

The welfare CHALLENGE

In a special report, ROISIN MAGEE takes a look at the issues of welfare and ethics in equine sport, and the challenges ahead

The world we live in is changing at an ever-increasing pace. I started writing this article shortly after protestors from the Vegan Strike Group of Germany ran out in front of Marc Houtzager's horse at the 2019 European Championships in Rotterdam. Marc dismissed the protestors

as "just idiots", and it is easy to ridicule their message of 'ban horse slavery', but we in the horse world laugh at our peril. Animal welfare protests are part of a growing social consciousness worldwide, and as Will Appelbe, of the New Zealand animal rights group SAFE told me: "Momentum is building in the animal rights movement. Free-range eggs was an

extreme issue 20 years ago, but today it is a mainstream victory: all major supermarkets in New Zealand have committed to going cage-free."

World Horse Welfare, the world's leading equine charity, supports the responsible use of horses in sport, and advises regulators (including horse sport's world governing body, the FEI) on horse welfare. Its CEO, Roly Owers, is very clear on the challenge facing horse owners. "We not only have to do the right thing by our horses, we have to be able to demonstrate that to the public, in an easily understandable way," he says.

"Horse welfare in the media is both overwhelmingly negative and high profile, and the general public gets a bad impression. As a result, the public's view of using horses for sport or work is changing, and there are increasing questions around the ethics of using horses. This 'new norm' isn't going away, and social media means that the speed of response has increased dramatically when an issue catches the public's attention."

After all, one week of focused

campaigning on social media directed at her 104 million fans was all it took before pop singer Taylor Swift pulled out of performing at the 2019 Melbourne Cup, citing "scheduling conflicts".

What are the main welfare challenges facing our horses?

Dana Kirkpatrick, CEO of Equestrian Sports NZ, says that the

key welfare challenge facing all disciplines is "the widening gap between the perception of the people involved in the sport, and the people who may be watching the sport".

No doubt this is true, but having spoken to a range of people from all corners of the equestrian world, both here in New Zealand and some from abroad, I believe this is only part of the problem.

Some of those I interviewed for this story were happy to be quoted, and some emphatically not, but the stories were worryingly similar and the theme was clear: we are NOT all doing the right thing by our horses all the time.

I heard stories that would make your toes curl. Broken glass put in tendon boots to make horses pick their legs up over jumps. Endurance horses being nerve-blocked during rides, leading to a loss of the horse's natural warning signals and in some cases, fractures

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ABOVE Vegan protesters disrupt Marc Houtzager's round at the 2019 European Championships. RIGHT AND BELOW Endurance and dressage are just two of the disciplines that are coming under increasing scrutiny and criticism from the general public, concerned over the ethics of using horses for sport



(an issue serious enough that new hyposensitivity testing is likely to be introduced by the FEI in 2020). Ponies hit with measuring sticks so they flinch under the required height (another issue that the FEI is looking at taking over). Dressage horses so valuable that they are never, or only rarely, turned out or hacked out. Horses, which are after all herd animals, stabled individually despite extensive research pointing to the psychological harm this can cause.

I also heard many grumbles about more everyday issues, such as over-rugging. The day before I submitted this article I drove past a large herd of horses in heavy winter rugs. It was more than 20 degrees!

In New Zealand, we are lucky in that we have the space to keep our horses at grass, and in herds, and as a result our horses are perhaps happier than those in many other countries. But there are still plenty of tales of unkind treatment. Here in the South Island, for example, a horse

taken for breaking-in recently was removed by its owner when she came to visit, and found the horse alone in a round pen with its head tied to its tail. This was a reputable breaker who came strongly recommended; I'd hate to think what the disreputable breakers are up to.

Early education

Several of the people I spoke to singled

out the early education of horse and rider as vital to improving welfare for our horses, but this crucial first step falls outside ESNZ's remit and has no governing body. We are reliant on pony club volunteers, family members and starters/breakers, who vary wildly in ability and methods.

According to well-respected Canterbury horseman Bryan McVicar:

"Lots of horses don't stand a chance.

"Every horse should be taught correct impulsion, leg-yield and flexion before it leaves the starter, but this doesn't always happen and as for riders, well – many riders jumping horses in New Zealand can't come round a corner with their horse bent correctly," he says.

"In Germany, a horse has to be Level 3 in dressage before you are allowed to show jump."

Brent Jury, who came back to eventing after a break of 25 years to compete successfully at Advanced level, also stresses the importance of breaking-in, and strongly believes that we need to do better when it comes to training our riders, especially in flatwork. He says beginning riders and horses need to be taught what he calls four 'basic buttons' – forward and back, forequarters left and right, hindquarters left and right and lateral flexion.

"If we installed these buttons when horses are started and taught riders how to press them, more riders would see the

value of, and take an interest in, dressage as these basic aids/responses or a combination of them, enable you to ride any movement a horse is capable of."

Moral danger

As riders and horses progress in their careers into various disciplines, problems can arise where financial gain or competitive instinct takes precedence over the welfare of the horse. The FEI states simply that "the welfare of the horse must never be subordinated to competitive or commercial influences" and yet there are stories of horses sent abroad for lucrative sales deals and/or for competition, only to be euthanised or left in unsuitable homes after suffering injury or illness.

Anecdotal reports from sources within endurance here in New Zealand suggest that a 160km Kiwi endurance horse can now be sold overseas for around \$NZ200,000, while the sport, in the Middle East particularly, is mired in welfare concerns.

Endurance isn't the only sport with problems, of course. Dressage has for some time found itself embroiled in scandal and negative press. Videos like the infamous clip showing Swedish Olympian Patrik Kittel schooling his horse Scandic in hyperflexion with the horse's tongue lolling and blue were shared far and wide on social media, and did untold damage to public perception of the sport. The furore eventually led to the FEI banning the practice of 'rollkur', but perhaps too late; the idea of dressage as horse torture took hold in the public imagination.

In 2016, *Vice*, an international online and print lifestyle magazine, published an article titled: 'Why is dressage still an Olympic sport?', describing it as "possibly

the worst Olympic sport" and "arguably cruel... the breaking of a horse's instincts and body through often tyrannical training techniques."

How did we get here, especially in what should be a beautiful sport showcasing a willing equine athlete?

Respected New Zealand dressage trainer and coach Bill Noble is pretty blunt: "Since the Olympics became professional, there has been massive growth in the 'professional competitor', whose only job is to win. The moral danger is that such riders can be caught up in competition to such an extent that results are all that matters. Add to this the rise of the career judge, who is neither rider nor horseman and who can only judge the horse's performance on the day, rather than the quality of the horse's training over time. [At the lower levels] dressage also attracts some of the most ignorant riders. They can work on the flat and make the horse go sideways, but they are poor horsepeople."

In dressage, a rider's will to win can result in grinding misery and/or boredom for their horse; in eventing, the result can be fatal. A search on YouTube will find a clip of British rider Jack Pinkney's mount Raphael attempting to jump a 3m wall (which was part of a fence decoration) at the most recent CCI5* at Pau and ploughing head-first into it, after Jack made the dubious decision to carry on with a broken left rein. Please don't search for this unless you are prepared for a very distressing sight. The horse was lucky to escape apparently with just a scratch, but Jack's reputation has come off worse; after he fell off, he threw his whip and air jacket to the ground in what looks like a fit of bad temper. He later said in an interview with *Horse & Hound*: "I was so angry



Lyal Cocks, NZ Rodeo Cowboys Assn



Ian Smith, Edinburgh Park Stud



Marty Burns, NZ Thoroughbred Racing



Dana Kirkpatrick, CEO of Equestrian Sports NZ



Bill Noble, dressage trainer and NZH&P columnist



Roly Owers, CEO of World Horse Welfare



SAFE's Will Appelbe



ABOVE AND RIGHT According to SAFE, rodeo's 'social licence has expired', and racing is under scrutiny by several international welfare organisations – will other horse sports be next?

with myself as I thought I could have hurt my horse”, but this is not what it looks like, and fairly or unfairly, in a televised event, perception is everything.

Public perception

We live in a world where most people have smart phones and our lives can be broadcast immediately and spread internationally in minutes, whether we like it or not. Rodeo learnt this the hard way, long ago.

Lyal Cocks, President of the NZ Rodeo Cowboys Association, is resigned to the sport's new reality. “There are people out there who don't want animals used for anything. Rodeo is an easy target and the political pressure on the sport is severe.” I was interested to know what lessons

Lyal felt he could pass on to other horse sports from his years on the front line of animal rights protests. I asked whether he would do anything differently if he had his time again, and whether it had been difficult to push through change. “We wouldn't do anything differently, but we would do it sooner. As for change, we had an old guard in rodeo, for sure,” he says. “They had worked with animals all their lives and couldn't see the need for change. We started by setting out welfare guidance for each animal sport and then the leaders of each sport told members pretty bluntly that if they wanted to continue, this change was necessary.” He says it was helpful to have reports from the US to support the changes they were introducing, but basically: “If spectators have an issue, there is a problem.”

Racing also offers plenty of examples of what happens when a sport does not get on the front foot quickly enough in response to negative public opinion. Whip use, arguably more a perception

than a welfare issue, has become socially unacceptable. “The racing industry did not engage with the public on the topic [whip use] and now the days of whip use are numbered,” Roly Owers explains.

More extreme welfare issues may turn out to be a threat to the very existence of the racing industry. A recent exposé in Australia by the ABC, entitled ‘The Final Race’, offered viewers 45 minutes of horrific footage showing racehorses being sent to their deaths in a brutal and undignified manner at an abattoir near Brisbane. Voices from within the industry were quick to point out the weak points of the programme, and it is now the subject of a 21-page complaint by Racing NSW, but some well-known racing figures realised just as quickly that picking holes in the exposé was missing the point.

I spoke to Ian Smith, whose stud Edinburgh Park in New South Wales has won \$AUD17 million, the morning after the ABC programme aired. He had watched in horror, terrified that he would see one of his beloved horses in the abattoir chute, being kicked or stamped on. The next morning, he gave a public guarantee that he would offer \$AUD1000 to buy back any horse, of any age or condition, bearing his IKS brand, to ensure they would always be too expensive for the dog tucker trucks.

“I am not going to sit back to wait for a committee to form or decide what they should do when I can do something about our horses now,” Ian says.

“We are supplying the market with what it wants and we have a duty of care to the horses we breed to make sure we know what happens to them. If people can't look after them or don't want them any more, we'll make sure they don't end up in that fate.

“I care about about horses and I am damn sure I am not going to have an IKS-branded horse go anywhere near a knackery.”

“We need to get ahead of the game before the critics prevent us from enjoying what we love.”

Chris Waller, trainer of champion mare Winx, has warned that the Australian racing sector will lose its social licence to operate if it does not find an industry-wide solution. He is reported as saying: “If we want the sport to be welcomed by the community, we have to do everything it takes to make sure that those scenes are never visited again.”

Here in New Zealand, New Zealand Thoroughbred Racing (NZTR) is taking affirmative action. The Messara Report, commissioned in 2018, made two welfare recommendations: a review of racing's overall integrity model with a focus on efficacy, independence and accountability, and also the introduction of robust processes to establish traceability from

birth of the entire thoroughbred herd as the foundation stone of the industry's ongoing welfare programme.

Marty Burns, General Manager Racing and Equine Welfare at NZTR, is clear that no horse should be sent to a knackery without a proper decision process to assess the horse for injury, temperament and age. I asked Marty what NZTR is doing to support that process; even a simple assessment of a horse requires grazing, feed, possibly vet bills and some ridden work by an experienced person.

In New South Wales, for example, 1% of all prize money goes to support the retirement and rehabilitation of racehorses, and even that proved insufficient to prevent the recent scandal. Marty says that NZTR “is considering its welfare budget and how to source funds for rehab and rehoming”, but currently the focus is more on supporting classes to showcase thoroughbreds in their second careers, and making sure that owners and trainers understand their duty of care to their horses (NZTR recently published *Thoroughbred Welfare Assessment Guidelines*).

Gina Schick of Eventstars, a rehabilitation and rehoming facility in Cambridge, feels confident that there are several people pushing hard behind the

over the last decade, which prompted the Messara Report, the industry may not have much time to waste implementing solutions. SAFE would like to see an end to both rodeo and horse racing. “Rodeo's social licence has expired and racing's licence is under review,” Will Apelbe tells me firmly.

A gloomy picture?

No, or not yet, anyway! Look at how far we have come. Our love affair with horses has gone on for so long that the oldest known horse sculpture, the Vogelherd horse, is around 35,000 years old. We have travelled far beyond the spiked spurs of the middle ages in Europe and the sad workhorses and pit ponies of the industrial age. The increasing professionalism and the knowledge we in the horse world have gained even over the last 50 years have brought many benefits for our equine friends: saddle fitters, body work, more enlightened training techniques and medical advancements that have resulted in far less rough treatment and much better outcomes. Many of our horses are treasured pets, who are lavished with care and attention even when we can barely afford it.

Nevertheless, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. Animal rights organisations like SAFE are vague about the details when it comes to horse welfare because their focus is currently on practices that affect larger numbers of animals, like live export and battery farming. This is not to say that they will always be vague, however. They care deeply about the lives our animals lead and we can expect a greater degree of informed scrutiny in the future.

Vicki Glynn, the Secretary General of Equestrian Sports New Zealand, and our international FEI representative, is firmly of the opinion that education is key to bringing about positive change and points out that a lot of interesting and important new research is freely available on the FEI's online campus.

Education must lead to informed action for change if it is to be of any use, however. Captain Mark Phillips wrote recently: “We need to get ahead of the game before the critics of horse sport prevent us from enjoying what we love”. Time is running out. ■