' Some unwanted horses are taken to sanctuaries that can barely afford to feed and care for them. A – hopefully small – number are left out in a pasture or paddock and forgotten about. And a huge number of unwanted horses are shipped to either Canada or Mexico to be slaughtered at those processing plants. If you have never watched a video of a Mexican horse processing plant, I envy you, it is gruesome. After surviving a long journey across the states in a hot, cramped trailer with a huge group of horses who may be aggressive, sick, or hurt, these animals are unloaded into holding pens that may or may not have feed or water. Once it is their turn to go through the plant, they are shoved, one atop the other, through a narrow channel riddled with metal drop-down gates that, in a number of videos I watched, are dropped on the tops of their heads to separate the horses. Eventually, a horse will be alone in a chute (of sorts). A worker will use a small shank to stab at the junction of the crest and poll, attempting to sever the spinal cord to paralyze the horse. This does not kill the horse, and, in most cases, this does not save the horse from feeling pain. Once paralyzed, the horse usually falls against the side of the chute which rotates, allowing the horse to fall out of the chute sideways. In one of the videos, a foal can be seen with his legs stuck under the panel that is bouncing off of his legs continuously, trying to close but unable to. The still-alive horse is then strung up via chain around a single hind-limb. Workers use shanks or machetes to lacerate the jugular vein of the horses, allowing the animals to bleed to death. Surprisingly, Canada isn't much better. There is little, if any, regulation in either Canada or Mexico, as opposed to in the United States where we have federal regulation and systematic welfare audits to ensure that the animals are not suffering.

I have spent the majority of my life on the back of a horse, doing anything from riding in circles to hopping fences or working cattle. I am one of those sentimental fools that thinks my horse is my friend, but the scientific part of me – the part of me that got accepted into veterinary

school – knows that these animals are livestock and should be regarded as livestock: a large animal that serves a purpose. As a living creature on this planet, the horses should be included in the Five Freedoms which includes: freedom from hunger, thirst, discomfort, fear, pain, injury, disease, distress, and freedom to express their natural or innate behaviors.

These abuses happen when training is insufficient and the horse cannot or does not meet the ideal or desired requirements for its discipline, or if the desired behavior is too difficult to train, such as the big lick or not swishing the tail. While acts and laws and regulations have reduced the amount of mistreatment, it has not ended it completely. A major problem we have is that, particularly within AQHA, the industry can only regulate within the show grounds. Abuse at home is not monitored unless an official sees evidence of abuse on the horse, such as emaciation, scarring, etcetera, and can then use the “elastic clause” to prosecute the owner. As I mentioned, within the gaited community, the people regulating are also showing or have some other investment in the industry, so many of them have a reason to want to continue soring their horses, as the more exaggerated gaits win. As for the racehorses, we have been selecting for conformation, stride length, and speed, and not worrying about what else has been happening within the gene pool. Instead of doing the difficult and time-consuming thing of trying to breed the pulmonary hemorrhage genes out of our racehorses, we keep breeding for speed and then just drug our horses. It is a mixture of ambitiousness, indolence, and, perhaps, a lack of empathy that allows the owners and trainers to abuse the horses. They want to win, but they want an easy way to win – a fast, easy way to get the horse to do what it needs to do in order to win.

While the abuse has become less with each new rule and penalty, it is still happening, at home, under biased officials, and while no one is looking. The industries and organizations are still working on ways to make it better.



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