



Posted on Tue, Sep. 09, 2008

End cruelty to walking horses

Sick is not too strong a word for the equestrian subculture that maims animals to manufacture a higher step in the show ring.

The Tennessee walking horse industry is under pressure, from inside and out, to end the cruel practice of soring and revive appreciation of the breed's natural gait.

Reformers might have gotten further, if not for Sen. Mitch McConnell.

McConnell has acted to protect American bears, but has shown no such compassion for walking horses.

Kentucky's senior senator pressured the U.S. Department of Agriculture to back off enforcement of the 1970 law that outlawed soring.

Too many trainers still illegally use caustic chemicals, chains and weighted shoes to produce so much pain in the front legs that the horse lifts its feet high to avoid the discomfort of touching the ground.

Sored horses shift their weight to their hindquarters. All this produces the exaggerated "Big Lick" rewarded by show judges.

McConnell, who has influence over the agriculture budget, pressured the USDA from 1998 to 2001 to sideline its inspectors and leave policing to the industry.

McConnell's former chief of staff, Niels Holch, went to work for the industry as a lawyer and lobbyist. Tennessee Walking Horse interests have rewarded the senator with contributions.

The problem with industry inspectors is that USDA veterinarians find exponentially more instances of soring.

Exhibitors have fled en masse when USDA inspectors showed up, including at a show in Bath County this year.

McConnell points out that many lawmakers, including former Sen. Wendell Ford, defended the industry. And you could argue that the government should leave people alone to enjoy traditional rural past times. (Cockfighters might try that one.)

Soring is not traditional, however. It's a 1950s invention that distorts the gliding gait of a horse famed for strength, stamina and the ability to carry riders swiftly across long distances and between rows of crops without damaging a plant.

Reviving appreciation for that natural gait is probably the Tennessee walker's best hope. The USDA has just \$500,000 a year to stay ahead of ingenious trainers who keep devising ways to conceal soring.

Industry offshoots, such as the National Walking Horse Association, based at the Kentucky Horse Park, are promoting natural walkers and sponsoring shows where natural gaits are rewarded.

New judging standards are one recommendation of the Lexington-based American Association of Equine Practitioners, which recently published a white paper calling for ending soring.

Here in the Horse Capital of the World, the Kentucky Breeders Incentive Fund should look for ways to discourage soring by rewarding natural Tennessee walkers.