

To the Publishers and Editors of Equus:

I read with interest your excellent article in the May 2017 issue entitled, “The Truth About Tail Blocks” and the notable sidebar piece “Tail Nicking.” As a 40+ year owner of American Saddlebred horses, I have competed saddlebreds at the highest levels in both the show and sport horse world.

Dr. Kate Hepworth-Warren’s article is an eye opener (or should be) for any horse lover. Dr. Hepworth-Warren incorrectly stated that a rule was enacted by United States Equestrian Federation (“USEF”) in the 2014-2015 competition year. In fact, a proposed rule change (“PRC”) to ban tail cutting in the American Saddlebred division was proposed to USEF and the American Saddlebred Rules Committee, however, the Rule neither made it out of the Committee, nor did it ever see the light of day. Prior to the start of the 2017 USEF Competition year, the American Saddlebred Horse Association (“ASHA”) submitted a PRC under USEF’s “extraordinary circumstances” provision. The ASHA stated the “EO Reason” or intent of the PRC was to “support of welfare for this division.” The USEF Saddlebred Rules Committee approved the rule, as did USEF; the rule is now codified as USEF Rule SB102.2. In my opinion, ASHA was attempting to show the USEF leadership and membership that ASHA is, in fact, aware of the horrendous public perception, regarding the cutting and setting of tails.

Rule SB 102.2 also states that “gingering” a horse is not permitted. Gingering refers to the insertion of an irritating substance into a horse’s rectum in order to force the horse to raise its tail. This practice has been commonplace for decades in all horses including weanlings. Commonly, trainers use a “tail brace”, in addition to the ginger, which holds the horse’s tail in place in a nearly vertical position over the horse’s back. The “look” is considered desirable and many trainers use the brace in concert with the ginger to effect the “look.” To complete the “look,” a shoelace is tied around the tail bone, drawing the tail up and over the brace and tied to the brace to create the “breakover.” Another shoestring is tied to the bottom of the brace and attached directly to the girth in order so that the brace remains in place.

Rule SB 102.2 provides that “Surgical release of only the ventral sacrocaudal muscle is allowable if performed by a licensed veterinarian.” Oddly enough, it is a well-known fact that tails are most frequently cut by horse trainers, which makes the licensed veterinarian proviso laughable. There are no testing procedures or penalties for noncompliance of the Rule, nor provision for sanctions of any kind. This fact speaks volumes as to the ASHA’s true intent and commitment to the welfare of the breed.

The ASHA has coined the phrase “releasing the tail”, in order to sanitize and rationalize the surgical procedure to an increasingly critical public. The phraseology does not change the barbaric process that is tail cutting; it does not change the fact that the procedure often permanently maims and disfigures the horse. Formerly, “nicking” was used to describe and minimize the procedure. Either description fails to accurately describe the surgery, which typically involves incisions at least two inches long and equally deep. While tail cutting is a surgical procedure; it is routinely performed by horse trainers, rather than licensed veterinarians. The result is the illegal practice of veterinary medicine, which is both illegal and unsafe. Tail cutting by any person is illegal in several states, including New York and California. Aftercare is performed by hardworking grooms. The risk of infection and additional damage due to

lack of quality care cause many horses to have crooked or deformed tails. Despite the illegality, it is a poorly kept secret as to who to seek out to have your horse's tail cut.

Success in the American Saddlebred show ring turns on presentation and turnout. Unofficially, the presentation requires a tail that has been "set" aka nicked/cut in order to be competitive, especially at shows such as the Kentucky State Fair, Lexington Junior League and the American Royal. While the USEF rules state a horse may be shown with an unset/uncut tail, it is naïve to believe that horse would be competitive. Hackney show ponies' tails are also altered. Sadly, the Morgan show world has followed suit, and many of their horses' tails are now also cut. The core of the issue is vanity. A widely expressed opinion by trainers of these breeds explains the procedure is required to aid trainers' ability to train a horse to drive. In contrast to this theory, other breeds are driven from a young age and their tails are never altered to accomplish this feat. Combined Driving horses are judged for their ability to lift and swing through their backs and are prohibited from competing with an altered tail.

American Saddlebred trainers work hard to start and finish young prospects to sell them. Prospects without a cut tail are perceived to be less valuable since the trainer didn't cut the tail. While "hand stretching" a tail may be undertaken to create a similar "breakover" appearance, the process is infinitely more time consuming. Due to the time consumption, tail stretching is rarely offered as an alternative as tail cutting is a quicker means to an end.

In 2016 and 2017, I submitted a "PRC" in order to halt Equine Tail Alteration in all breeds and disciplines governed by USEF. In 2016, the PRC was roundly rejected, never having left the Committee stage, despite the fact that the American Association of Equine Practitioner (AAEP) "condemns the alteration of the tail of the horse for cosmetic or competitive purposes. This includes, but is not limited to, docking, nicking (i.e., cutting) and blocking. When performed for cosmetic purposes, these procedures do not contribute to the health or welfare of the horse and are primarily used for gain in the show ring (nicking/cutting, blocking and docking) or because of historical custom (docking)." Vocal opposition has notably come from the following breed associations and their respective Rule Committees: American Saddlebreds, Morgans, Hackney and National Show Horses, as well as the hunter/jumper discipline. The crux of their argument is that tail alteration is not a welfare issue.

The PRC uses exactly the same language as in USEF's Arabian section, including testing and penalties for tail alteration. Should the current PRC not pass this year, it is my intent to continue submitting the PRC until a meaningful Rule is enacted to protect these magnificent horses. This issue is without a doubt in my mind a welfare issue- even as acknowledged by the ASHA. As the sanctioning body for many breeds and disciplines, USEF, first, and foremost, is obligated to protect the welfare of all horses and ponies at their competitions. It really is that simple.

Sincerely,

Julie Lynn Andrew