

Report from the NordCAW seminar on the welfare of horses used in equestrian sports

There are about 5 million horses in Europe ([FAOSTAT](#)), about half of which are used in equestrian sports. Horses and the horse industry have a stable position in society, but the preservation of equestrian sports requires active responsibility and clear measures to ensure the horses' welfare. Upholding social licence to operate (SLO) requires more than just talking about horse welfare. The horse industry has been at the centre of public discussion due to welfare problems and abuse of horses in equestrian sports. In November 2023, the Danish documentary Operation X raised the issue of horse welfare for public discussion. The documentary revealed how internationally successful and popular dressage rider Andreas Helgstrand caused suffering to horses in his training, and how even the Danish Equestrian Federation had long turned a blind eye to these events. Also at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, a competitor whipped her horse in the modern pentathlon obstacle course. The incident led to the removal of horse riding from the pentathlon. This year's NordCAW seminar dealt with the use of horses in equestrian sports: horses as sentient beings, how equipment and use of horses affects the horses' welfare, ethical issues, and the need for changes across the EU.

Mette Uldahl, veterinarian, researcher, and consultant to the Danish Equestrian Federation, opened the seminar with her presentation on Society and governance of horse welfare - Use of intrinsic value as a starting point. The presentation highlighted how important it is that regulations and practices in equestrianism are based on science and respect for horses as sentient beings. We must walk the talk in order to maintain legitimacy, credibility and trust, and hence, the social licence to operate.

According to Uldahl, there is currently a lot of pressure from society to change animal welfare for the better, but we are blind to common practice. She compares the horse industry to the future ban on caged animals and tail docking in pigs. The horse industry is in the same problematic situation when practices that impair horse welfare are justified with reasons that are not logical according to scientific evidence. Uldahl emphasises that change requires more than just more information: we also need to discuss the values that guide our decisions. How is the individual value of the horse weighed against human interests, such as the desire to compete?

Minimum requirements for the protection of animals varies depending on the category in which the animal is placed. Horses can be categorised as production animals, companion and hobby animals or as experimental animals. However, the horse's needs do not change with different purposes.

Talking about animal welfare problems and necessary changes makes people afraid of losing privileges. Change is often difficult, but according to Uldahl, the loss of the SLO of the horse industry ultimately causes more costs and efforts, if society's acceptance of the industry needs to be restored instead.

The Danish Animal Ethics Council (Det Dyreetiske Råd) has put together a report, which includes recommendations on the use of horses in equestrian sports ([Det Dyreetiske Råd, detdyreetiskeraad.dk](#)). According to Council President Bengt Holst, the recommendations and their application in practice are more important than ever.

The recommendations includes; The horse should be given the opportunity to fulfil species-specific behavioural needs e.g. social contacts, free movement, grazing and chewing, and human competition goals should not be used as a reason for the horse living an isolated and unstimulated life; Increased minimum age of competitions for young horses counted from the actual birthday and not from the beginning of the calendar year; Methods used to train horses should be based on learning theory; Equipment shall only be used as a guidance and not as a tool for punishment; The use of equipment must not cause injury to the horse. Injuries should be monitored before, during and after competitions; Equipment that forces the horse into different positions, alters natural movements or prevents the use

of its senses shall not be used. The equipment must not prevent the horse from showing signs of discomfort and pain; If the horse does not respond to human requests, the reason for the behaviour must be investigated; Competitions should set clear definitions for unacceptable handling of horses; Riders whose horse does not show pain, fear and other conflict behaviours should be rewarded in competitions.

The new recommendations have been widely criticised for being too ambitious. To this, Holst replies that with so much money (over €50 billion) involved in equestrian sport, it must be as difficult as possible to cause suffering to horses. According to Holst, there are structural problems in the horse industry and recent abuses should not be seen as isolated cases. Unless the horse industry and the federations change the rules and supervision, the violent treatment of horses may continue behind closed doors. Laws and regulations should be detailed enough so the requirements are clear to people handling horses. The rules of the Danish Equestrian Federation are unclear, and do not define the limits of harmful activity. For example, what is excessive use of spurs or how does one define the use of a whip as a "reprimand tool"?

The seminar also addressed the concept of the Happy Athlete. The concept was popularised in 2004 when the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) updated the goal for dressage. The rules emphasise horse welfare and the horse's development into the happy athlete through harmonious training. However, Denmark's Animal Ethics Council finds the FEI's idea of a Happy Athlete unclear: who can decide when the horse is a happy athlete, what is harmonious training and how much is the horse's welfare worth to the human who has the motivation to compete? There is a problem in that people can interpret negative emotions as positive, and emotions can be difficult to interpret objectively when influenced by human ambitions, hence, the use of scientific welfare indicators is recommended.

According to Holst, the horse's perspective needs to be better understood. The horse has no ambition to win or desire to compete as we humans do, but competition and training is a big part of the horse's life. Therefore, there is an increased risk of both mental and physical stress, which can lead to health problems such as gastric ulcers. The horse's opportunities to live according to its nature may also be limited. We must accept that competing is a human choice, not the choice of a horse, and the biology and welfare of the horse sets the limits.

One example of equipment that forces the horse's movement and position, which the Danish Council on Animal Ethics wants to ban, is various counterproductive auxiliary reins. According to the English scientist and entrepreneur Russell MacKechnie-Guire, there is almost no research evidence on the benefits of these types of equipment for the biomechanics of the horse. Various auxiliary reins are popular in the UK for lunging, and they are too uncritically recommended for rehabilitation of horses, without considering the individual needs of the horse or the knowledge of the user.

Draw reins often aim for a certain shape and more active movement of the hind legs. However, according to the research evidence presented by MacKechnie-Guire, these tools make it difficult for the horse to find its balance. In addition, auxiliary reins which come through the bit and behind the hind legs, always pull the horse in the mouth when the hind legs move backwards. According to MacKechnie-Guire, horses also quickly learn a compensatory movement pattern to avoid pain and discomfort caused by the reins and other equipment. Only one piece of equipment proved to be of little benefit when used correctly: a belt with an elastic band that comes just behind the hind legs can promote exercise and does not cause pressure on the horse's mouth, neck, and back. However, MacKechnie-Guire recommends other ways to train a horse: moving around on uneven terrain, working with small obstacles, and other exercises, preferably from a young age, and not having a rider on its back. The horse's musculature is simply developed by training, not using auxiliary reins.

Mette Uldahl and the Finnish researcher and veterinarian Kati Tuomola presented their findings on oral health in horses. Uldahl and her assistants carried out more than 3000 mouth checks in dressage

and show-jumping competitions in Denmark and found that the higher the level of competition, the more mouth ulcers the horses had. According to Uldahl one could expect that more experienced riders should be more knowledgeable and therefore cause less damage to the horse. The type of bit or the type of discipline had no significant effect according to Uldahl's study, while a tight noseband had a significant relationship with mouth ulcers. Most wounds came from continuous hard pressure.

Oral examinations of sport horses at the Danish Championships led to a situation where 20 % of competitors were disqualified from the competitions due to mouth ulcers. Removing the competitors before the start caused frustration, but the following year much less mouth lesions were found. It can be concluded that prevention of mouth injuries requires an active responsibility from both riders and trainers, as well as veterinarians and staff at the competitions.

Veterinarian and researcher Kati Tuomola had a presentation on whether rein tension is associated with horse behaviour and mouth injuries in harness racing trotters. As in Uldahl's study, Tuomola found a high prevalence of mouth ulcers. But, in contradiction with Uldahl's result, Tuomola also found a correlation to the use of specific bits. In the study on rein tension, Tuomola found that the pressure in the reins varied by several kilograms. The harder the rein pressure, the more often and longer the horses kept their mouths open. Horses with more mouth lesions were also found to walk more nervously after racing compared to horses without mouth lesions. According to Tuomola, such signs of discomfort in horses should be used more when trying to identify horses with possible mouth injuries.

The Swedish researcher Elke Hartman from SLU started her talk with showing a video of a horse. In the video, the horse gallops and bucks with the rider on its back, and the text describes how the horse is excited about spring. According to Hartmann, people often explain horse's conflict behaviours as enthusiasm, stupidity, or malice. In her presentation, Hartmann highlighted how important it is to systematically observe the horse's behaviour and to understand the reasons behind it.

Conflict behaviour is an activity by which the horse tries to show or get rid of physical or mental discomfort. The cause of the behaviour is often frustration, discomfort, fear and/or pain. Conflicts also arise in situations where there is a conflict between the wishes of the human and the motivation of the horse. Conflict behaviours are often dangerous and unwanted. However, according to Hartmann, conflict behaviour should never be ignored or punished, but should always be seen as the horse's attempt to express its own discomfort or pain. The causes of the behaviour can be anything from unsuitable equipment, pain, and fear, to unclear human communication. Therefore, behaviour should be influenced by removing the causes of conflict behaviour and influencing emotions in a positive way. Examples of conflict behaviours are rushing, freeze response, bucking, rearing, shaking its head and pulling the reins but also waving its tail, open its mouth, pull out the tongue etc.

Anette Graf, veterinarian, and vice-president of the European Association of Equine Veterinarians (FEEVA), gave the final speech of the seminar on What happens in Europe – We are talking the talk, but are we walking the walk? Concerned about the loss of the social licence to operate in equine sports, she used the example of greyhound racing, where measures to promote the welfare of dogs were not sufficient and not timely, leading to a loss of social acceptance of the sport. Also in the UK, up to 20% of the respondents in a study did not approve of the use of horses in sport at all.

Change begins when you both recognise and accept the problem. Graf agreed with Uldahl's views that there are people who are unaware of the problems and people who continue despite being aware of the problems. Graf points out that many players in the equestrian sport are in a difficult situation: how can you be objective when you are part of the horse industry? It can be difficult both to see the problem from the inside and to talk about it out loud.

The basis for SLO is Legitimacy - Playing by society's rules, Credibility - Transparency, and fulfilment of obligations and Trust - The belief that horse people take care of their horses. According

to Graaf, Europe has long been talking about how to prioritise horse welfare in equestrian sports, but the continued negative attention and poor management and handling of the horse show that actions have not been taken on a sufficient scale and in sufficient detail. In recent years, many recommendations have been published in Europe regarding the use of horses in equestrian sports (the report of the Danish Animal Ethics Council, the Dutch Veterinary White Paper, and the French recommendations for the 2024 Olympics). A legal initiative is also planned to be discussed in the EU, calling for a ban on the breeding of horses for slaughter and on Europe-wide horse slaughter tours, as well as better protection for working horses and horses in equestrian sports. According to Graf, another example of individual measures that can preserve the social license is the prohibition of rollkur and tight nosebands, as well as the recognition of conflict behaviour in the warm-up. According to Graf, the criteria, rules, monitoring and reporting should be clear to all competition staff and competitors to avoid loss of credibility. This requires training and support.

In summary; Horses will continue to be part of society also in the future, but equine organisations have to take a more active responsibility to promote the welfare of horses during training and competition. Traditions, habits and ignorance cannot justify continuing to act as before.

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