

Lined up

Horse owners are turning to permanent cosmetics to protect equine eyes from King Sol's rays

Article and Photography by REBECCA OVERTON

Karen Steele was elated when she saw an advertisement at the 1995 World Championship Paint Horse Show in Reno, Nevada. A certified tattoo artist who lives in Arizona, Steele wanted a way to protect her horses' eyes from the searing sun.

Since she began breeding Paints in 1980 in Waddell, an agricultural community west of Phoenix, Steele had noticed how the eyes of some of her bald-faced horses watered excessively. The intense sun for which the state is famous burned the pink skin around their eyes, making them swollen and red.

The possibility of skin cancer, or squamous cell carcinoma, also concerned Steele, so the ad for lining a horse's eyes with permanent ink to deflect the sun's rays caught her attention.

Although she taught classes on how to apply permanent cosmetics to people, Steele had never tried the procedure on horses.

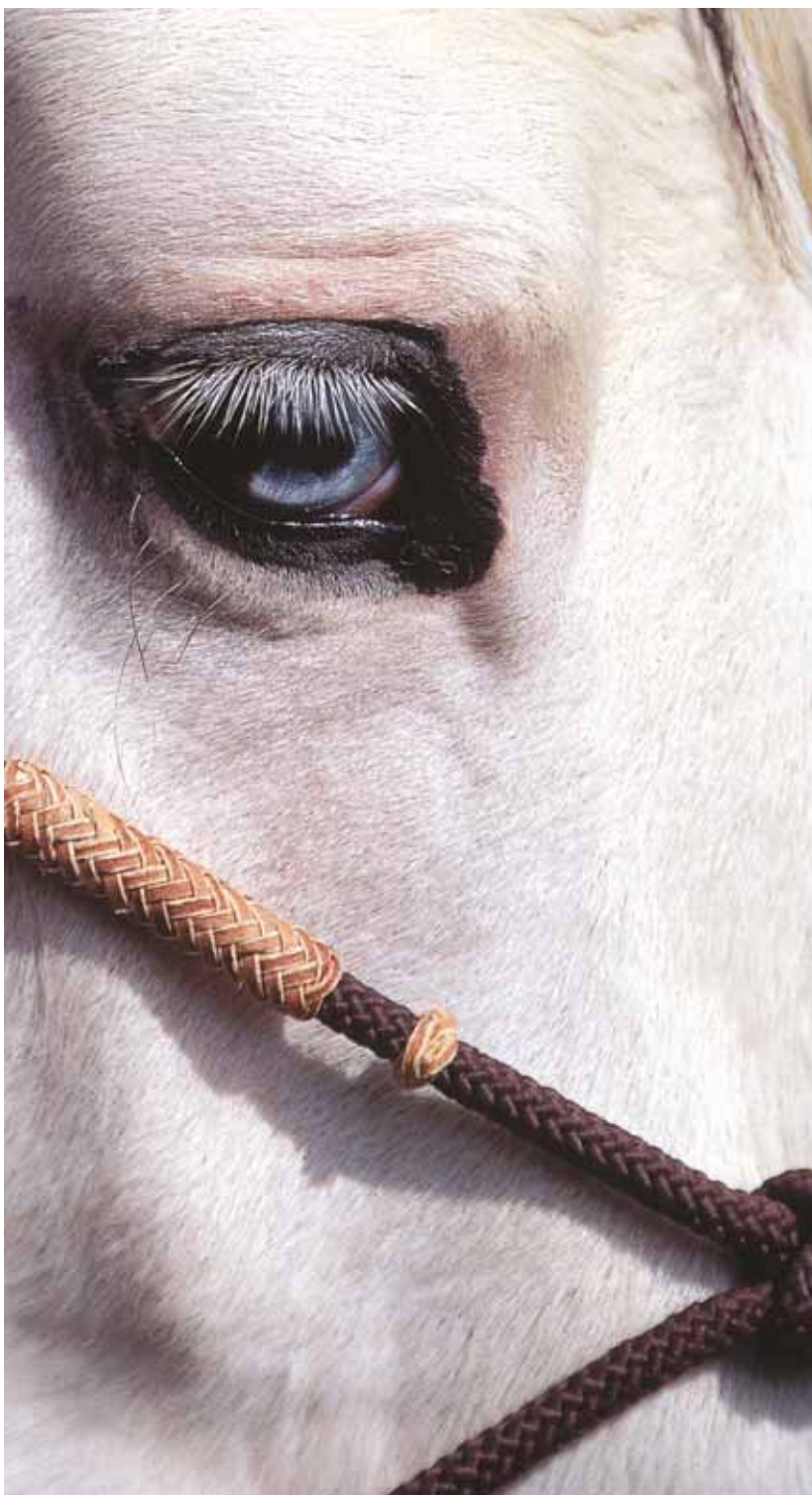
"But when I saw the flier, I was so excited," she recalled. "I told my husband, 'I can do this!'"

After finding a veterinarian who agreed to anesthetize a horse for her, Steele tattooed permanent liner around its eyes. After the tattoo healed, the excessive watering stopped.

Document it

Whether it is called permanent cosmetics, dermapigmentation or tattooing, it's still the same process. The procedure involves puncturing the skin with needles, inserting pigment and letting the skin heal.

The American Paint Horse Association allows tattooing around the eyes of a registered Paint Horse if its owners believe it will help protect the animal's vision.



Is it real? When Mother Nature doesn't line a horse's eye, permanent cosmetics can do it.



At work: Karen Steele (right) lines the eye of Catch My Tailwind, a young Paint filly whose eye had been watering excessively. Steele's daughter, Amber Cates, assists.

"It is done mainly in the Southern states, where you have a lot of heat and sun," said Barbara Scheffler, APHA director of field services.

The first request to APHA to allow eyelining came in the early 1980s from a horse owner in the Bahamas.

"The owner, who was trying to raise black-and-white tobianos, had a horse who was throwing tovero colts," Scheffler recalled.

"He had had a lot of trouble with the colts' eyes tearing and watering. After that, we decided to allow eyelining for the health and welfare of the animals."

APHA requires that the change be documented on a horse's registration papers.

"We ask owners to submit photographs after the tattooing has been completed so we can record it on the horse's registration certificate," continued Scheffler.

"This can be particularly important at a competition like the World Show, where we positively identify every horse. If someone brings a horse who doesn't match

its certificate, we automatically hold the animal until its identity can be verified."

The association has received calls from members whose veterinarians have suggested the procedure to them.

The sun can definitely cause a chronic irritation to the eyes of light-skinned horses.

As with any chronic irritation, the body is going to react to it in some way.

—Dr. Scott Houser

"We get calls mainly from Florida, Arizona and California," Scheffler said.

"We don't refer members to specific veterinarians. If someone wants to have their horse's eyes lined permanently, we tell them to

ask their veterinarians to recommend someone."

Some horse owners see eyelining as simply a way to improve their animal's appearance, Scheffler conceded.

"Some people believe it makes a horse look more pleasing, especially if it has a white face and dark eyes," she said.

The procedure falls under Regulation 121 on page 58 of the APHA's *2000 Official Rule Book*.

"We handle it the same way we handle scars and brands," Scheffler said.

Solar side effects

Dr. Scott Houser was a little leery when Steele first asked him to anesthetize a horse so she could eyeline it.

"I had heard of tattooing around a horse's eyes, but I had never played a part in the procedure," the equine veterinarian from Litchfield Park, Arizona, said.

Houser has practiced veterinary medicine for 17 years in the Phoenix area. A graduate of Colorado

State University, he operates a mobile equine unit.

After he saw the results of the procedure, he believes it works.

“The main advantage of eyelining is that it reduces eye irritation,” he explained. “If you have a horse whose eyes are constantly tearing, you’re going to have fly problems, which also increases the chances of infection.”

Houser sees three to five cases of squamous cell carcinoma in equines annually. The cancer usually occurs in the eye and genital regions in horses because skin there contains less pigment, so it absorbs more ultraviolet rays from the sun.

The cancer begins as a wart-like growth or flat ulcer with a yellow, infected-looking base. As it grows, it becomes firm, nodular and fleshy, and bleeds easily.

“We are able to treat some squamous cell carcinomas with hyperthermia (heat) or cancer drugs,” said Houser. “Other treatments include radiation and cryosurgery, in which cancerous tissues are frozen. In some cases, you have to remove the eye.

“Sometimes you’ll see cases in which a horse gets cancer in the eye, not just on the eyelid. At other times, you’ll see it on the nictitating membrane, or third eyelid, which you cannot normally see.”

If left untreated, carcinomas can spread into the lymph nodes and finally the brain, which is fatal. Not surprisingly, the disease occurs in cattle as well.

“The sun can definitely cause a chronic irritation to the eyes of light-skinned horses,” said Houser. “As with any chronic irritation, the body is going to react to it in some way.

“Animals in the Southwest are particularly vulnerable. We try to protect horses’ eyes with fly masks, but tattooing helps more.”

When a horse is tattooed around its eyes, the dark dye helps deflect the sun from the eyes, similar to the way eye black works for football players.



On a mission: Karen Steele (top) used permanent cosmetics to protect the eyes of her 3-year-old tovero mare, Oh Retro Rachel. The certified tattoo artist has bred Paint Horses for 20 years.

As a precaution: Dr. Scott Houser (middle) applies antibacterial ointment to the eye of Catch My Tailwind, an overo filly, before the anesthetic takes effect.

Sun damage: This burro’s eye (right) reveals the chronic irritation that can result from prolonged exposure to strong sunlight.





Before and after: Catch My Tailwind was born with a right eye that was partly lined (top). White-faced Paints are particularly susceptible to sunburn. (Bottom) Catch My Tailwind's eye after it was tattooed.

"You also don't get the intensity of ultraviolet radiation on the light skin around the eyes," Houser said.

During the last 20 or 30 years, veterinarians have used tattoos to

protect collie-type dogs, which have pink noses, from sunburn. The dye, like that used to eyeliner horses, may eventually fade.

Still, some of the benefits remain.

"Even when the tattooing grays out, the watering in a horse's eye slows down and the horse isn't as irritated by the sun," Houser said.

"There is less irritation, which makes the horse more comfortable."

White-faced horses whose eyes are lined naturally got a gift from Mother Nature.

How it's done

Tattooing is a form of art, Steele maintains. It is not a science.

"There is no guarantee," she said. "It's a pretty simple process, but you have to be careful. You want to avoid keloid, or scar tissue.

"The key to successful tattooing is sterilization and watching for infection."

Horses who are allergic to anesthesia or anti-bacterial agents used to clean the area and fight infection are poor candidates for the process.

"If you have a horse that is hypersensitive to a lot of drugs, there is a good chance it would react negatively to tattooing," Houser said.

Steele was certified in 1990. Later she joined the Permanent Makeup Society, a national organization that represents the tattoo industry. Laws that regulate tattoo artists are few and vary from state to state.

Steele's daughter, Amber Cates, a certified nurse's assistant, helps her. Steele works with several veterinarians, who anesthetize the animal before she goes to work.

First, the vet examines the horse and gives it a sedative. After applying anti-bacterial ointment to its eyes, he anesthetizes the animal, according to its weight.

Steele uses an autoclave to sterilize the tattoo needles and implements. She uses the needles only once.

She inserts the needles into a coil tattoo gun, an instrument that resembles a fountain pen with a motor. The gun has a well, which she fills with nontoxic, black tattoo ink.

After the animal is asleep, Steele cleans the area around its eye and applies anti-bacterial ointment. Then, while her daughter holds the

skin around the eye taut, like a canvas, Steele begins to work.

Pushing the needle into the skin, she etches the ink into it, using a circular motion. Afterward, Cates applies pressure to the tattoo with gauze so the dye won't come out.

Steele applies a second layer of pigment with a roller ball to help ensure the tattoo will be as dark as possible.

"I do this as a precautionary measure to keep the tattoo from lightening," she explained. "The roll-on tattoo ink is absorbed into the skin, where it can't be washed away by tears.

"You don't have to do two layers on people, but you do with horses because their skin and hair are tougher."

After the second layer of pigment dries, Steele covers the tattoo with a layer of ointment and waits for the horse to regain consciousness. The entire process, from the time the horse is anesthetized, takes 15 to 20 minutes at most.

After the fact

The eye area must be kept clean and fly masks used for five days after the tattooing. Initially, the area will be a little pink and puffy. Between two and seven days afterward, a light scab will appear, then fall off.

After approximately two weeks, the tattoo will be completely healed. If the color lightens too much afterward, Steele reapplies the tattoo for free if the client pays for the vet's examination and anesthetic.

Although she uses the most advanced tattoo pigment, Steele can't guarantee how long the ink will stay dark.

She charges approximately \$200 to eyeliner one eye. The veterinarian bill varies among practitioners.

The cost of tattooing both eyes and the accompanying vet bill can range according to the state and tattoo artist. For example, it can total \$1,200 in California.

Steele stresses the importance of knowing a horse's medical history and that of its family before tattooing the animal. Out of 27



Taking care: Minerva, a numbing agent that controls swelling and bleeding, is applied to the eye before it is lined.



All around: A sanitized brush is used to ensure pigment completely encircles the eye.



All done: Steele and Cates wait for the filly to wake up. She seemed to have no recollection of the procedure and wasn't sensitive to grooming, said owner Pam Padilla.

horses she has eyelined, the only serious problem she encountered was with a stallion. The horse owner didn't tell Steele the animal's sire had died while it was anesthetized until she was almost finished with the procedure.

"It was horrible," Steele recalled. "We could hardly pull him out of the anesthesia."

Steele requires her clients to sign a contract before she begins.

"Make sure you read a contract carefully," she cautioned. "Ask questions about anything you don't understand. If you don't like the answers you get or the contract, find someone else."

Eyes wide open

Pam Padilla has sought Steele's services twice for Catch My Tailwind, her yearling filly. The bay overo's left eye was already lined naturally, but "Buffy" had chronic watering and squinting in her right eye, which was unlined.

A longtime Arizona resident, Padilla began raising Quarter Horses in 1980. She started breeding Paints in 1993.

Buffy is owned by Pam and her husband, John. The couple own Desert Haven Ranch in Goodyear, Arizona, where they have lived since 1996.

Buffy's eye worried Pam because she knew three people in Arizona whose horses had died after developing squamous cell carcinomas.

After one of her friends, whose colt had been eyelined successfully in California, told her about the process, Padilla talked with Houser, who referred her to Steele.

Steele lined Buffy's right eye last December, and the watering stopped.

"Within days after her eye was tattooed, the tearing ended," Padilla said.

"It was amazing to see the difference. Both eyes were much more open."

Buffy had no reaction to the process, her owner said.

"I thought she might be a little fussy at first when I groomed

What to look for

If you are thinking about having your horse's eyes lined, consider the following suggestions from equine veterinarian Dr. Scott Houser and Karen Steele, a certified tattoo artist:

- Make sure a veterinarian is in attendance to anesthetize your horse.
 - Find someone who uses a human-quality tattoo machine to line your horse's eyes.
- "The tattoo machines veterinarians use are usually very coarse and rough," said Houser. "You want a machine that produces lines that are more delicate and refined."
- Find someone who is experienced with a human tattoo gun, i.e., someone who is knowledgeable about tattooing humans.

"It only follows, if you want someone who is familiar with a human tattoo machine, you want someone who is experienced with that equipment," Houser said.

- Provide a complete medical history of your horse and its pedigree to the tattoo artist and veterinarian. If the animal's sire or dam suffered complications from anesthesia or drugs, your horse may, too.

In addition, if a horse is sensitive to a variety of substances, there is a good chance it will react negatively to permanent cosmetics.

around her eyes, but she seems to have no recollection of the tattooing," said Padilla.

After the first tattoo lightened, Steele reapplied it five months later. "I see it as a medical benefit," said Padilla, who worked at a small-animal clinic.

"Although it makes Buffy look prettier, it made her more comfortable, which is the best part to me."

Not just for looks

Veteran Paint Horse breeder Fred Tabor sought the services of a permanent cosmetician because of excessive watering and tumors in some of his horses' eyes.

A successful halter horse breeder in Moorpark, California, Tabor raises Paints. After he had five



A human-quality tattoo machine helps to ensure the lines drawn around a horse's eye will be fine and delicate.

- A horse may injure itself when the anesthetic becomes effective. "Because a horse is so heavy, it might hurt itself when it goes down," Houser explained. "It could have a rocky recovery."

"Younger, lighter horses seem to recover more quickly."

- Horses with a serious eye infection or sunburn should not be tattooed. Wait until their condition has healed before you have their eyes lined.

- Read a tattoo contract carefully and ask questions.

"If you don't get the answers you want, find someone else," Steele said.

- When choosing a tattoo artist, find someone with experience and certification. Ask your veterinarian for recommendations.

The Permanent Makeup Society certifies tattoo artists, but the industry is loosely regulated from state to state. Some states have no regulations.

tumors removed from inside some of his horses' eyelids, he had the area around their eyes tattooed.

"Their eyes were watering too much," Tabor noted.

"Some people want to have it done for aesthetics, but I don't think that is necessary. I don't think horses with white around the eyes are displeasing to the general public anymore."

Steele is convinced tattooing benefits the health of horses, so she charges less than some of her colleagues.

"These horses need help," she said. "The main thing is to make it affordable."

She also gets a certain satisfaction as an artist when a task is finished.

"Horses are wearing my artwork," Steele said. 🐾