

Road Rage

Debate heats up over proposed roadster rule change

By Sadie Fowler

A debate over the future of the Road Horse division continues to split opinions among the show horse community as people express their voices regarding speed, safety and even spectators who come to watch the roadsters show.

A recently proposed rule change to the division that would close the Road Horse classes at Saddlebred/Hackney/Roadster shows to Standardbreds and registered half-Standardbreds prompted the debate, where opponents of the rule change also question due process by leaders within the American Road Horse and Pony Association who approved it.

Debate over whether the division should be inclusive to only Standardbreds and half Standardbreds further heated up following a post on social media earlier this month by well-known trainer, Melissa Moore, which received a swarm of attention from both sides of the argument.

"I will say there's a tremendous amount of false statements on social media and that's a shame," said Rick Adams of the ARHPA, officially deferring comments on behalf of the organization be made by James Nichols. "A large number of people commenting don't even have road horses. It's disheartening to see professional horse trainers using social media (as a platform) like this."

"The rule proposal is for horses showing in the roadster division to be Standardbred or at least half-Standardbred and that includes Dutch Harness Horses and other breeds," said Nichols. "Horses that are shown through the 2019 season are grandfathered in."

"The intent of this rule proposal is to keep integrity of the division for the Standardbred type as it is stated in the specs."

Moore's post outlined her support of a division she believes should remain inclusive to multiple breeds, mainly the Dutch Harness Horse and Morgan, in order to remain healthy and alive. The post, which she says was a last-ditch effort to bring awareness to the topic that was being ignored by some road horse industry elites calling the shots, also suggested the decision to push the rule forward was not backed by the majority of the show horse industry, including general membership of the ARHPA.

"The proposed rule is being pushed forward by ARHPA as an extraordinary rule change and we as the membership are not allowed to comment on the rule on the USEF website," Moore's original post on Facebook states. "... The general membership is against this rule but is being railroaded by a handful of individuals."

The term "extraordinary" is a way of closing the rule out from a general membership vote. The ARHPA board is only able use this term and bypass general membership if they deem the issue a safety concern.

The rule is currently up on the USEF website and allows for members of the organization to post comments, which go to staff members of the USEF (not board members). The USEF did not respond to Saddle Horse Report's request for comment about further details,

including whether or not comments were at any time deliberately not allowed.

The USEF is the organization that will be responsible for putting the rule change into effect. Jim Lowry, a trainer with a long-history across various different breeds including Morgans and Saddlebreds, explained that the USEF normally makes its decisions based on board recommendations. Thus, in this case, it is likely they'd approve the ARHPA's recommendation to make the rule change unless there is enough outcry that would prompt further discussion on the topic among at the USEF meeting. Lowry said horse show enthusiasts need to let their opinions — no matter what side of the fence it's on — be known by contacting their USEF committee representatives.

THE ISSUE

Looking further into the issue at hand, opponents of the rule change sight many reasons for wanting to keep the division open to all breeds, mainly that doing so makes shows more exciting and competitive, therefore driving both entries to the division and the number of spectators who come to watch it.

"There is a renewed interest in the division and people who have never had a roadster are buying them," states Moore, in the post. "The classes are better than ever. People actually go to the ring to watch the classes rather than go to the bathroom because a one-horse class is coming in the ring."

Those in support of the rule change disagree, saying that numbers at larger and more prestigious shows are not indicative of that point.

"Some of the (smaller) shows are getting more numbers but, other than in the (roadster) under saddle class, at shows like Louisville it's not enough to make a difference," said Raymond Shively, a long-time road horse enthusiast who is in favor of the rule change.

Looking back, there have been a couple other times over the course of history that, to some degree, mirror today's debate. When the division initially began, it was an open division, similar to the hunter/jumper division. In other words, any breed with speed could enter in any given roadster class, such as roadster to bike, roadster to wagon and roadster under saddle, for both amateurs and professionals.

By nature, the division became a spotlight for the Standardbred breed, where many Saddlebred trainers, like Shively, developed a secondary passion for the Standardbred. Shively acquired his first good road horse, a Standardbred, in the 1960s and has loved the division ever since.

"I just like the breed, period," Shively said. "They are such a nice breed of horses and I like their speed at a trot."

Moore is also a fan of the Standardbred, and says her opinions are formed out of her desire for the division in general to flourish.

"It's not about me liking one horse over another," said Moore, in a phone interview that followed up on the Facebook post and issue at hand. "I like the division ... The point is that this was always an open division so why are we now supporting the Standardbred instead of the show horse? I ask that question all the time. No one can beat a good Standardbred but they are few and far between so keeping it open brings the excitement and competition to the ring and that's what people want."

While it started as an open division that was, simply by nature, dominated by Standardbreds, over time other breeds trickled into the roadster division and some even had their chance to shine. This was especially evident in the north, where Morgans have long been the breed of choice for many trainers and owners.

It wasn't uncommon to see a great Morgan enter the ring to race against the Standardbreds in a really exciting class, and it didn't have to be the UPHA Spring Premiere. Since the rules didn't specify otherwise, any breed could show at larger Saddlebred shows, even Louisville, and there have been a few greats over the years.

Morgans who won at Louisville include the great Dr. J and HVK Derigueur as well as twice reserve world's champion Flairetation. There have also been several Saddlebreds and half-Saddlebreds star in the roadster division over the years.

In 2003, the rules were tightened up to make the division exclusive to Standardbreds and it remained this way until 2014, when the rule book was again changed to re-open the division and nullify the rule from 2003. (Coincidentally, some shows, especially those in the north that cater to many Morgans, got around the rule from 2003 to 2014 by holding "opportunity" classes. See more about opportunity classes at a further point in this story.)

Some say the decision to open the division back up in 2014 was prompted by dwindling numbers in the roadster division due to lack of enough Standardbreds fitting the bill for the Saddlebred enthusiast. By 2015, classes in the roadster division began increasing in size as other breeds once again began sharing the stage with the famed Standardbreds that were born to race. Around the same time, shows also began seeing the emergence of the Dutch Harness Horse, and many trainers have since invested in this breed for the division as a preference over the classic Standardbred.

According to records from the Highpoint Report (saddlehorsereport.com), there were 107 horses to compete for points in the open roadster to bike division in 2013. Two years later, that number grew to 110, with seven of the 110 being registered as Dutch Harness Horses. Another two years later, in 2017, 113 horses competed in the same division with a dozen of them being designated as Dutch.

This emergence of the Dutch Harness Horse has further heightened the debate about what the division calls for in terms of speed and style.

"We compete in a road horse division but we are not racing in the ring," Moore said. "It's about show, what looks good and goes fast with style and form."

So, the question becomes, how important is speed in a road horse class at our traditional Saddlebred/Hackney Roadster show?

Shively said the speed is a major factor of this division, which requires three distinct gaits. He said it's challenging enough with Standardbreds in the ring, but when you factor in other breeds that are not able to go as fast, it becomes dangerous.

"They are more in the way than anything," he said. "I showed at the Mane Event show last week and there were five in the class and three or four of them were Dutch Harness Horses. They can't keep up."

"I like to show on the rail and I can't do that because they're on the rail and don't go anyplace ... the Dutch horses can't go fast. They can set up but when they try to go on they get to skipping behind and running to keep up with a Standardbred and they can't do it ... They look pretty but they can't go anyplace. They don't belong in that class."

WHAT DOES THE ARHPA SAY?

According to the ARHPA website, "the objects and purpose of the American Road Horse and Pony Association shall be to:

- Promote the training and exhibiting of the "Road Horse" and to promote other activities and events of any nature to create enthusiasm, use, pleasure, and interest in "Road Horses."
- To encourage and educate all persons interested in "Road Horses."
- To promote higher standards of showmanship and sportsmanship through better communication with those interested in "Road Horses."
- To cooperate with and assist horse show managers and organizations who promote horse shows in the selection and spacing of classes of "Road Horses" and to encourage exhibitors and owners to show their horses, and to do all things necessary to further the development and quality of "Road Horses."

SAFETY CONCERNS

No matter what side of the debate you're on, another common word we're hearing connected to the rule change debate has been "safety" — but it's now to the point where both opponents and proponents of the rule change are saying the opposing view is the one that's unsafe.

When explaining his opinion about other breeds not being able to keep up with the good Standardbreds, Shively said he is concerned about safety.

"They (other breeds) get in the way and it's getting a little dangerous," he said. "When they say 'turn on' they can't go anywhere. Something is going to happen and it's going to be a wreck."

Others offer a different perspective.

Lowry said if it's a good Standardbred, the trainer ought to be able to steer them around slower horses, and if they can't, it's the Standardbred that is the 'unsafe' horse.

Referencing herself as an example, Moore also said non-Standardbred horses can attract newcomers to the breed who might not be able to find a good Standardbred or who might not feel safe going as fast as a good Standardbred might go.

Several years ago, Moore said she had vowed to never show a Standardbred again after she nearly had an accident in the show ring. Eventually, she teamed up with a Dutch Harness Horse and got her confidence back to a point where she is no longer personally opposed to showing a good Standardbred.

"When I got my Dutch Harness Horse, Indian Outlaw, he was a gentle giant," she said. "Dutch Harness Horses are true road horses, born to pull buggies. Before I got him, I had forgotten how fun the division was, so if anything, the Dutch Harness Horse is encouraging people to compete in this division."

There is a sector in the horse community that have been attracted to shows as a result of their love for the Dutch Harness Horse, so many would argue taking them out of this division will harm the industry as a whole.

DOES MAJORITY RULE?

At the end of the day, the question remains as to what, at the core of the division's standards, is the roadster division about — speed, speed with form, or some combination of both? Can shows survive without a division that's open? Is it fair to close it up?

Only the authors who write the rule book and those that approve it can answer those questions, however Moore's Facebook post brought up another question that goes beyond all that, and it's received equally as much question as the issue itself. Moore, and many people who have commented on her post, suggest the rule change is not the opinion of the majority of ARHPA general membership.

Moore said the ARHPA did not present the topic to its general membership in a timely or detailed manner prior to the annual meeting, which, combined with the use of the term "extraordinary," is the only reason the rule passed.

"That's why there were 50 people in the room instead of 350," she said, adding that ballots that were supposed to be sent out to general membership never were sent. Moore further stated that rules must be sent to the USEF by Sept. 1 and that the president of ARHPA had done this without going through due process.

When asked about this, Shively said the topic was voted on at the association's meeting at Louisville, where it passed. It was further voted on by the Association's board of about eight people, where it passed unanimously.

"Then we had a USET committee meeting and I think it passed 9-2 in favor of having at least half Standardbreds," he said. "We are not ruling them out. If they have a half Dutch mare they want to breed to a Standardbred, for example, it would be eligible."

Going forward, it's clear that the devil's in the details and there are many to flesh out before this storm will level out.

Shively says he is driven to support the rule change as a result of his love of the road horse, his desire to save the integrity of the breed, as well as his hope to clarify the key components of the division.

He said with the Dutch influx in the division, a division he says calls for a "Standardbred type," without the rule change judges would have to be better educated about what they're judging.

"(The division) calls for a Standardbred or a Standardbred type," he said. "There's nothing about them (Dutch Harness Horse) that's Standardbred type."

THE GRANDFATHER CLAUSE

Under the current proposal, the rule change has a clause in it that would allow horses shown by Dec. 1, 2019 to be grandfathered into the new rule.

Moore says this still doesn't cover those who have invested or bred mares, before knowing about the rule, without complicated and expensive DNA testing.

Shively believes the clause is fair, further adding that other breeds have their own shows designated exclusively for them. Additionally, he points to the opportunity class, which any show can offer at their discretion to allow other breeds to show should they want their show's roadster class to be one that's open.

"And there's nothing wrong with that class — I'm all for it," Shively said. "But when you have an open road horse class that's what it should be."

WHAT YOU CAN DO?

Regardless of one's opinion, members of the USEF can let their voices about the road horse debate be heard by contacting their representatives prior to the USEF meeting, which will determine the fate of the road horse division. Representatives are then responsible for communicating the voice of their constituency.

The following names, provided by Lowry, are people concerned citizens may contact prior to the USEF meeting:

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