

REMARKS BY DAVID A. TURNER

U.S.D.A. HEARING ON TENNESSEE WALKING HORSES

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I would like to thank our USDA hosts for sponsoring these forums.

My earliest Walking Horse show ribbon was won in 1959 and my last in 1972, 40 years ago. So, I come to this forum rather like Rip Van Winkle.

My first show horse was an aged stallion sired by old Merry Boy and his dam was sired by old Merry Boy. For my family in Texas, the circuit for gaited horses already was a remnant of the grand era of the 1920s – '40s. Then, Saddlebreds, Hackney horses and ponies, hunter/jumpers and a lovely division for natural-moving Tennessee Walkers ruled the show scene in the Southwest. After WWII, most show barns had switched to the American Quarter Horse. The Southwest Circuit remained. There were even traces of an old B-circuit for die hard gaited horse people. We showed at Marlin and Nacogdoches, where they offered classes for everything, including Walking Horses, and always, the open class for any gaited pleasure horse. In Austin, gaited horses had almost disappeared, so we showed our old-style Walkers out of a hunter/jumper stable where soring would not have been tolerated.

By 1960, what Central Tennessee trainers were doing to Walkers had spread to Texas. Natural going horses were being edged out in the ring. My family participated as part of that ebb and flow. Horses like ours were no longer winning, so my heart was set on those green ribbons, and I knew the color of an eighth place ribbon was brown. It still beat being excused with others who also didn't sore their horses -- because the judges couldn't "use" them. In effect, two classes were being judged at the same time, one for sore horses, and starting around 5th, another for natural Walkers.

I learned that no matter how many pounds, pads, plates, chains or mercury boxes that we attached to the hoofs of talented natural horses the big lick didn't come. Certainly, the winning horses in the early '50s didn't use them, nor ought we now. Such techniques are essential ingredients only to the basic application of mustard oil under the boot or, in contemporary times, other irritants below the knees. I believe that the big lick, the sore horse and all of the helpful artifice like packages, chains, elaborate leg wraps with cellophane at show grounds should end.

But there was another part of the strategy to halt soring was just as important. Back then, I watched how Walking Horse exhibitors and trainers were treated by riders from other disciplines at AHSA multi-breed shows. Since the '70s, prominent families get into performance Walkers, then almost immediately quit.

During those transition years, I had an opportunity to observe Walking classes at Madison Square Garden, Washington International, Devon and Penn National. And by the time that Joan Blue and Senator Tydings stepped forward, what can only be called social shunning was in full force. When AHSA stepped in with their outright ban against any Walkers at big shows the impact was as devastating to the big lick as what the USDA was achieving in the inspection barns.

Only the rise in popularity of single breed- or single discipline-horse shows, which also occurred in the 1970s, would give Walking Horse trainers a continuing venue for sored performance horses.

Since moving to Washington in 1973, my time has been spent, in a small way, with Saddlebreds. I have participated in attempts to move that breed towards more humane show styles. I've sponsored breed classes for them at Dressage at Devon, and started the Maryland Saddlebred Futurity then switched it to dressage breed show rules. And I took a Saddlebred to the national pleasure carriage marathon championship at Devon. So, I've got some limited experience with the proposal I am about to make.

At this point let me underscore that the courageous and ingenuous efforts of APHIS employees, U.S. Marshals, judges and natural Walking Horse owners during the last four decades have laid the groundwork for what I believe to be a helpful new strategy. This approach would reintroduce Tennessee Walking Horses to upper-tier American equestrian competitions. I have been to the new clean shows and firmly believe there is no taint of soring or the big lick there. It is finally time to trust yourselves and your organizations enough to implement a carrot incentive strategy that is so important to a carrot-and-stick process.

RETINTRODUCE SHOW WALKERS TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

The reintroduction of Walking Horse classes at the remaining big multi-discipline shows would return Walkers to the status I saw them briefly hold in the early 1950s. Natural classes, introduced gradually, would provide a showcase for this breed to a far wider national audience. Inevitably, it would attract well-heeled buyers who have an eye towards competitive showing. This strategy dramatically reverses the shunning effort against all Walking Horses that effectively removed the breed from the general public's eye. The USDA could help enlist the cooperation of show management committees who seek to help close a sordid chapter of equestrian history. Making this effort will be good for their business, because it broadens the appeal of the entire horse show industry.

With a carefully focused glare of public attention directed on the natural Walker as the show horse, the carnival footlights on performance classes in Shelbyville will abate. It's just human nature -- there can be only one central stage.

Combined with continued heroic efforts by APHIS and by the courts, this accompanying "carrot" strategy at major shows will attract important new owners and help smother the financial underpinning of the horror show.

RECOMMENDATION: I recommend that the Secretary of Agriculture approach the U.S. Equestrian Federation and American Horse Council with a well designed plan to gradually reintroduce natural Walking Horse classes at DC, Devon, Penn National and elsewhere. This new tactic will be part of a more comprehensive campaign to contain and eliminate the big lick. It would begin a process of pulling the rug out from under the financial incentives that a new client base represents to professional trainers who perpetuate soring.

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