

REPORT ON AWRN-FUNDED EQUINE ATHLETES WORKSHOP



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How Happy are Equine Athletes? Assessing Equine Quality of Life in Equestrian Sporting Disciplines

Online workshop - 30th March 2021

The aim of this workshop was to provide a platform for discussion and collaboration between representatives of the equestrian sporting disciplines and those involved in the development of validated measures of equine quality of life. The workshop programme was designed to:

- Gain a better understanding of the current practices and guidance within equestrian sporting disciplines that protect or improve equine welfare
- Evaluate the potential usefulness of current approaches to assessing equine quality of life, and inform the development of measures relevant to the equestrian sports sector
- Plan future collaborative initiatives that will promote consideration of equine quality of life in the sporting context and provide evidence of how to recognize a 'happy equine athlete'

Participants at the workshop included AWRN members, representatives from the equine/animal welfare sector and invited participants from equestrian sport. All of those who registered for the workshop (n=150) were invited to listen to the presentations, with restricted numbers participating in the six Focus Groups (FGs) (these were limited to approximately 10 participants per group). Two separate FG sessions of one hour each, consisting of the same participant groups, were included. Four of the FGs include participants involved in a specific equestrian discipline (dressage, show jumping, eventing and endurance), one included participants from other (mixed discipline) equestrian sports, and one included participants not involved in equestrian sport but in animal welfare research and/or the development of methods of assessing animal QoL. The FG sessions were recorded on Zoom Pro and have been analysed in preparation for publication. A summary of the main findings is included below.

This workshop aimed to initiate a collaborative approach to developing relevant measures of equine QoL through an improved understanding of the current welfare focussed practices already in place across the equestrian sporting sector. The findings of the workshop will be used to inform future developments in this area.



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SUMMARY OF POINTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Acknowledgement of their responsibility to provide the equine athlete with a good quality of life

Participants acknowledged that we have a responsibility towards the well-being of non-human animals participating in sports (in this case equine athletes participating in equestrian sport), including ensuring that equine athletes enjoy a good quality of life. However, participants recognised that it is difficult to know whether a horse is experiencing a good life, how this could be assessed from a practical point of view and whether formal measures could / would be used within this sector. Many participants were unaware that there were tools available that could help them assess their horse's welfare.

Conflict between the demands of competitive sport and providing for the needs of the horse

The demands of competitive sport conflict with the needs of the horse. Recognising and addressing these conflicts is key to improved equine welfare. Although equine physical well-being is vital for competitive success and maintaining this is paramount (particularly at elite level), there is less consideration of equine mental well-being. The psychological well-being of elite equine athletes was flagged as an area of concern. Equine athletes at novice levels are more likely to be managed by less knowledgeable carers but their individual needs may be better catered for. Unlike their human athletic partners, equine athletes are not given the choice of participating or not and it is questionable whether any would choose to take part in equestrian sport if given such a choice. Consequently, human equestrian athletes must ensure the equine experience is as positive as possible.

Conflicting interests of different stakeholders can result in compromised equine welfare

Equestrian sport includes a large network of stakeholders with conflicting interests, some of which have the potential to impact negatively on the equine athlete. For example, young horse classes provide a marketing opportunity for breeders but may result in horses being produced in a rush and not allowed to mature before being put under competitive stress. Such classes may also encourage shortcuts in training and horses being expected to perform at levels for which they were not fully prepared (mentally or physically). These young horse classes have also been linked to the over-production of potential competition horses, with resultant wastage of horses that do not make the grade or suffer injury because of this. Many elite competition horses will be owned by professional groups who may focus more on the need to succeed than individual owners of less elite horses. Riders will generally put the horse first and are best placed to decide when to push a horse and when to ease up and stop.

Welfare issues not always publicly visible – sports participants will be better able to identify the most important challenges to equine welfare in their sport

As far as public criticism goes and the potential impact of social license on the sustainability of equestrian sports, some sports are more publicly visible than others (for example, racing compared with endurance riding). Criticism will focus on visible signs of potential 'abuse' such as the use of whips, spurs etc. However, no heed is paid generally to the life of the equine athlete outside of competition (most of the horse's life) where QoL can be most affected. Sporting regulations can be adapted to minimise the deleterious effects of competitive participation on the horse but have no influence over the rest of the horse's life. In equestrian sports that are less publicly visible it is down to the participants to be the 'public eye' and ensure acceptable practice / protect the welfare of the horse. Also, it is those sports participants who will be most aware of factors that may compromise equine welfare in their sport, rather than the general or even horse-owning public.

Motivation for change needed

Motivation to work towards change for the better is needed – this may include a review of sporting regulations and increased support for riders who are the best advocates for protecting and improving the welfare of their equine partners.

Moving forwards

There has already been progress in improving the welfare of horses in equestrian sport (welfare is a term historically used only to refer to negative experiences and which now encompasses the full spectrum of potential positive and negative experiences). There was support for identifying areas for improvement and all agreed that collaborative initiatives involving stakeholders from equestrian sport were needed. In terms of encouraging all equestrian stakeholders to consider the QoL of their equine partners, changes in the content of equine education are needed. Although maintaining equine health is paramount, education should also include discussion of the behavioural signs of positive and negative mental state and encourage those involved with equines to recognise positive / negative responses and adapt their management and training practices accordingly. Such consideration of equine mental well-being needs embedding at the outset for it to become the norm.

The overall conclusion was that although there is no one answer to improving equine QoL and producing happier equine athletes, there are many (often context-specific) initiatives that combined could make a difference.

We look forward to working together to bring about this change.

Thank you to the AWRN for supporting the first stage in this initiative.