

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

with Peter and Lori Conway

In the last 20 years, the Arabian horse industry has seen:

- Over 60% decline in membership
- Over 72% decline in registered Arabians and Half-Arabians
- Decline in the number of Class A shows
- Decline in Regional Championship Show participation

If any of the above startles you, you're not alone. In the past two decades, as the number of horses in the U.S. has remained relatively stable, the Arabian horse industry has been on the losing team. AHT recently sat down with Peter and Lori Conway, long-time breeders, dedicated volunteers and leaders in the Arabian horse community. Their take? The Arabian horse community is in a precarious position and it's time for everyone to take action.

The Conways hosted a forum discussion with approximately 60 industry leaders at their Ocala farm in November 2023, which led to a consensus that now is the time for change. Attendees included AHA Board members, the Executive Director, a Past President, show managers, farm owners, breeders and trainers. The questions asked were in response to the startling statistics above. How do we turn around our Arabian horse breed? How do we reverse the dangerous downward trends within our industry? And most importantly, what can we do to make our organization more effective?

The group was challenged to be positive and forward focused. Here are some of their findings, as shared by Peter and Lori.

What is the state of the industry and why?

Precarious. The numbers above should alarm any Arabian horse enthusiast. As identified by the group, although many dedicated people have tried various initiatives over the past 20 years, those initiatives have failed to reverse the declining numbers. The problem, as this group identified, is that the Arabian Horse Association's (AHA) primary mission, promoting the Arabian horse, has been hindered by an outdated, antiquated and cumbersome organizational structure with a board that is far too large for the size of the organization. The result has been a steady decline in membership, registrations and show participation.

As identified by this group, and two consulting organizations (one hired in 2003 and one in 2007) the current board structure is unsustainable. Here's why:

- Organization is unable to react effectively in today's fast-paced, rapidly changing business environment. The end result: business challenges are not addressed in a timely manner, resulting in further deteriorating conditions.
- Outdated and ineffective governance structure. The end result: by continuing to assign board members in the current manner (regional directors, Trust appointees, etc.) we may not have the most qualified businesspeople making decisions to move the business of AHA forward.
- Lack of effective long-term strategic planning. The end result: although the decline was identified nearly two decades ago, we continue to spiral downwards instead of making progress.

What needs to be done?

This group, with the support of other Arabian enthusiasts, is recommending the following changes for consideration:

Restructure the Governance of AHA

As recommended by both consulting firms, the governance structure of AHA needs to be changed. Here are some specifics that are being brought forth:

- Reduce the size of the Board to a more manageable size (AHA currently has a board comprised of 29 people, compare that to organizations far larger to understand the disparity). Make the board directly accountable to membership.

"Greatness is not in where we stand but in what direction we are moving. We must sail, sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it – but sail we must and not drift, nor lie at anchor." ~ Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

- Amend current requirement that Board members be a designated representative from a particular region of the country. Instead, create a Board based on a set of defined qualifications for executive level Board members. Ideally, Board members should have both the business experience and a deep understanding of the Arabian horse community.
- Empower Regional Directors to appoint a portion of the Board.
- Enable the delegation to elect a majority of the Board members.

Besides changing the governance structure, which the group feels is critical to moving forward, other recommendations include:

- Developing long-term strategies to spur growth in the Arabian horse industry.
- Actively seeking input from membership to help spark excitement and engagement.
- Modernizing operational tools and adopting a business-like approach to improve efficiency and member experience.

What should individuals who are reading this article right now do?

Every person can make a difference and the first thing Peter asks is for people to join the team. Sign up to receive news, meeting announcements and updates from the Arabian Horse Promotional Fund at their website, <https://arabianhorsepromotionalfund.com/>. The group's goal is to "promote the Arabian horse to people beyond its existing community through a variety of different efforts introducing, educating and attracting people to the breed." Led by board members Becky Nash, Lisa Blackstone, Mary Trowbridge and Peter Conway, the group is committed to helping facilitate change to the Association's structure. Besides email updates, they plan to host monthly Zoom calls to keep members informed and engaged. Their goal: achieve the 2/3 majority needed to change the association structure during the 2024 convention.

Interested?

Watch for details about upcoming calls and read the notes from the meeting, which can be found on the site as well.

"It's not our horses, we know that," says Peter. "And it's not our people. It's the structure of the governing organization and we can change that."

What is the Arabian Horse Promotional Fund?

Founded in 2018, the Arabian Horse Promotional Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the Arabian horse to people beyond its existing community through events to introduce, educate and attract people to Arabian horses. Funded solely by donations, some of their initiatives are:

~ Keystone Arabian Horse Experience Charity Event

Keystone classes are held during the AHAF Holiday Festival Show with funds from the classes benefitting the Black Stallion Reading Project and Horses & Heroes of Marion County.

~ Arabian Horse Riding Academy

This initiative is a youth program that allows children to develop equestrian skills at their own pace and offers grant and work programs for families to fulfill their dreams of riding an Arabian horse.

~ Experience Arabian Horses Magazine

This free quarterly publication is designed to help introduce new people to the breed by showcasing the versatility and beauty of the Arabian horse.

For more news about the Arabian Horse Promotional Fund, other ongoing initiatives and how you can be involved, visit <https://arabianhorsepromotionalfund.com/>.