

# ASHA Letter to Equus

Monday, May 15, 2017

*Editors' Note: The following is a press release from the American Saddlebred Horse Association*

To Whom It May Concern:

It has been brought to my attention, by many of the American Saddlebred Horse Association members, that within an article titled "The Truth About Tail Blocks", featured in your May 2017 issue, there was a sidebar titled "Tail Alteration: Nicking" which contained an abundance of misinformation regarding our breed. The American Saddlebred Horse Association will not ignore publications that put forth articles, without fact checking their information, that attempt to defame the American Saddlebred. The American Saddlebred is possibly a lesser known breed to the average equine enthusiast, so it is of utmost importance that we insure our breed is properly represented when it is the subject of any article. This article's author, Kate Hepworth-Warren DVM, presents herself as an authority on her subject yet put forth many misconceptions and misinformation in portraying tail release surgery, even using improper terminology, which is a telltale sign of a person unfamiliar with the surgery and American Saddlebreds. In fact, I would be interested in how much experience Dr. Warren has had with American Saddlebreds and if she researched her article by interviewing veterinarians specializing in American Saddlebreds and tail release surgery.

As most professional American Saddlebred trainers will tell you, a large percentage of the breed are started as youngsters pulling a jog cart before they are broke to ride. This is done to strengthen the back and hindquarters adequately before riding to prevent injuries. Even with mature horses, it is not uncommon to jog several days a week as part of the training routine to build muscle and stamina without putting undue strain on the horse's back. Before a young horse is taught to jog, the trainers will begin daily stretching of the horse's tail in preparation to wear the harness, and lessen the instance of the horse "clamping down" on the crupper and kicking. As the horse develops, if their tail tends to be particularly tight (generally with a corresponding tight back), a minor surgical procedure can be performed in which a small incision is made through the ventral sacrocaudal muscle to release the tail, in turn helping to relax the back. The procedure is performed by a licensed veterinarian with local anesthetic, analgesic, and antibiotic medication. Contrary to Dr. Warren's claim that this surgery is potentially life threatening (citing only one instance, in 1992, that a horse died from complications due to the surgical site becoming infected), this procedure is less invasive than many common equine surgical procedures including castration, prosthetic laryngoplasty, and many elective orthopedic procedures. The coccygeus muscles (the muscles that allow a horse to "swish" its tail) remain intact. The horse retains full mobility of its tail and can return to normal activity the next day. This procedure is both legal and allowable by the United States Equestrian Federation (refer to SB103.5 in the USEF Rule Book).

Dr. Warren also presented, as fact, that USEF had implemented a rule for American Saddlebreds that "prohibits tail carriage alteration procedures on foal's birth year 2014 and thereafter." That is a blatant falsehood that could have been uncovered had Dr. Warren or Equus bothered to do a basic fact check.

Another popular misconception is that a horse must have had tail release surgery to have the appearance of a high tail in the show ring. We have horses who have had the tail release surgery that will never show with a 'set' tail, and horses showing with a 'set' tail that have not had the tail release surgery. This is because the decision to have the tail release surgery performed on a horse is based on if it will benefit the individual horse. Very few American Saddlebred trainers arbitrarily have tail release surgery on their young horses. Careful consideration is given to a horse that presents a tight back and if it can be relieved, providing more comfort to the horse. Unfortunately, this simple procedure is so misunderstood that many people don't consider the benefits it can provide. However, in all American Saddlebred competitions horses may be

shown with unset tails in any class without penalty (USEF Rulebook SB103.4).

I am sure that it is understandable why many American Saddlebred owners, trainers, and exhibitors have been offended by assertions in your magazine of inhumane treatment of their horses. It is disappointing that Equus was willing to be a vehicle for an individual to spread their misinformed propaganda without bothering to verify the information to properly educate its readers. The ASHA would be more than willing to provide Equus with a more accurate portrayal of the American Saddlebred by contributing a story on our wonderful, versatile breed. If interested, I can be contacted at [SkylineASB@aol.com](mailto:SkylineASB@aol.com) or (520) 991-6536.

Regards,

Donna Pettry-Smith  
President, American Saddlebred Horse Association