



Investigation Documents

Horse Abuse

Investigation at Tennessee walking horse trainer Jimmy McConnell's Formac Stables in Shelbyville, Tennessee, shows cruel acts of soring horses under watch of a key industry leader



Photo by the HSUS, 2022.

Soring is the cruel practice of inflicting pain on a horse's legs or hooves to force an exaggerated, high-stepping show ring gait, known as the "Big Lick."

Congress enacted the Horse Protection Act in 1970 to make illegal the abusive practice of "soring." Soring methods include applying caustic chemicals, using wraps to "cook" those chemicals deep into the horse's flesh, and attaching chains to strike against the sore legs. Sored horses often live in constant and extreme pain throughout their show ring careers.



Soring methods include applying caustic chemicals, using wraps and bandages to "cook" those chemicals deep into the horse's flesh (left) Horses showed many signs of pain and discomfort, including facial contortions (right). *Photos by the HSUS, 2022.*

Summary of investigation findings

Employment-based investigation in Shelbyville, Tennessee

The Humane Society of the United States successfully placed an undercover investigator at Formac Stables in Shelbyville, Tennessee, owned and operated by trainer Jimmy McConnell. McConnell's brother Jackie McConnell was the subject of a 2011 HSUS undercover [soring investigation](#) that gained national attention. He pleaded guilty to 23 counts of violating the federal Horse Protection Act and Tennessee state law.

Our investigator was in place at Formac from August 15-August 30, 2022, and worked alongside Jimmy McConnell and his team. **Jimmy McConnell is one of the winningest trainers in the breed's history**, having won a record four World Grand Championships.

Infliction of pain and application of chemicals

During their employment, the investigator spent time at both the McConnell barn and with the McConnell team at the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration. While under McConnell's employ, the **investigator documented several employees applying a variety of notorious soring chemicals** to the pasterns of the front legs of the horses in training.

These employees included assistant trainer Sam Martin as well as Earsie Allen and Chris Alexander, both of whom have served federal disqualifications for alleged violations of the Horse Protection Act.

The chemicals applied to the horses' skin included a kerosene cocktail, heavy-duty pumice hand cleaner, and other pastes and liquids housed in unmarked jars and tobacco canisters. In many documented cases, the investigator witnessed liquid toxins being grinded into the horses' pasterns using a wire brush. The pastern is the area on the horse's leg right above the hoof.



The investigator witnessed several employees applying chemicals known to be used to sore horses in an assembly-line fashion. *Photos by the HSUS, 2022.*

Laboratory reports confirm chemical findings



Photo by the HSUS, 2022.

The investigator obtained a sample of the kerosene solution for the purpose of laboratory testing. This small sample burned the investigator's hand upon contact and, even more shockingly, caused burning on their leg when wiped onto their work jeans. The mixture was tested by a Southwest Research Institute laboratory in San Antonio, Texas.

The results indicated the solution contained a petroleum substance (kerosene and/or diesel) and allyl isothiocyanate, ingredients commonly used to sore horses in the Tennessee walking horse breed.

Horses documented in pain and suffering

As the investigator observed, after the soring chemicals were applied, the horses' legs were then wrapped with plastic or paper wrap and cloth bandages and secured with duct tape to prevent the horses from removing the bandages. This is a typical practice in the soring of horses, as the wrap causes the soring solution to seep or "cook" into the horses' flesh, creating heat and exacerbating the pain. Horses showed many signs of pain and discomfort, including resistance to touch or hose water on the pastern tissue, facial contortions, ears pinned back against their heads and head thrashing.

Use of devices integral to soring

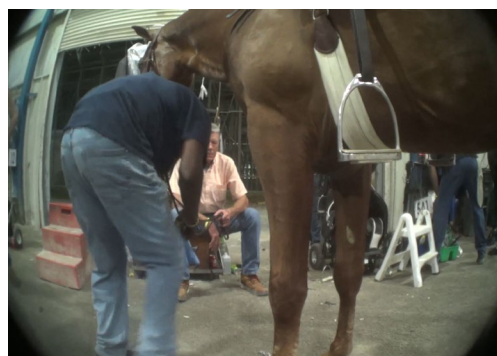
When ridden in the training barn, horses often had heavy chains or rollers affixed to their pasterns to further exacerbate the pain. Devices such as these, which are used in training to encourage the horse to perform the high-stepping gait that is rewarded in competitions, weigh much more than the 6-ounce weight limit allowed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for use in the show ring. Repeated use of devices weighing more than 6 ounces has been shown to have the ability to cause a horse to be sore, even when soring substances have not been applied.



Photo by the HSUS, 2022.

Trainer Jimmy McConnell and industry leader Billy Young witnessed abuse

Not only was McConnell himself documented witnessing this horrific practice in his barn, but Billy Young, who serves as the president of the Walking Horse Trainers Association, stood by and casually stared as horses were abused by McConnell's staff and even held the reins as a McConnell-employed groom sored a horse at the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration.



Billy Young (in white) and Jimmy McConnell (in orange) at Formac Stables (left) and Billy Young holding a horse by the reins at 2022 Celebration (right). *Photos by the HSUS, 2022.*

Tactics to evade detection of soring

Several of the sored horses' pasterns were missing hair or were scarred, with damaged skin peeling off. It was a common practice prior to a horse being led to the inspection area to use a fine comb on the animal's pasterns to remove any dead skin as the presence of that skin would be a violation leading to disqualification of the horse.

The investigator also witnessed and filmed horses being injected with the sedative romifidine, which is marketed under the trade name Sedivet. This sedative was seen and documented by the investigator to be in the horse trailer used to transport horses to the Celebration, on a shelf in a stall at the Celebration, and in the bathroom of McConnell's office at the Celebration. The injections occurred in the stables used by McConnell on the Celebration grounds, prior to the horses being taken to the preshow inspection area at the Celebration. Following this administration, the horses became lethargic, droopy and inactive.

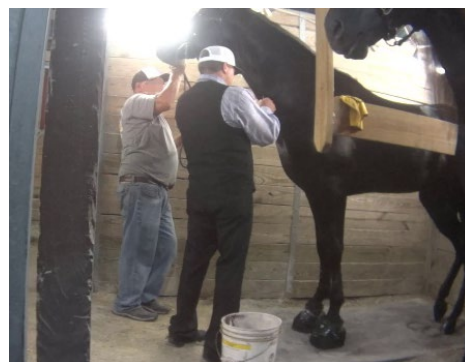


Photo by the HSUS, 2022.

Manipulation to pass inspection

McConnell and Sam Martin were then observed testing the horses to determine whether they would respond in pain. The two men palpated the front pasterns of the

horses' legs, which had recently been sored. The point of this test was to judge whether a horse could pass the inspection that all horses participating in Tennessee walking horse competitions undergo, as required by regulations implementing the Horse Protection Act. All of McConnell's horses who underwent this procedure passed initial inspection by horse industry Designated Qualified Persons, or DQPs, but two were found in violation by USDA Inspectors and were disqualified from competition, and another was found in violation by those inspectors after competing.

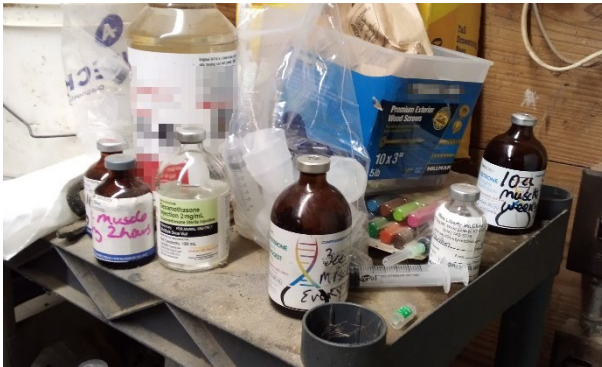


Table containing medications and other paraphernalia at Formac Stables. Photo by the HSUS. 2022.

Use of stimulants for show performance

After McConnell's horses passed inspection and were placed in the post-inspection holding area at the Celebration, the investigator observed them being injected with stimulants to wake them out of their sedation and increase their energy for performance so they could then be ridden in the show. One McConnell staffer was caught in this area by a USDA official with a syringe, which was taken from him by the official, who loudly stated (for all in the area to hear) that this would not be tolerated. When asked if the man worked for him, McConnell lied to USDA by responding in the negative and remained qualified to compete in the show.

Warning to trainers

In response to this blatant incident, the HSUS has learned that Walking Horse Trainers Association president Billy Young sent an email to its members warning them: "YOU MUST be extra aware of your actions on the show grounds and in the inspection area for the duration of this show. When one person acts in an irresponsible manner it not only affects that barn, but the business and livelihood of your friends. WE cannot afford one more incident at this show." This email of warning fails to highlight the egregious act of soring, but instead the mishap of getting caught in the act. Such a flagrant display of inhumanity from this industry truly reveals how insidious it is and how it continues to operate in a backhanded manner.

Dangerous practices with overlapping drugs

After that incident, McConnell switched to an approach of dangerously overlapping the sedative and stimulant injections. The stimulant injection was then administered in the stalls just before the horses left to be inspected, sometimes less than an hour after the sedatives were injected, giving the stimulant as much time as possible to reverse the effect of the injected sedatives so the horses could be shown.

As the sedatives began to wear off, the investigator observed that the pain that the sedatives were used to camouflage during inspection began to return. While still in the post-inspection holding area and in the presence of USDA officials, several McConnell horses were filmed having a paste of soring chemicals applied by staff member Earsie Allen who, at the time, was serving a federal disqualification from participating at horse shows.

Young was seen sitting in McConnell's corner holding a horse by the reins and watching Allen illegally rub soring paste from an old tobacco canister on the animal's pasterns while Allen asked for people to cover him from inspectors.

Our investigator obtained a sample of the paste, which was also tested and found to contain oil of mustard. In response to Allen's request, McConnell and his staff, along with Young, are shown on the HSUS video creating a human wall around the horses being sored in the holding area, obstructing the view of their malfeasance from USDA inspectors.

Intimidation of the investigator

Also during the investigation, after one of McConnell's horses failed to pass inspection by a USDA veterinarian, the investigator was questioned by several of the other employees, and asked if they were a USDA investigator. One employee used threatening language about what would happen to snitches. Another stated, in reference to keeping quiet about readying horses for competition, "What's said in the barn, stays in the barn."



Staff intentionally block the view by inspectors of illegal activity in the inspection holding area. *Photo by the HSUS, 2022.*

Trainers active in industry despite violations

Continued involvement by assistant trainer

The HSUS has found that Sam Martin, McConnell's assistant trainer at the time of the undercover portion of our investigation and who was directly involved in the soring, injection and mock inspection of horses, is continuing to train horses and show them under the stable name of Thornridge South. Martin showed 16 horses at the 2024 Tennessee Walking Horse Celebration in Shelbyville, Tennessee, in late August. The owners of horses being trained by Martin also showed their animals. Several of these horses had been sored during our undercover investigation.

Continued recognition despite disqualifications

Since the undercover operation, the HSUS has continued to track McConnell and his establishment. In December of 2022, McConnell was awarded the title of Riders Cup Performance Champion of the Year with a prize of over \$15,000, by none other than the Walking Horse Trainers Association, whose president Billy Young had witnessed his illegal activity firsthand just months before.

At the 2023 Celebration, several horses who had been sored during our undercover operation were shown. Following the 2023 Celebration, McConnell, Formac Stables and Chris Alexander (a McConnell employee) began serving federal disqualifications for alleged violations of the Horse Protection Act, which is intended to prevent them from participating in horse shows.



Thornridge South and Formac East stable in Tennessee. *Photo by the HSUS, 2022.*

"Living Legend" award despite abuse

In complete disregard of his federal disqualification or the abuse of the horses he was violating, the Walking Horse Trainers Association presented McConnell with its Living Legend Lifetime Achievement Award in February of 2024. This clear example of institutional disgrace needs to be called out for what it really is—enabling the horrific abuse of trusting and vulnerable horses.

Alleged violations by industry participants

It is believed that the following activities witnessed and documented during the investigation represent potential violations of the Horse Protection Act, or HPA (15 U.S.C. § 1824 subsections 1, 2 and 7 and 15 U.S.C. § 1825 subsections (a)(2)(B) and (C)); the Tennessee cruelty to animals code TCA 39-14-202; and potentially other laws.

Jimmy McConnell

The owner, operator and trainer at Formac Stables

- Hiring a person on federal disqualification (Earsie Allen) to work on show grounds—including in the inspection holding area—in a manner not permitted for a person who was on federal disqualification during the investigation, which violates the Horse Protection Act.
- Soring, which is prohibited under Tennessee’s cruelty code TCA 39-14-202 (directing others to sore).
- Entering, exhibiting a horse who is sore, which violates the Horse Protection Act.
- Interfering in identification by USDA veterinarians of sore horses; overseeing the drugging of horses with sedatives and conducting mock inspections to evade detection, which all violate the Horse Protection Act.
- Overseeing others who were involved in trailering sored horses to a show, which is a violation of the Horse Protection Act.
- Overseeing others in the administration of a controlled substance for illicit/unethical/medically unnecessary purposes.
- Overseeing others in the application of prohibited substances—including soring substances, sedatives and stimulants—on show grounds and in an inspection area, in violation of the Horse Protection Act.
- Lying to a USDA official, claiming an individual caught with a syringe in inspection holding area was not working for him.

Sam Martin

Assistant trainer, Formac Stables

- Entering, exhibiting a horse who is sore, which violates the Horse Protection Act.
- Soring, which is prohibited under Tennessee’s cruelty code TCA 39-14-202.
- Trailering sored horses to a show, which is a violation of the Horse Protection Act.
- Applying prohibited substances—including soring substances, sedatives and stimulants— on show grounds and in an inspection area in violation of the Horse Protection Act.
- Administering a controlled substance for illicit/unethical/medically unnecessary purposes.
- Interfering in the identification by USDA veterinarians of sore horses; drugging and mock inspections, which all violate the Horse Protection Act.

Chris Alexander

Walking Horse Trainers Association Groom of the Year 2018 and 2022

- Soring of horses at Formac Stables, which is prohibited under Tennessee’s cruelty code TCA 39-14-202.

Earsie Allen

Groom, Formac Stables

- Soring, which is prohibited under Tennessee’s cruelty code TCA 39-14-202.
- Working on show grounds in manner not allowed for a person on federal disqualification—including in inspection holding area, which violates the Horse Protection Act.
- Applying prohibited substances—including soring substances—in a post-inspection holding area on show grounds, in violation of the Horse Protection Act.