

Activism

AFTER ABSORBING ALL OF THE ADVICE SET forth in this book, you're amply prepared to care for, ride, and compete your own horse in a humane manner befitting the trust your horse places in you, and the responsibility you feel toward him. Both your horse's health and his well-being will be the better for it.

But all horses are not so lucky. There are individuals within the horse world for whom equine health and well-being are not important considerations; they're more interested in the glory of competitive success or running a prosperous business. To some, horses are little more than commodities or equipment to be used and disposed of by any convenient or financially beneficial means. Although it may be difficult to fathom for those of us who care so deeply for our horses, some people simply don't care at all. Horses are often the victims of neglect or abuse by owners who should know better.

It's a constant struggle to secure humane treatment for all animals, horses included. Ensuring the best of care for our own horses is, of course, where we all should focus our efforts, but it's also important to help elevate the care of horses as a whole. As admirers of the species, we owe it to these magnificent creatures to continue improving the situation of horses everywhere.

We're not all capable of running a rescue or leading a legislative battle, but there are myriad ways in which average horse owners can help make the world a better place for horses to live, even if it's just one horse at a time.

Speak Out Against Cruelty

The horse world is a diverse one, where well-meaning individuals often have very different opinions. But there's one issue around which all equine enthusiasts can unite: opposition to abject cruelty and neglect.

Unfortunately, it seems as though every few months a new case of abuse gains widespread publicity due to its severity—a farm where the owners simply stopped feeding the horses, leaving dozens of them to starve; a horse who is dragged to death behind a truck; kids shooting and killing horses for “fun.”

Many times these are incidents perpetrated by mentally disturbed individuals whose actions are outside our realm of understanding. In other instances, the abuse is the result of a cavalier attitude toward

animal life in general. In any event, such situations are a matter for law enforcement to handle, but it's often everyday citizens who sound the alarm and get authorities involved.

You can do your part simply by being observant and aware. Make a point of getting to know (if only by sight) the horses in your general area. Take note of any out-of-the-way horse properties you might pass while driving down back roads, or that might be visible from the trails while you're riding, and observe how many horses there are and their general condition. (You should never trespass, however; simply make mental notes of what's visible as you pass by.)

In some instances of abuse, horses exist on a property in very poor condition for months or even years, simply because there are no watchful eyes around to see and report them. Being on constant alert for abuse and neglect might allow you to be the one person who notices the too-skinny horse in a secluded paddock off a dead-end road, and can get him the help he needs.

If you spot horses who look to be in very poor condition, or if you notice a deterioration in the condition of horses with whom you're familiar, you can notify local animal-control authorities and ask them to investigate. (You can do so anonymously, if you wish.) Provide them with as much detail as you can about the situation—the address of the farm, the number of horses on the property, and what you noticed about their condition and the care being provided. For example, if you can see that the horses' hooves are curling up at the toes, that's a telltale sign of neglect, as are untreated wounds.

If you feel comfortable doing so, you can simply approach the owner with an offer to help. Many times neglect springs from ignorance or poverty, and the owner might be grateful for someone to guide him to options that will help him provide better care.

Know the laws regarding animal neglect in your state and what constitutes a sufficient level of care—in most instances, horses must be provided with food, water, veterinary care, and shelter (although in some jurisdictions, a stand of trees may qualify as "shelter"), but

specifics vary. If there are obvious violations, such as failure to provide shelter, include that information with your complaint. Let the animal-control officer know that you are an experienced horse person so the officer will know your assessment is an educated one. (These officers are also called on by those who are less knowledgeable to investigate “dead” horses who are simply napping in the sunshine, or “blindfolded” horses who are wearing fly masks, so they are likely to appreciate knowing that your report is based on actual knowledge of proper horse care.)

The attitudes and helpfulness of local animal-control officials range widely. In some jurisdictions they may not take such reports very seriously, or they may be so severely understaffed that they have a large backlog of cases. (Animal control may not exist as a separate agency but be the responsibility of the sheriff’s department, or be handled by a volunteer investigator from a nonprofit agency.) Keep an eye on the horses in question and follow up with animal control, especially if it seems that the animals’ condition fails to improve. If you’re not satisfied with the response from animal control, ask for help from your elected officials or contact equine rescue organizations or local humane societies in your area and see if they can help you light a fire under the proper authorities.

Keep in mind that there are legitimate reasons for horses to be in poor shape, so don’t automatically assume the worst. Elderly horses often have a very difficult time maintaining their weight, despite the best efforts of their owners, and may be unthrifty, shaggy, and sway-backed, even if they’re in decent health for their age. A horse who has been ill or injured may lose considerable weight that takes time to gain back. Perhaps the horse in question is a rescued animal in the process of being rehabbed. When animal control investigates such complaints, the officer should be able to discern easily whether it’s a case of abuse or neglect or if there are reasonable explanations for why a horse is in poor condition. He may check for available food and water on the premises or ask to see the owner’s feed-store receipts. Officials can also check back after a period of time to ensure that animals are improving.

Less Obvious Forms of Abuse

Lack of food, water, and shelter are not the only abuses to which horses are subjected, unfortunately, nor does abuse happen only on secluded private properties, out of the sight of passersby. Often abuse occurs in front of witnesses or at public facilities, such as horse show grounds, and may be perpetuated by so-called equine professionals in the name of “discipline” or “training.”

If you’re familiar with the concept of diffusion of responsibility, you know that, when there are more people around to observe a situation, it’s often less likely that someone will speak up or intercede, simply because everyone assumes someone else will do it. You see this principle played out in real life in the warm-up arena of an equestrian competition. Perhaps a frustrated rider is jerking her horse in the mouth, jabbing him with the spur, or walloping him repeatedly with a crop, the punishment getting more out of control as the horse’s behavior (understandably) doesn’t improve. Other riders steer clear to avoid upsetting their own horses, and trainers warming up their students in the ring seem oblivious to the meltdown in progress. Spectators along the rail avert their eyes, muttering, “That horse is a saint,” or “What a shame,” to one another.

Rarely does anyone speak up or attempt to stop behavior that is clearly inappropriate. No one wants to offend fellow riders or competitors or challenge those deemed more experienced or accomplished. People allow the abuse to continue because they don’t want to be perceived as rude or make a scene during an otherwise enjoyable day. This “see no evil” strategy damages everyone who participates in every organized equine activity. It is tacit acceptance of, and complicity in, bad behavior.

No matter what your discipline, a sanctioned competition always has some sort of official whose job it is to enforce the rules, including those that govern abusive behavior. If you witness a situation you feel crosses the line between appropriate and inappropriate treatment of a horse, find that official immediately and insist that she accompany you back

to the horse and rider in question. In most cases the official actually must witness abuse to take action against a competitor; she cannot simply rely on eyewitness accounts from bystanders.

Even if the official doesn't witness the abuse first-hand and can't sanction a rider under the rules, she is likely to have a stern word with the abuser and let the person know she is being watched. Perhaps this action alone will prevent similar outbursts from this rider in the future or cause the rider to reflect on her behavior and realize it was out of line.

There are times, however, when there are no officials available to help, and it's up to individuals to step in and speak up. If you witness behavior you believe is abusive—at a private facility where you're a visitor, or perhaps at the barn where you board—approach the individual in a firm, but non-threatening way, if you can. Sometimes simply drawing attention to the fact that the incident has been noticed—that witnesses are present—will change the behavior. At other times, a private but subtle criticism (“Trainer Smith, I'm uncomfortable with how hard you are on Midnight. It seems to me he is frightened, not ‘just being an idiot.’”) will at least force the rider/handler to justify behavior that is unacceptable to students and onlookers.

Your “interference” may not be received well. Someone who is upset enough to mistreat a horse is obviously not in a frame of mind open to criticism. Expect defensiveness, even hostility. Such a response is telling in and of itself. Do what you can without risking your own safety. At least by stepping forward and speaking up, you may have inspired others—grooms, working students, horse-owning novice parents—to summon the courage to do the same.

Educating Others

Although many cases of abuse or neglect are premeditated, purposeful, and can have no legitimate excuse, there are instances in which horses suffer because their owners simply don't know any better. Those who

don't have much horse knowledge might not recognize when a horse is too thin or might not know the difference between hay (feed) and straw (bedding). An owner might not realize the importance of regular hoof or dental care. Or an individual might simply be overwhelmed by the work—and cash—involved in caring for horses and find herself caught in a downward spiral of neglect from which there seems to be no escape.

Individuals have a responsibility to be educated about the animals in their care and to provide for them. But not all ignorant people are inherently careless or unkind; they are not necessarily lost causes.

If you make the effort to get to know your horsey neighbors and other horse owners in your community—the folks whom you pass on the trails or meet at the tack or feed stores—and become involved with others at the local level, you can sometimes spot dangerous situations developing and make yourself available to help.

Perhaps your next-door neighbor has an older horse who has gotten progressively thinner over the course of the summer and fall, and winter is fast approaching. Neighbor Jim is a well-meaning person, but he is not very knowledgeable about horses: he might not even have noticed that the horse was losing weight or might not know what to do about it.

Stop by his house to say hello. Compliment his barn paint job, dog, or garden, then casually mention that you noticed old Stormy was looking a little thin: has the neighbor tried a particular brand of feed that worked well for your older horse? Would he like the number for your equine dentist, who did such a great job helping your older fellow?

It's certainly not unheard of for horse people to tell a few white lies to help effect a solution. You might just happen to have a few bags of senior feed sitting in your feed room that you're not going to use (*because you bought them for the neighbor's horse*)—would he like to try some? Or you might coincidentally have the equine dentist coming over to float your horses' teeth next week—would he like to join in on the appointment?

Well-intentioned but uneducated horse owners can be helped, if someone takes the time to do so (and they're amenable to being helped). In such cases, small efforts on your part can make a big difference for

the horses, and can perhaps turn around what otherwise could have developed into a very unfortunate situation.

Vote with Your Wallet

In any local area, you're likely to find some professionals (trainers, barn managers, and the like) with wonderful reputations as consummate horsemen, nearly universally recommended by others in the area.

But there are a whole lot more whose reputations are decidedly mixed. You might hear of a trainer who many say has worked wonders with their horses, but he has also been suspended several times by the governing association of his sport for rules violations. Another might be that rider you saw losing her temper with her horse in the warm-up arena.

Rumors can often run rampant, of course, and it can be difficult to confirm or debunk what you hear about others. But even if only half of what you hear in any given local horse community is actually true, it's enough to make your hair stand on end.

For some individuals, all that matters is that a professional gets them results—whether it's ribbons or a horse sold or a training problem solved—even if the methods are questionable. They dismiss previous transgressions and are willing to look the other way if rules or ethical covenants are broken. If the trainer helps Suzy win the championship at this year's big show or runs the glitziest barn in town, they choose to ignore the fact that horses in his "program" seem to last only a few years before being broken down or sold off, or that he was suspended for showing a horse that tested positive for cocaine.

Unscrupulous individuals are kept in business by those who are willing to put ethics aside for their own personal gain, and unfortunately, the horse industry has a healthy contingent of such people.

If the humane treatment of horses is important to you, you should support equine professionals who share your beliefs. Vote with your wallet, and give your business to those in the industry who have demonstrated that they believe in putting the horses first. Avoid those who are known for bending the rules (and even the law) when it suits them. Rules violations are usually

a matter of public record. (For instance, the USEF, which governs saddle seat, show hunters and jumpers, eventing, dressage, and reining, among other organized sports, publishes all rules violations in its monthly members' magazine.)

When enough people decide that they're not willing to financially "enable" the horse world's less savory characters, the horse world becomes a much less attractive place for the unsavory to do business.

Educate Yourself About Welfare Issues

Over the last hundred years, great strides have been made in ensuring humane treatment for all animals, including horses. It used to be that animals were considered a person's property, and owners could do as they chose, regardless of the effects on the animal. Today, the humane community views all animals as entitled to basic standards of care and protection from abuse, whether they're pets, farm animals, or animals used in research. The humane treatment of animals is an established part of our culture, and, although many serious issues persist, progress is being made all the time.

These changes didn't occur overnight and wouldn't have been possible without substantial pressure from concerned citizens, those who demanded laws to protect animals, and those who worked to educate the public and change perceptions about how animals should be treated. That work continues today, both in the United States and in developing nations, where much remains to be done to ensure protection for animals under the law and to educate the general public.

As a horse owner, your first focus (and rightfully so) is your own horse, managing his care and simply enjoying his company. But as equine enthusiasts, we also have an appreciation for the entire species. And some horses are not fortunate enough to have owners like you who care so diligently for them. Who looks out for those horses?

By becoming educated about the welfare issues facing our equine friends, we can help spur discussion of these concerns within the equestrian community and use our collective expertise to develop solutions. Visit The HSUS at its website, www.humanesociety.org, to find out how you can help us combat cruelty.

How Horse Lovers Can Help

Although the issues facing horses can seem vast and insurmountable, progress is being made all the time, thanks to horse-loving individuals who get involved. Equine enthusiasts come from widely varying backgrounds—from the cowboys of the West to elite show riders of the East—but what all should have in common is a reverence and respect for the horse. When riders from across disciplines come together and speak in one voice, much can be accomplished.

The protections our horses have now were not quick in coming, and the horse lovers who preceded us had to work hard to secure them. Solutions to complex problems are rarely perfect, but such problems can always be improved over time. Although we may never live in a society where all animals are safe from mistreatment or neglect, it's certainly a noble goal to strive toward.

We can't all be Anna Sewell, whose *Black Beauty* almost single-handedly made animal welfare a popular cause more than a century ago, or Velma Johnson ("Wild Horse Annie"), who campaigned to obtain federal protection for free-roaming mustangs and burros on the western plains. But individuals can take many small actions that, cumulatively, can make a big difference.

Be an Example

As an individual horse owner, one of the most valuable contributions you can make is to be a good example. When your own horse is happy and supremely well cared for, it sets the standard for other horse owners

around you and raises the overall level of care. When you don't tolerate callous attitudes toward buying and selling, or when you disavow abusive training practices, it encourages others to do the same. And when you compete in a conscientious manner, embodying the ideas of putting the horse first and engaging in good sportsmanship, it shows others how things should be done.

You can actively help your friends, neighbors, and barn-mates to learn about the welfare issues that affect horses. Some may view their horse activities as an escape from "real-life" problems and *want* to hide from the dark side, but others are simply so involved in their own small corner of the horse world they may be unaware of what goes on elsewhere.

Support Legislation

All the good examples in the world won't encourage certain individuals to change their practices—they need to be forced to do so by legislation. In recent years, state and federal legislation has addressed the slaughter of horses for human consumption, equine transport, and fraud in horse sales. New legislative efforts are always emerging, from local ordinances to federal laws, that can either be a boon or a detriment to humane horse care.

Take the time to educate yourself on such issues, and then make your opinion known. Call or write your elected officials, tell them what you think, and encourage others in your local equestrian community to do the same.

Familiarize yourself with the existing laws regarding equine welfare in your state. As welfare advocates have become frustrated with lax enforcement and paltry punishments for heinous crimes against animals, there's been a push to change such laws from misdemeanors to felonies. Forty-three states now have some sort of felony-level penalties for animal cruelty, and twenty-nine of those were enacted in just the last ten years. Take a look at your state's laws and see how they compare. Do they apply to first-time offenders? Do they include provisions for stiff

finances and prison time? If not, make your voice heard and press your legislators to toughen the laws that protect animals.

Laws are only useful when they are enforced, however. How seriously does your local law enforcement take animal-related crimes? Is your local department of animal control effective and responsive to complaints? Animal-control departments are quite frequently underfunded and understaffed. If this is the case in your community, lobby for improvements that will help these local officials pursue cases of abuse and neglect more effectively.

Get Involved

Did you know that many states, and even some cities and counties, have their own horse councils? These non-profit membership organizations represent all equine interests in their areas, from such big businesses as horse racing to individual horse owners. They monitor legislative efforts that affect the ownership and use of horses, such as changes in zoning laws, including access to trails and public lands. And they provide an information clearinghouse tailored to local interests, information on disease outbreaks, alerts about stolen horses or tack, lists of boarding facilities, and so on.

With the modest dues you pay to these organizations, you help support educational initiatives and ensure that local government hears the opinions of your community's horse owners. You'll also be firmly plugged into your community's equine network, more aware of the local issues facing horse owners, and better able to help resolve them.

There are national and local equine organizations that represent particular organized disciplines. If you're an active competitor, you're likely already required to be a member of the national organization, but consider joining a local one, too. It will help you connect with other enthusiasts in your area. Even if you're not an active competitor, national and local memberships help to support your sport. They give you a chance to become involved in your sport's governance and lobby for rules that help protect the horse's welfare.

Volunteer and Donate

There are hard-working equine rescues in many communities whose volunteers are on the front lines of the battle for humane treatment. Whenever a large-scale case of abuse makes the news—the discovery of a farm with dozens of starving horses, for example—these groups take in the rescued animals. They're equipped to deal with severe cases of starvation and abuse, everything from putting horses who are too weak to stand in slings to help them recover, to expert trimming and rehabilitation of horribly neglected and overgrown hooves.

These groups take in the unwanted and the abused and nurse them back to health, then either make them available for adoption or provide them with a permanent, safe home. They also offer valuable educational opportunities for the local community and help raise awareness about the welfare issues that affect horses.

These groups rely on horse-knowledgeable volunteers—from beginners able to handle a pitchfork and a feed scoop to experienced hands able to work with problem horses. If you have time to give, it will certainly be well spent helping out at a reputable horse rescue in your area. It can be heartbreaking work, seeing horses who have often been horrifically neglected or abused, but it is also incredibly rewarding to see them learn to trust humans, gain weight, and blossom once again into beautiful animals.

If you have an empty stall at home, you might also consider fostering a rescue horse. You typically provide feed, housing, and perhaps some basic training until a horse can be placed in a new, permanent home. Putting horses in foster care helps them get more individualized attention and frees up space at a rescue facility for emergency cases.

In addition to giving your time, you can support these groups with monetary and equipment donations. Many rescues accept used tack, horse blankets, riding clothes, and other items, either to use in their programs or to sell to raise funds.



THE HSUS / CHAD SISNEROS

HSUS Director of Equine Protection Keith Dane comforts one of the Miracle Horses rescued in 2007.

Rescues aren't the only groups that can benefit from volunteers, however. If you have a local Pony Club or 4-H, consider helping out in an educational capacity. You can lend your expertise to help shape young equine-loving minds, ensuring that sound horse-management practices and a concern for equine welfare are passed on to the next generation.

Join Up

Finally, consider becoming a member of The Humane Society of the United States (www.humanesociety.org) and other equine advocacy organizations. Doing so will help keep you abreast of the welfare issues that affect horses in this country and around the world. You'll add your voice to the hundreds of thousands of others calling for change when it's necessary.

Your monetary contributions also help lobby for new legislation that protects horses, and the continued enforcement and strengthening of existing laws. Since its founding in 1954, The HSUS has worked to prevent animal cruelty, exploitation, and neglect through education, advocacy, and public policy reform. The HSUS has been a major force in pushing for the ban of equine slaughter for human consumption, educating women about Premarin, and advocating for stricter anti-cruelty laws.

There are also many other non-profit groups with a more specialized focus that may match your own interests. Some organizations work to transition racing Thoroughbreds, Standardbreds, and Quarter Horses to new pleasure or sport careers. Others specialize in providing veterinary care for working horses in developing nations and educating their owners about proper harness fit and horse-management practices.

Whatever issues matter to you most, you're sure to find an organization out there dedicated to addressing them. By lending your moral and financial support, you can help further the cause of humane horse care beyond your own stable or local community.