



# Working Together – The Western Horse Industry

By C.J. Garland

## Extremist Tactics – Tear Us Down Brick by Brick

Animal extremist groups have been targeting individual sectors of the horse world for decades, methodically picking at what they consider to be the “low-hanging fruit” in their efforts to establish precedents to further their agenda. The list of recent examples is actually quite staggering. Their ultimate goal is to end all animal ownership. Villainizing horse owners and trainers is a big step in dismantling the livelihoods, lifestyles, ownership rights, and valued pastimes of *all* animal owners. These groups rely on a “divide and conquer” technique to push their agenda, picking our industry apart brick by brick. They target one discipline or breed at a time, and they have made big inroads without much of the horse world noticing.

In this day of viral social media posts, one highly edited video clip or purposely cropped or staged photo can cause irreparable damage. Not only will it unjustly destroy the reputation of the owner or trainer involved but is often used as evidence to “take down” the entire event or discipline. If the extremist groups happen upon the rare “bad apple”, they use this opportunity to malign the entire horse industry. These often fake and malicious posts, videos, and “stories” have the potential to influence lawmakers unfamiliar with horses which in turn, offers an opportunity for the uneducated public to vote for legislation that creates permanent changes. These changes are often harmful to actual animal welfare and our rights as owners.

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## **Common Tactics:**

- Using pictures and edited video out of context, some of it coming directly from horse people to hurt each other. They create public outcry based on false information.
- Pushing owners, associations, and clubs to change their rules and policies by harassing and threatening them via email blasts, protests, and media campaigns.
- Writing, funding, and marketing horse-related legislation, laws and ordinances.
- Awarding lawmakers who help extremist groups push their agenda.

## **Horses Are Part of The Human Experience**

Horses have 6,000 years of domesticated history with humans. Horses have made significant contributions to the development and advancement of the modern world. Generations of purposeful breeding have allowed for horses to become specialized. Today in the U.S., the roles horses play in the lives of their owners are as varied as their uses. Some work on western cattle ranches, others race, some provide therapy – physical, emotional, and behavioral--some pull carriages, and still more compete in a variety of horse show events ranging from jumping and dressage to reining, cutting, working cow horse or rodeo, and some are trusted trail and leisure horses.

## **Our Industry Often Plays Right Into Their Hands**

### **A few questions to consider:**

- Is the variety in horses, their uses, and horse ownership making sectors of our industry easier to divide?
- Why are horse people so quick to judge each other when they don't know the whole story, situation, or training method?
- Why do some horse lovers jump on a bandwagon when people or sports are targeted?
- Do horse owners understand that by jumping on those bandwagons they are fueling their own demise?
- Why don't more people in the horse industry look at the bigger picture and recognize that if they continue to publicly disparage each other, they are helping animal extremists push their agenda?

## **Folding to Pressure Is Not the Answer**

Many targeted disciplines have folded to the pressures and threats of animal extremist groups. Instead of working within their associations and making animal welfare changes on their own over time, they have adopted animal extremist's suggested rule changes to "get them off their back". Some organizations have even involved these groups when writing their welfare guidelines. All this does is embolden these groups, make them stronger, and give them more avenues to spread their ideology. It gives them a share of voice yet they are not the animal care experts.

When it comes to animal welfare, we as an industry, must make needed changes on our own instead of allowing these dangerous extremist groups to gain more footholds. Changes should only be made by the people who truly understand horses, their welfare, and the industry itself. Changes should not be made due to pressure from animal extremist organizations, especially considering that their ideology views all horse ownership as slavery, and they paint the entire horse community as abusers. Allowing these organizations a seat at the decision-making table only adds fuel to their fire. Situations have already happened in both the horse racing and the Tennessee Walking Horse industries.

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Now, the Rodeo and Reining industries are being regularly targeted, and it won't be long before that list grows.

## **Get Off That Bandwagon – Don't Jump to Conclusions**

Over the years we have seen a lot of misinformation publicized. Animal abuse is a hot topic these days and most non-horse people are getting their information about the horse industry from animal extremist groups, not from actual horse owners. What is even worse, is witnessing fellow horsemen and women jumping to conclusions and joining in on attacks. When people fail at supporting their industry and fall for the smear campaigns, how do they expect people with no knowledge of horses to react?

When those within the horse industry jump on the bandwagon, animal extremist groups use this as ammunition, making statements such as "even others in the horse industry agree..." This also gives animal extremist organizations leverage when working to influence lawmakers and voters who know nothing about horses. We need to realize that publicly maligning our fellow horse people encourages more targets in the horse industry.

## **“Better Them Than Us” is a Dangerous Position - What Impacts One Sector of the Horse Industry Impacts Us All**

It is natural to want to keep your distance when animal activists target other disciplines. Unfortunately, looking the other way or even joining in and sharing misinformation is very common. It causes further division and gives animal extremism another foothold to harm horse owners as a whole. When activists see posts and videos on social media portraying horse owners and trainers negatively, it gives them more leverage to push their agenda.

To combat misinformation and push back against the agenda of these groups, we must stick together and support our industry as a whole. Even if you have little personal knowledge about the specific discipline being targeted, the attitude of, "better them than us" is destructive. Standing by while fellow horsemen and women are being attacked and ultimately controlled by the actions of animal extremist organizations is a big problem that impacts all horse owners.

It is common to hear "they will never come after me, I take better care of my horse than I do of myself". Let us not forget, the animal extremist agenda is to end ALL animal ownership, regardless of the care an animal receives. Keep in mind, animal extremist ideologues view all horse ownership as slavery. They make no distinctions. Each time this happens, they gain ground in reaching their goal to end all horse ownership. Once they destroy one sector of the horse industry, they move on to another. When a sector of the horse industry allows animal rights organizations to influence their policies it gives them one more foothold into the industry as a whole. It sets an ugly precedent for their future involvement in all other horse sports. Today they are targeting racing, rodeo, and reining. Tomorrow it could be your chosen discipline.

## **What Should the Horse Community Do?**

- First and for most - stop sharing posts on social media that negatively portray other horse people. Animal extremists are very active on social platforms and have infiltrated many interest groups searching for "evidence" of abuse. By joining in on over-generalizations and publicizing the activities of one bad apple, animal extremist groups are provided with ammunition to attack our industry as a whole.

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- If you are a member of a show or breed association, make sure you know their rules on horse welfare. As a member, be willing to involve yourself when there are ideas to improve welfare processes. Help effect positive change.
- If you see abuse, report it either to a ring steward, show office, or the event authorities.
- Many breed and show associations have a steward program. The primary goal of a steward program is the health and wellbeing of the horses. Stewards are usually volunteers that have been specially trained to understand and recognize many different types of situations. They help educate members and event attendees on humane treatment and ensure participants follow their association's rules. Steward programs can be developed in any discipline. As an example, the AQHA has a steward program, follow this link for more information about it: <https://www.aqha.com/disciplines/showing/programs/aqha-stewards>
- Educate yourself – never stop learning. Talk to people from other disciplines, get to know training techniques and rules.
- Certain trainers and other well-known professionals need to stop painting themselves as the “solution” to exaggerated problems in horse training. Most horse trainers are very talented, kind, and care deeply for the horses they train. This small group of professionals should not be profiting by disparaging the rest of the horse world. They are not helping improve horse training and horse welfare as much as they are adding to the perception that there is a lot wrong with horse training. This is simply not true. We encourage everyone to have a discussion with these professionals and to bring the potential damage they are doing to the entire industry to their attention.
- Support horse education whenever and wherever you can. Volunteer for your 4H horse program or help a new horse owner learn the ropes.
- Remember that people can still work as a united front and not agree on every issue. Keep the end goal in mind.

## Together Our Voices Are Strong

The horse industry has an overall economic impact of 102 billion dollars per year and employs 1.75 million people. With 9.2 million horses in the US and 4.6 million citizens involved in the horse industry, we make up a large and influential group.

We must not waste opportunities to work together to defend our right and freedom to own, raise, train, use, show, and enjoy horses in our chosen disciplines. As an industry, we should be showing a united front to protect ourselves and the true welfare of these animals we hold so dearly. Horse owners, association boards, members, competitors, and horse lovers, in general, need to put aside differences and work together to address issues with horse welfare if they arise. We must also work together to **exclude** animal extremist organizations from our community.

If people within the horse industry do not publicly support each other, encourage improvements in welfare as needed, and educate interested parties, animal extremist groups will gladly do it for us. In fact, they are already fast at work spreading misinformation about horses and their owners and trainers. It is long past time to think of the horse world as a single community. The animal extremist narrative about the horse industry is not our real story—it is a carefully orchestrated agenda designed to destroy us. We cannot add fuel to their fire by falling prey to the social media mob mentality. Though we will never agree on everything, we need to stop, think, and remember, we are more alike than we are different. From trail and ranch horses to Triple Crown winners to NCHA World Champs there is common ground and it's called....a horse.

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