



EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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Horse Sense, in association with



Carving out a future for our sport



BHSI performance coach Brendan Bergin looks at how the equine industry can improve its public perception

IS there a future for our sport? As a combined industry, racing and sport horse, we need to start truly evaluating how the general public perceives what we do.

In years gone by, it was easier to explain away a poor moment like a horse being behind the vertical or the use of a whip but now everyone has a smart phone camera in their pocket. Everything that we do is now open for scrutiny and the big question is do the justifications of what we do stack up in the eyes of the non-equine public?

Can we justify the safety of equine sport both in the thoroughbred industry and sport horse industry? There has been a lot of damage to our social licence over the past few months with the likes of the BBC Panorama documentary, the Gordon Elliott photo on social media, Kevin Lemke's performance in February which is now being targeted by PETA and obviously the ongoing use of rolkur and LDR (low deep round).

Small positive steps are starting to come through though. Outlawing the trimming of whiskers is a good starting point, but we have to do better.

As our understanding of evidence-based training and management develops more and more, our industry needs to start to lean in to the research rather than denying the empirical data.

Historically there is a mistrust of science by the greater equestrian community and an assumed incompetence of scientists in practical matters. This is something that has to change by honest collaboration with our ears open and a genuine effort to understand rather than to defending tradition and doctrine without foundation in equine welfare.

By embracing and incorporating science in training, the greater the



Equine welfare is important from Olympic level right the way down to the local riding school

available defense on the trial by social media stage.

Public opinion

We have to take our cue from other industries which have had to change as they come under fire by change in public opinion.

One of the best examples of this is the use of animals for performance in circuses which is now seen as unacceptable. If you look at the issues raised on this it centres around them being forced to do what is not natural to them, abusive training methods, lack of opportunity to express their ethogram and small cages/pens.

There is a significant disconnect between owner understanding and the welfare needs of their equine partners.

Despite leaders at top level like Carl Hester FBHS extolling the importance of regular turn-out in groups, many horse owners still feel their horses are too precious to be allowed freedom to be horses and roll without rugs.

Social licence

One other aspect which feeds into our social licence of both horse and rider safety is the clear interpretation of the construction of competitions and setting the level and stepping stone at

the correct level.

With Covid's impact on the sport, riders are under pressure chasing minimum eligibility requirements (MERs) which has a major impact on rider and equine safety where riders look to take more risks.

As teams worldwide prepare for Tokyo the pressure to clear your MERs has been exceptional. In the four-star course in Bicton many combinations avoided the helpful long routes to detrimental affect resulting in a huge number of stops and fly-bys.

Recently, I attended a talk with some of the eventing elite: veteran cross country trainer and rider Lucinda Greene, Badminton course designer Eric Winter, Bicton course designer Helen West and top event rider William Fox-Pitt.

One of the key points of discussion at present is the importance of building competition from five-star downwards rather than the reverse. Often times courses at the 80cm, 90cm and 100cm level bear no relationship to the top echelons of the sport.

Courses at lower levels need to ask more questions to draw horse and rider combinations upwards. The evolution of eventing in recent years has been towards precise distances which train riders to ride by rule rather than

riding by feel.

The true test of eventing is to getting the canter in gear and guiding the line and trusting in the partnership.

Future

Our modern generation is a swift executioner of cancellation culture, once the wind of public opinion changes it may be too late to make the necessary changes.

If we look at our sport through the publics' lens, would we be perceived any differently to a circus with performing animals? If we want our sport to have a future we need to take action; to improve not only equine welfare in all areas of the sport from Olympic level to the local riding school, but also the public's perception of how seriously we take the welfare of our equine counterparts.

Finally, I am often drawn to a quote by Dr. Andrew McLean: "The horse does not volunteer for the job, we put him to it."

With that in mind our equine welfare obligation is even more absolute and we have to be able to stand up not in front of our peers but in front of any member of the public and honestly say that we are doing right by our horses rather than taking advantage of them.



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