

investigative report



The Humane Society of the United States Investigates Cruel Training of Tennessee Walking Horses

For almost 2 months in the spring of 2011, an HSUS undercover investigator documented the cruel application of caustic substances to the legs of horses transported and shown by Jackie McConnell, a well-known walking horse trainer in Collierville, Tenn., in violation of the federal Horse Protection Act (HPA) and Tennessee State law. “Soring” is the application of caustic chemicals such as mustard oil and heavy chains on a horse’s legs in order to intentionally inflict a maximum amount of pain so horses will lift their feet high off the ground in an unnatural gait to relieve the pain experienced as their injured legs hit the ground.



Jackie McConnell is seen beating a horse held in cross-ties in the face with a heavy wooden twitch handle.



The lives of many Tennessee walking horses trained in this manner are filled with agonizing pain, suffering, and terror. Many are kept in stalls the majority of the time. Fitted with tall, heavy shoes, their legs covered with caustic chemicals meant to cause pain, these horses can be subjected to extreme cruelty, all for the sake of a ribbon. At the time of the HSUS investigation, McConnell was already on a **5-year disqualification** imposed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Oct. 31, 2006, for violations of the HPA. **McConnell’s history** of HPA violations goes back to 1979.

Investigation Findings:

- Some of the most decorated horses in the Tennessee Walking Horse show circuit—and those in training—were subjected to lives filled with pain, privation, and fear. All horses observed by the investigator in McConnell’s facility were kept in small, dark stalls for the majority of the day, only let out for brief and brutal training sessions. Fitted with thick, heavy shoes, their legs covered in caustic chemicals and wrapped with plastic wrap to “bake” the burning chemicals into the skin, the horses documented in HSUS’ investigation were subjected to extreme cruelty, all for the sake of a ribbon.
- McConnell and others sored horses by using mustard oil, croton oil, diesel fuel, heavy-duty hand cleaner and other caustic substances – some of which are so toxic that they must be applied using an eye dropper. The HSUS investigator documented McConnell recoiling after smelling a bottle of croton oil then telling a worker to mark the bottle accordingly.
- Horses being sored were struck on their heads and legs with thick wooden



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Printed on recycled paper.

Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty

2100 L Street, NW Washington, DC 20037

t 202.452.1100 f 202.778.6132 humanesociety.org

investigative report



twitching handles if they resisted when painful chemicals were applied to their injured legs.

- Horses who were too sore to rise from the floors of their stalls were beaten, kicked, and whipped until they got on their feet.
- McConnell used an electric prod to shock horses during training.
- McConnell and others transported and showed sored horses in violation of federal law – including competitions held in Humboldt and Shelbyville.
- Moody Star – winner of the TWHNC Walking Horse Championship WHT 2011 Riders Cup – was sored during the HSUS investigation and passed inspection for the May 2011 Spring Fun Show after workers spray-painted and dusted a black powder on the back of his pasterns to conceal scar tissue from detection by inspectors. Star's rider in the Fun Show told McConnell's workers that he could deal with Star getting a "one-footer" but not a "two-footer" ticket because he would not be able to ride another horse in the show if he was found with a bilaterally sored horse.
- Master Streaker – a young filly at McConnell's stable was in such pain after being sored with Croton oil that she could not rise in her stall the following day. McConnell asked a worker if Master Streaker was "paralyzed."
- Pride's Mr. Williams – owned by Beverly and Floyd Sherman of Shelbyville, Tenn. – was one of many horses owned by the Sherman family who was sored during the HSUS investigation. Pride's Mr. Williams was illegally transported and shown in the West Tennessee Strawberry Festival show in Humboldt, Tenn. On May 26, 2011 the HSUS investigator was told by an employee that Pride's Mr. Williams was sent to a different trainer because "He need to be somewhere where he can get tortured."
- In addition to Pride's Mr. Williams, the Sherman's paid McConnell to train a number of other horses. The Sherman family has a long history of hiring McConnell to train their horses; despite the fact that McConnell was under a federal court order to refrain from training for 5 years, he continued to train the Sherman's horses. At the 2011 Spring Fun Show, Beverly Sherman rode one of their horses, Mucho Bueno, to a disappointing 8th place finish. After Beverly Sherman dismounted in the warm-up area, she slapped Mucho Bueno in the face and said, "You made an ass of yourself out there." The HSUS investigator was told Mrs. Sherman had hoped to place in the top three. The Shermans also **have a history of HPA violations.**
- Workers applied a numbing agent to horses' feet to temporarily desensitize their pain – and used spray paint and markers to cover up hair loss—a sure sign



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Printed on recycled paper.

Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty

2100 L Street, NW Washington, DC 20037

t 202.452.1100 f 202.778.6132 humanesociety.org

investigative report



of soring—right before competitions

- Horses were “stewarded,” a process by which horses are trained to ignore the pain of physical examinations of their legs by inspectors. One worker presses on the horse’s legs while another yanks a metal device placed on the horse’s nose if the horse reacts to the pressure.
- Several owners watched as their horses were either sored or had their plastic wrappings removed in the morning.
- During the investigation, because he was on suspension, McConnell falsified show entry forms by having other workers claim they were the trainer of sored horses.

Evidence from The HSUS investigation – including videotapes and samples of the substances that were applied to the horses’ legs – was immediately turned over to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Tennessee and the USDA’s Office of Inspector General, resulting in a **52-count federal indictment** filed on February 29, 2012 against Jackie McConnell, Joseph Abernathy, Jeff Dockery and John Mays. All 4 defendants have prior histories of HPA violations and are expected to plead guilty under plea agreements on May 22, 2012. The HSUS previously refrained from releasing its video evidence at the request of the U.S. Attorney’s Office while its investigation was ongoing.

On March 1, 2012, the day after the federal indictments were handed down, the District Attorney General’s office serving the Tennessee 25th Judicial District seized 8 horses from McConnell’s stable and McConnell along with two employees were arrested and charged with **31 counts** of cruelty to animals.



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Printed on recycled paper.

Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty

2100 L Street, NW Washington, DC 20037
t 202.452.1100 f 202.778.6132 humanesociety.org