

## Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration Begins Today

**The show goes on despite a long history of controversy surrounding the practice of soring.**

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The Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration has drawn breed enthusiasts to Shelbyville, Tennessee every year since 1939. Tens of thousands of fans crowd the stands to watch the breed's distinct, animated, smooth-riding gait.

The Celebration offers classes for western and English pleasure, trail, driving, performance and equitation. Walking Horses are judged on their distinct gait, the running walk. Show horses are expected to have a long, reaching stride with minimal vertical action behind, and an animated, high-stepping front end action. A unique trait of the Walking Horse is the head nod in time with each step of their gait.

Though the Celebration remains a highly popular spectator attraction in central Tennessee, its image has been tarnished by the practice of soring. Soring is the intentional injury of a horse's front feet or legs to cause the horse to take a faster, higher step. It can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century when the practice was fairly commonplace, but was outlawed by the federal Horse Protection Act of 1970. Though the vast majority of present-day Walking Horse exhibitors oppose the practice of soring, some trainers still cling to the outdated practice and find ways to make soring less detectable instead of opting to humanely train their horses.

Though negative press still surrounds Tennessee Walking Horse competition, the situation has improved. Breed owners and enthusiasts have come a long way in recent years to encourage an end to soring and promote the sound Tennessee Walking Horse. Some recent steps include:

- The Sound Horse Conference is an annual gathering of interested parties to discuss problems and solutions relating to soring. The Conference is organized by Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH) and will be held for the third time in November of 2010

- Testing methods have improved and become more consistent. Three times as many violations were found this spring/summer compared with the same time period last year. Inspectors attribute this to better testing, not to increased soring.

- Penalties for Horse Protection Act violations have increased. Three trainers who had sored a horse and attempted to cover up the symptoms were handed the first ever lifetime suspensions.

This year, horse industry leaders will meet during the Celebration to discuss the breed's future and how to combat both soring and the negative perception of the Walking Horse show industry. Attendees for this meeting will include veterinarians, equine science professors and leaders from other breed organizations.

With continued support for sound, humane training of the Tennessee Walking Horse, fans of the breed hope to eradicate the ugly practices of the past and secure its future.