

AAEP NEWS

Ethics: Altering a horse's tail—why not?

By Nat T. Messer IV, DVM

The authors of the AAEP position statements have carefully and thoughtfully drafted these statements to establish AAEP policy when it comes to all aspects of equine practice. Many of these position statements, including the Ethical and Professional Guidelines, serve as a template for all members to take into consideration in the context of his or her practice. It is incumbent on all practitioners to familiarize themselves with both the AAEP position statements and the Ethical and Professional Guidelines.



Dr. Nat T. Messer

All members of the AAEP are expected to comply with the following: a) the Code of Ethics of the AAEP (or counterpart in foreign countries), b) the AAEP's Ethical and Professional Guidelines, Bylaws and procedures of their enforcement, c) the Code of Ethics of the veterinary medical association of the state or province in which licensed, d) all rules and regulations of racing applicable at racetracks where practicing, e) rules of organizations governing horse shows, sales, equine events and all the rules of all breed registries in relation to veterinary practices, and f) all other laws of the land.

With regard to the propriety of performing procedures that alter tails in horses such as docking, cutting (nicking) or blocking, the AAEP has a Position on Tail Alteration in Horses:

The American Association of Equine Practitioners 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). If a horse's tail becomes injured or diseased and requires medical or surgical intervention, such care should be provided by a licensed veterinarian.

The AAEP urges all breed associations and disciplines to establish and enforce guidelines to eliminate these practices and to educate their membership on the horse health risks they may create. Members of the AAEP should educate their clients about the potential health risks, welfare concerns, legal and/or regulatory ramifications

regarding these procedures based on the relevant jurisdiction and/or association rules.

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This policy was promulgated for several reasons. First, these procedures will likely adversely affect the health and welfare of the horse and are only being done for cosmetic or competitive purposes and personal gain. In addition, there are both published¹ and anecdotal² reports of serious, life-threatening complications associated with tail blocks, including such things as ascending hind-end paralysis, clostridial infections at the base of the tail, and sloughing of the tail and surrounding musculature. Second, because of item (e) above, it is unethical for an AAEP member to alter tail function of a horse by the application or administration of any drug, chemical,



Muscle atrophy/deformity four months after a tail block and resultant infection in the musculature above the base of the tail.

foreign substance, surgical procedure, or trauma that could result in alteration of normal tail function, carriage, conformation, or overall appearance as expressly prohibited by certain breed registries; and thus doing so would constitute unethical behavior as defined by AAEP's Ethical and Professional Guidelines. And last, but certainly not least, docking and cutting tails are prohibited by law in several states, so in those states at least, performing those procedures would be considered unethical based on item (f) above in the AAEP's guidelines.

So what should an ethical veterinarian do when asked by a client or trainer to alter tail function in a horse? The simple answer would be to refuse to do it and then explain why: because 1) it is not in the best interests of the horse's health and welfare, 2) it is unethical for me to perform such procedures contrary to the rules of the breed

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registries, and 3) it may be illegal in the case of docking or cutting tails. This is an excellent opportunity to educate the client or trainer as to why these procedures should not be performed, even though it might give them and their horse a competitive advantage in the show ring, and why the breed registries have rules forbidding such procedures.

Some veterinarians rationalize doing tail blocks for their clients because they feel if they don't perform the tail block themselves, someone else with less knowledge and experience will do it to the detriment of the horse, plus they might lose the client. Unfortunately, if the client is determined to have the procedure done, your refusal poses those risks; but is compromising one's professional integrity and ethical standards worth it for a client that is asking you to help them cheat? Most likely not.

Two of the major veterinary specialty organizations—ACVIM and ACVS—have asked AAEP to join with them in trying to stop the practice of altering tails altogether, primarily because of the adverse consequences board-certified veterinarians are having to treat in horses that have had their tails blocked. They strongly feel more punitive measures should be taken against veterinarians, trainers, and owners who persist in either performing tail blocks or having tail blocks done to their horses since there is no medically sound reason to block a horse's tail just to keep it from moving while the horse is being shown.

Actions that have been discussed include such things as charges of unethical conduct by veterinarians, charges of animal abuse and cruelty against owners and trainers, sanctions against judges who reward quiet tails in the show ring, stiffer penalties or fines assessed against owners whose horses have had their tails blocked, and more intense scrutiny of horses in shows where the breed registry forbids tail blocking. Only time will tell if these efforts are successful in stopping horses from having their tail function altered. There seems to be a “cheat to win” mentality that has become pervasive in the show horse industry. Hopefully, ethical AAEP member veterinarians will refuse to take part in such activities.

Dr. Messer is a Professor Emeritus of equine medicine and surgery at the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine and a member of the AAEP's Professional Conduct and Ethics Committee.

References

1. Stewart RH, Reed SM, Weisbrode SE. “Complications associated with alcohol tail-blocks in three horses.” *Progress in Veterinary Neurology*. Vol 1, No. 4; 1989: 476-480. (View this article at <http://tinyurl.com/ktecvjh>)
2. Personal communication. F. Glenn Anderson, DVM, 2015.