

Presentation

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What's in it for the horse?

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We've been using horses for thousands of years and many of the things we do to them have changed very little over that time.

But in Western civilisation, at least outside of Amish communities, mechanisation has almost completely taken over the role of the horse as a working animal. We now use horses predominantly for recreation, competition or performing purposes.

Horses are the basis of a multi-billion dollar industry. In Australia, their use in racing alone generates around 4 billion dollars a year and is inextricably linked with gambling and through taxation revenue to government funding. What other sport commands its own Ministerial portfolio? Even here in Australia there isn't even a Minister for Cricket.

But ultimately, with the possible exception of police work, the things we make horses do; racing, eventing, pony club, show jumping, trail riding, polocrosse, rodeo, endurance riding, reining and driving... are all carried out for the same reason.

Horse riding is not a productive, educational, scientific, or useful activity. It is something people do, directly or indirectly, for entertainment, pleasure, or FUN.

There are some obvious benefits to horses from their domestication and use by humans: the provision of food and shelter, protection from predators, disease prevention and care during illness and injury.

But there is little evidence that horses benefit in any other significant way from our use of them, despite what we might like to think in our more romantic moments.

Doing something for pleasure or fun is not an inherently bad thing, but it doesn't provide much moral justification for an activity. On a scale of 1-5 it scores a lot lower than finding a cure for cancer.

That wouldn't matter, if it wasn't for the fact that the horse has to share the experience. So if that experience is not a good one, it raises the question of whether we should be making them do it at all.

Public concern over the use of horses often focuses on their performance in competitive events, especially when there is a catastrophe when horses are injured, die or have to be killed in front of an audience.

The most topical example of this here in Australia is jumps racing.

There are only two states in Australia which still allow jumps racing.

The season in Victoria starts on the first of March. By the beginning of May this year, five horses were dead: four at race meetings and one during a trial race. This is equivalent to 1 death every 5 races.

Jumps racing has an average of 1 death every 140 starters, compared to 1 every 3500 starters in flat racing.

The public outcry over these recent deaths was enormous – fuelled by pictures of the horses as they fell. As a result, Jumps racing was suspended on the 7th of May.

But it resumed again less than two weeks later with some minor changes to the layout of fences including removal of the 'last' jump.

On June 20th another horse stumbled at the (new) last jump and was killed on the track.

The public was reassured that this was not a preventable death, as it was caused by an error by the horse. Silly horse – apparently horses are very accident prone. Especially, it seems, when you make them run at 60 km/hour over fences.

We were also reassured that the industry **puts horse welfare first** and, in the words of trainer David Hayes "*the people really hurting when they die are the participants*"...

Death as an end-point is the most extreme example of 'what is in it for the horse' when it comes to equitation. But there are other, non-lethal, activities that also attract public concern – the use of whips in racing currently being the most prominent.

There are two main arguments put forward about why whips are used: to make horses go faster and for rider safety. But concern about over-use or inappropriate use of whips has been around for many years.

This quote comes from a 1991 Australian Senate report into racing:

"the committee accepted the use of the whip as a guide or control, but could not condone... it to inflict pain on a horse for no other purpose than to make the horse run faster in what is essentially a sporting event."

And let's just remind ourselves what a sporting event is – its something we do for recreation or diversion – for FUN.

This year, the Australian and New Zealand Racing Boards will follow the UK, India and the USA in introducing changes to the use of the whip, including the mandatory use of padded whips.

However, whips will still be used to strike horses to make them go faster.

The whip action and the post-race marking shown here will both still be acceptable under the new whip rules.

These are two of the most visible welfare issues in horse use. At most horse races, there are six video cameras recording different angles of each race. Dedicated TV channels ensure that racing is a very well documented and public sport.

But most horse use is much less visible. And the level of public concern over an issue does not necessarily reflect its actual welfare impact.

Given that around 1% of the Australian population are horse owners, yet there are no restrictions on experience, age or training for recreational horse ownership, the potential for poor welfare due to ignorance or neglect is huge.

But when horses are properly cared for, recreational horses that are left to their own devices for most of the time, may be the best off of all. From a behavioural and physiological perspective, it may be the elite, high performance horses that should attract more concern.

Many of the activities embedded in traditional training, riding or competing can have serious adverse impacts on horse welfare.

Some of these impacts may only be well known by those within the sport itself.

Issues raised with the RSPCA include:

- Unnecessary invasive interventions
- Training and riding techniques that involve punishment or extreme control
- Use of specific types of tack that have a high potential to cause pain or distress, including double bridles, lever bits and cranked nosebands
- Use of artificial aids, such as spurs and whips
- Extreme challenges in competition which cause acute or chronic injury
- Repeated transport, long-distance transport
- Housing in single stalls, inappropriate feeding
- And the lack of long-term responsibility for horses leading to multiple ownership and wastage.

You should note too that many of these issues are not about physical injury or exertion, but about mental state of the horse. They can't all be solved merely by having a vet present.

Some of the issues raised are specific to a particular discipline.

For instance, in the outwardly sedate sport of dressage – or what I call *ballet for horses* – elite international competition rules, which set the stage for all lower levels, require the use of double bridles and spurs. These rules also encourage activities such as riding deep (through hyperflexion) or using tight nosebands to prevent the mouth gaping during competition. All of this in the quest for the outward appearance of precise control over the horse.

Other issues cut across riding disciplines, such as housing horses in single stalls.

Indoor housing of horses presents them with a complete mismatch to their evolutionary history – wild horses do not live a solitary existence in an area of less than 16 square metres.

In other industries, such as intensive farming, the isolation and confinement of social animals is grounds for raising serious concerns about the animals' welfare.

In fact, as Raf Friere pointed out in a presentation at the ISAE conference last week, if you compare the space allowance per kilogram of body weight for a horse in a stable to other farmed animals, it comes off badly.

We know that stabling causes disruption of normal feeding patterns – resulting in both digestive and behavioural abnormalities.

We know that stabling causes disruption of normal movement: In an open environment, horses are constantly moving and selectively grazing for most of the day.

We know that stabling causes disruption of normal social interactions: which can lead to chronic social frustration and stereotypic behaviours not seen in free-roaming horses.

Yet it is still “normal” practice to singly house horses indoors.

As Temple Grandin says, if you do something bad to animals often enough, it becomes normal. Well, we've been doing some bad things – like single housing - to horses for thousands of years, and they have become so 'normal' they're almost invisible.

So, given that there are clear indications that when we use horses, the experience for the horse can be a very poor one, it is worth investigating what the legal protections are which might help prevent this from happening.

I am often asked **how it is that** horses can be subjected to a sport like jumps racing where there is a high risk of being killed, or are allowed to be repeatedly struck with a whip?

Surely the RSPCA can do something?

Well, no, we can't.

There is currently no specific legislation to protect the welfare of horses in Australia apart from the general provisions of Animal Welfare laws, which contain only one or two specific references to horses. The situation is little different in other countries.

Animal welfare legislation makes it possible to prosecute people who carry out acts that are considered to be *cruel* to animals – but it doesn't make it a legal requirement that all animals have **good** welfare.

Determining whether an activity is *cruel* relies on the test of what is 'reasonable' or 'acceptable'. If a traditional practice is not specifically banned it is generally considered to be 'reasonable'.

It's this interpretation that means whipping a thoroughbred up to thirty times as it closes in on the last stages of a race is considered legally 'reasonable'. It happens on a daily basis.

And, although Australia is in the last stages of developing national Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for horses, it is unlikely that much will change in terms of what is currently regarded as 'reasonable'.

The Standards will apply to all areas of horse use – which means they can't cover the detail needed to ensure good welfare in every equestrian activity.

For the most part, it seems that they will just provide an enforceable basis to the status quo. Anything requiring more than that is not written as a *must*, but as a *should*.

For example, there is no standard for the use of whips – only a guideline that states

*Whips **should** only be used on horses by or under the direct supervision of a person competent in the handling and training of horses. Whips can be used as a training aid and **should** only be used as reinforcement of correctly applied aids (e.g. legs, seat, voice, hands and heels) when the horse has failed to respond.*

What about industry codes? These at least have the advantage that in order to compete in a particular discipline, be it show jumping or racing, you have to abide by specific rules or codes.

But for the most part these fail to acknowledge the welfare impacts of the discipline itself, and can actually reinforce practices that have adverse impacts by requiring them in competition.

The FEI does have a Code of Conduct for the Welfare of the Horse – but this is a 2.5 page document containing very brief motherhood statements about the need to acknowledge and accept that at all times "the welfare of the horse is paramount".

Hyperflexion in dressage is the only event-specific welfare issue so far addressed by the FEI, and even an entire workshop dedicated to this one topic failed to recommend any changes.

In reality, it is human interest that is paramount when it comes to setting the rules of riding. It could be argued that leaving the FEI to set rules for horse welfare is like putting the fox in charge of the hen house.

Legislation, codes and guidelines, then, are clearly not enough to protect horses from bad outcomes.

Public concern for horses is likely to remain focused on the most visible issues such as serious injury and death. Frankly, the media are unlikely to get excited about the intricacies of dressage. But these details ARE important to the welfare of the horse – and they are becoming increasingly important to many people on the inside of the sport – and in many cases you have to be on the inside to know what the issues are.

So what approach should be taken to determine what is acceptable to do to a horse for 'fun'?

We need objective measures of welfare and a much more sophisticated ethical framework than legislation or codes currently provide.

So let's talk ethics

In human society, different uses of animals have different ethical justifications and attract different levels of concern. What society considers 'acceptable' to do to animals varies according to the reason, or the **justification** for doing it.

Certain actions are more 'acceptable' to us if there is sufficient justification for them.

For example, society accepts that mice can be used in invasive medical research if the purpose is to improve human or animal health.

Justification is not a static concept: change over time as societal expectations and knowledge changes.

And we are also capable of holding conflicting views about how we should treat different sentient animals when the justification is the same.

For example: Our society accepts that pest animals, such as foxes and cane toads can be killed because they cause serious damage to agricultural and environmental assets... but the view is often different if the pest animal is a feral horse.

But justification alone, no matter how strong, is not enough to ensure that our actions regarding animals are ethical. It is only half the equation. We also have a responsibility to minimise the suffering we cause to other animals.

This equation is based on utilitarian ethics, first proposed by the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham.

Bentham equated happiness with pleasure and the absence of pain. He proposed that when making ethical decisions, our actions should seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. And he extended this to our treatment of other sentient animals.

We use utilitarian ethics in the assessment of the use of animals in research, in the form of a cost-benefit analysis.

A cost-benefit analysis in research, involves balancing the harms imposed on the animals involved in the research against the benefits of the research to humans or other animals.

The more severe the harms, the more justification is required to allow a research project to be approved.

In animal research, this process is usually applied by an Animal Ethics Committee. Researchers are required to explain what the likely benefits of their research are, what procedures will be carried out on animals, and what the adverse impacts of those procedures will be. The Ethics Committee then has to work out the overall impact or harms involved, balance this against the reasons why the research is required and decide if the proposal should be modified and if it can proceed.

In 1994, David Mellor and colleagues from Massey University proposed a formal model for assessing the impact of animal use based on the Five Freedoms for farm animals. This model has since been further developed to be applicable to both animal research and pest animal management.

In Mellor and Reid's model, these five freedoms are translated into five domains of welfare impact:

- First – thirst, hunger and malnutrition
- Second – Environmental challenge
- Third – Disease, injury, functional impairment
- Fourth – Restriction of behaviour or social interaction

These four measures feed into Domain 5 which represents the overall mental state of the animal.

This inclusive approach ensures that all potential impacts of an activity are considered: it takes into account physical, physiological and behavioural measures.

The model uses an 'impact scale' against each of these domains, which ranges from no impact to the most severe impact.

The score from each domain feeds into the score for Domain 5 (since the mental state of the animal is affected by the status of the other domains).

This produces an overall impact grade.

Where appropriate, this grade can be further defined in terms of the duration of the impact.

The higher an activity or action rates on this matrix, the stronger the justification needed for performing the activity.

So, in animal research, actions that cause significant pain, suffering or distress to an animal cannot be carried out unless there is a very good reason and no alternative.

Armed with this information, researchers can act to reduce or avoid activities that have high impacts and instead choose methods that have lower impacts.

Applying this kind of ethical framework to the use of horses can help us establish exactly 'what's in it for the horse'. It would provide an objective means of assessing the relative impact of different activities, identify ways to improve welfare, and help to draw the line between what is acceptable and unacceptable.

Of course, a model is only as good as the information that is put into it. To make really objective assessments, we need objective data that measures what the impact of a given

activity is. Some of this information is already available, but there is a need for continuing research on the impact of different training and riding activities.

The idea of minimising welfare impacts or costs sounds like a good approach, until it comes to considering equestrian competitions.

Competition is the area where there is the most difficulty in applying the principles of utilitarian ethics, because the nature of competition is to increase the level of challenge or difficulty, which comes into direct conflict with the concept of minimising suffering.

Also, to be good at competition, you need to work harder and practice more often, which is likely to involve placing more demands on the horse.

Competition inherently leads to horses being used for more and more strenuous or challenging events. It also places horses in more and more unfamiliar and stressful situations; means they have to be transported more often and on longer journeys, and places them in continually changing social groups.

All of which are likely to increase the welfare costs or impacts on horses.

But the one advantage of competition over many other aspects of horse use, is that competition requires rules – and with sufficient motivation, rules **can** be changed to reduce or avoid adverse impacts on horses.

We need to ensure that increasing competition difficulty doesn't mean increasing impact

The challenge is to keep up level of difficulty without compromising the welfare of the horse – for example, relying more on the skill of the trainer and rider than making it harder for the horse.

This requires changing both the way in which people train and ride as well as the way in which events are judged. And closing the door on those activities that despite repeated attempts to reduce welfare risk, have proved too challenging.

With the emergence of equitation science, we are understanding more and more about the impact of our activities on horses, so it should become easier for us to act to reduce these impacts.

Peak equestrian bodies need to take an active role in promoting horse welfare, adopting improved techniques, and setting clear limits on what is acceptable and what is not.

If elite competition is to be ethical and sustainable then it needs to be demonstrated that impacts are being recognised, and minimised.

To do this they need to:

- Ensure that the costs and benefits of the activities in the discipline are assessed
- Support and monitor the results of equitation science and other horse welfare research and ensure that new findings are fed into the assessment process
- Act to ensure the most humane approach is being used: which means changing competition rules to remove requirements that have poor welfare outcomes and ensuring increased competition doesn't mean increased welfare challenge.

At the individual level, riders and trainers also have a crucial role in improving welfare, which I have boiled down into two main principles:

- **Firstly, users of horses are ethically responsible for all the activities and actions they conduct on horses.**

It is not enough to assume because others do it, it is acceptable, or because the law allows it, it is acceptable – as a trainer or rider, you have to understand the impact of your actions and be prepared to justify them yourself.

- **And secondly, they are ethically bound to minimise the impact on horses of their activities**

This involves taking active steps to modify activities to reduce their impact – or finding a better way to do something. It should also include avoiding activities that are known to have a serious adverse impact.

So, to summarise what I've tried to cover:

1. Justification for using horses?

The main reason we use horse is for fun – while this may be important to us as individuals, it's a weak justification for poor welfare outcomes

2. Welfare issues?

Public concern centres around visible issues, but there are many less visible welfare problems that are well known to equestrians that need to be addressed

3. Welfare protection?

Legislation does not protect horses from adverse impacts, only from overt cruelty or neglect. Standards, guidelines and industry codes are also unlikely adequately protect horse welfare as they currently stand

4. Making ethical decisions?

What is needed is an ethical framework: cost-benefit analysis is suggested as a way of establishing 'what's in it for the horse'. But we still need to overcome the inherent conflict between competition and welfare

5. So what are the Solutions for a sustainable, ethical approach?

I've outlined what you can do as individuals, and the approach that could be taken by peak bodies. If elite competition is to be ethically sustainable, it requires clear action to ensure that welfare impacts are minimised.

Finally,

- We need always to bear in mind that it's the tractability of horses that makes them a pleasure for us to work with – but it also makes them especially vulnerable to abuse.
- We must not take horses for granted and must strive to understand better our impacts on them, and continually strive to reduce them.
- Which means reassessing what's good, what's normal, and what's plain bad.
