

Saddlebred FAQs

Are American Saddlebred horses “sored”?

No. In fact, the American Saddlebred Horse Association (ASHA) and the United Professional Horseman’s Association (UPHA) both supported the Prevent All Soring Tactics (PAST) Act when it was introduced to Congress in 2013 and continue to assist the United States Department of Agriculture in their quest to end soring practices.

As UPHA vice-president Smith Lilly explained: “American Saddlebreds all trot in the show ring. The trot is a two-beat diagonal gait in which the front leg and the diagonal hind leg strike the ground together and at an equal interval from the corresponding pair of legs. Any unsoundness, or soreness, produces an uneven and unattractive way of going at the trot that would be severely penalized in the show ring, which is why American Saddlebreds have never been found to have been sored, or subject to inspections under the Horse Protection Act (HPA). Not only is there no incentive to sore a trotting horse, there is a strong disincentive to do so.”

ASHA president Donna Pettry-Smith further explained: “In American Saddlebred competitions, soreness will likely cause an entry to be last, not place, or risk judicial disqualification in any given class. The reason for this is because the American Saddlebred is a trotting breed of horse. In every class, in every division, our horses are judged at the trot. A sore horse simply cannot perform at the trot, is not competitive, and will not place well in American Saddlebred competition.”

How are American Saddlebred show horses shod?

The shoeing of the American Saddlebred show horse is directed to improving the comfort, balance, and soundness of these naturally high-stepping performers. Most horse shoes used on American Saddlebreds weigh between 12 and 24 ounces, depending on the size, way of going, and maturity of the horse. This is a comparative weight to a men’s paddock boot and less weight than many tall boots worn by jumper and dressage riders. In no way should the horse’s shoe weight be a burden to the horse, for a “labored way of going” is penalized under United States Equestrian Federation rules. When pads are used, it is to protect the feet and limbs from the impact of the horse’s natural gait. The pads help absorb shock, much like the rubber sole of a tennis shoe. A wedge pad may also be used to maintain proper hoof angle and thus keep the horse sound. When it is preferable for a horse to wear bands, bands are permitted to maintain the integrity of the hoof and prevent the loss of a shoe resulting in trauma to the hoof. Bands are also used to secure the shoe at the heel to avoid driving nails into the back of the shoe at the heel, which is the most sensitive part of the hoof. For additional information on American Saddlebred shoeing practices please reference the USEF Rule Book SB 103.

About American Saddlebred tails:

Trainers and caretakers of the American Saddlebred show horse invest hours of attention and care maintaining the beautiful, proud tail carriage that is one of the hallmarks of the American Saddlebred and Hackney performance horse. The setting of a horse’s tail usually can be achieved by daily stretching of the ventral sacrocaudal muscle, similar to a gymnast daily stretching their iliopsoas (major hip flexors), hamstrings, and abdominals.

For some show horses with particularly tight tails (and correspondingly tight backs), a minor surgical procedure is performed in which a small incision is made through the ventral sacrocaudal muscle to release the tail, thus helping to also relax the back. This, in turn, improves the performance of the show

horse by helping to relieve unnecessary back pain caused by the strain of having a “tight back,” and the residual effects that has on connected tissue, tendons, and, ultimately, the spine itself.

“The tail-releasing procedure involves a small, single-site incision with simple bisection of the sacrocaudal muscle at one vertebral space, saving the vessel and nerves to the tail,” said Hugh Behling, DVM. “Normal function of the tail is maintained.”

This procedure, by USEF rule, must be performed by a licensed veterinarian with local anesthetic, analgesic, and antibiotic medication, is less invasive than other common equine surgical procedures including castration, prosthetic laryngoplasty (“tie back” surgery), and many elective orthopedic procedures. The coccygeus muscles (the muscles that allow the horse to “swish” its tail in all directions) remain intact. The horse retains full mobility of its tail and can return to normal activity the next day. Contrary to erroneous assertions, in no way is the tail “broken.” It is common practice for the horse to wear a tail set or bustle in the stall while the tail is being set. Saddlebred trainers and caretakers must assure that their horses are comfortable wearing their tail sets, for any discomfort results in poor performance and poor training. Once the tail is set, it is common practice to only have a horse wear a tail set for a few days prior to competition to be sure the tail muscles are loosened properly.