

Back to the horse ranch



Jury finds brothers not guilty

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Three brothers who breed Arabian horses said their name has been cleared after a jury found them not guilty Monday night of mistreating their herd.

"We never doubted the outcome since day one," said Mustafa Sabankaya said. "We knew that all we would have to do is fight back."

The local SPCA accused Sabankaya and his brothers, Nezih and Semih, of under feeding and mistreating their horses. Last October, the SPCA obtained a search warrant, raided the brothers' 300-acre Bonny Doon ranch and seized 44 horses.

The Sabankayas denounced the way the SPCA handled the situation, saying that not only were they innocent but that the SPCA officers didn't know much about horses.

"I asked the jury to deliver a ringing slap to the ears of the SPCA and I think we did," said

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Mustafa Sabankaya holds 'S.S. Liberty,' born Monday as a jury cleared Sabankaya and his brothers of horse cruelty charges.

Horses

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Madeleine Boriss, a Sabankaya defense attorney. "I hope the SPCA learned the right way to go about these things."

After nearly two weeks of often contradictory testimony, it took the jury about seven hours to reach its decision. It was a difficult choice for some.

Jury foreman Richard Schaffer said it was clear in his mind that the Sabankayas had no criminal intent in the way they managed the herd.

"We would have liked to have seen better care for the animals we saw," Schaffer said. "But there was no doubt in my mind (as to the Sabankayas' innocence) as soon we went into the chambers. Some people had more difficulty, which is why we took so long."

The seized animals were from a herd of young and scruffy horses worth relatively little money. The horses were far less impressive than the Sabankayas' pampered show and breeding horses which are worth hundreds of thousands of dollars each.

Assistant District Attorney Kristen Long said the SPCA did a good job on the case and that she supported its actions.

"All of our witnesses told us the horses were abused," Long said. "The SPCA was very professional throughout (the case) and a good organization to work with."

The price of justice was not cheap for the Sabankayas who said that their name and reputation was on line.

"We were in the position to call it off and plead guilty to one charge and pay \$500," Mustafa said. "Now we have spent into six figures (in legal fees) just to say

'I'll die before I would accept guilt.'

— Mustafa Sabankaya,
horse breeder

I'm not guilty. I was not going to be blackmailed into saying I was guilty. I'll die before I would accept guilt."

The Sabankayas are a proud family of horse breeders who emigrated to the United States from Istanbul, Turkey about 20 years ago. They are nationally known for their Arabian horses and raise several hundred head on two leased ranches in Bonny Doon.

"We love it here," Mustafa said. "Bonny Doon in the next 10 to 20 years will become known as the best place for Arabian horses in the world."

The Sabankayas said they bear no ill will toward the SPCA and were ready to accept whatever judgment the jury returned with. The verdict, they said, was a vindication of the U.S. justice system.

The Sabankayas also took it as a good omen that a foal was born on the ranch within about five minutes of when the jury returned with its verdict. The foal was named, S.S. Liberty, in honor of the Sabankayas' victory.

As for the seized horses, which were returned to the Sabankayas months after they were confiscated, they continue to romp around their pasture.

"The horses' life is as usual," Mustafa said.