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A HISTORY OF CRUELTY IN EQUESTRIAN SPORTS: WHY THE OLYMPICS SHOULD GO ANIMAL-FREE

info@animalaid.org.uk



The 2024 Paris Olympics is upon us; but what does this event say about our relationship with animals, and what does the recent past tell us about the cruelty involved?

Earlier this year, two letters were sent to the FEI (International Federation for Equestrian Sports). One, from leading trainers, officials and athletes from the realm of dressage; the other, from the Northern European equestrian organisations from Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. The message was the same; the FEI need to urgently act to protect equestrian sports, as cases of abuse and cruelty continue to threaten this sport with a complete revocation of its social license.

MODERN PENTATHLON



In fantastic news, the horse-riding element of the modern pentathlon has now been removed. This followed the horrifying scenes witnessed at the 2020 (held in 2021 due to covid) Tokyo Olympic Games where a coach punched a horse named Saint Boy and was heard shouting orders to whip the horse harder. If a coach felt able to commit such heinous acts of cruelty on the global stage, it is frightening to imagine the levels of abuse which occur far away from the public eye.


DRESSAGE

Dressage involves a horse having to perform a certain routine of prescribed movements whilst being ridden. British Dressage uses terms such as 'harmony', 'submissiveness', 'suppleness': "free from the paralysing effects of resistance, the horse obeys willingly". The entire discipline is rooted in domination.

The 'rollkur' is just one example of the violent methods used to force horses to submit. This is now a banned practice, but who knows what still occurs behind closed doors. The rollkur is hyperflexion of the neck: where a horse's head is pulled into their chest behind the vertical, commonly believed to improve 'suppleness' (a fallacy). This is excruciating and can cause a plethora of suffering including airway obstruction, injury of a major ligament in the horse's neck and nerve damage.

The rollkur flew into public consciousness after Patrik Kittel was caught on camera performing the manoeuvre in 2009. The horse's tongue turned blue due to lack of oxygen. In 2010, the FEI banned the rollkur in warm-up practices at international competitions.

Kittel did not receive any disciplinary action after this abuse, and photos surfaced of him at the 2012 Olympics, appearing to use the rollkur again (the FEI denied this). Earlier in 2024, Kittel was photographed riding horses whose tongues appeared to be blue – indicating further use of violent force, resulting in restricting the horses' oxygen. The FEI is reported to be looking into this.



Furthermore, whilst the rollkur is officially banned, cruel practices can continue freely behind closed doors. Indeed, a German dressage rider is reported to have subjected his horse Totilas to the rollkur during a competition in Germany in January 2020; Totilas died that December. The rider denied allegations that he used the rollkur. The 'Low, Deep, Round' (LDR) is a move very similar to the rollkur in terms of the suffering it inflicts upon horses, and yet this is still allowed.

In 2022, a grand-prix rider (the highest level for dressage riding) was convicted of "causing unnecessary suffering to five young horses in his care". The horses, who the examining vet believed were malnourished/starved and with heavy worm burdens, were seized by the RSPCA. One died in their care after becoming unwell. The rider was given a prison sentence and was banned from keeping animals for the rest of his life. "According to him, he had the financial means to look after the horses but simply chose not to".

The aforementioned letters sent to the FEI came after a Danish TV channel aired a documentary (in autumn 2023) exposing horrifying cruelty at Andreas Helgstrand's riding centre. Painful riding aids (the bit and spurs) were used so aggressively that horses were seen to be bleeding from their mouths and flanks. Helgstrand was banned until 2025 and the Helgstrand Dressage training-company status was revoked.

Painful artificial aids include inflexible 'crank' nosebands and tight curb chains which impede a horse's capacity to move their own jaw. The overuse of spurs, rife within equestrian sports, can cause bleeding and bruising on a horse's skin.

SHOW JUMPING

In show jumping, horses are ridden over a set of jumps, scoring penalties if they knock any down or if a horse refuses to jump. This event has been embroiled in drug and abuse scandals for years. In 2004, a show jumper was stripped of his gold medal for doping his horse with human sedatives. In 2008, a show jumper was banned from competing in the final because it was discovered his horse had been doped with 'capsaicin': a banned substance derived from chilli powder. When rubbed into the horse's legs, it causes a burning sensation, encouraging them to jump higher so as not to hit any jumps which would cause severe pain.

At the Tokyo Olympics, a horse named Kilkenny suffered a nosebleed during the showjumping final. The FEI imposed what has become known as 'The Blood Rule', whereby if any blood is found on the flanks or mouth of a horse, they will be eliminated. However, it was determined that this was not in breach of the blood rule. In the aftermath of this, a new rule was implemented whereby a bell can be rung to eliminate a combination if it appears the horse's welfare is being compromised.

At the Rio Olympics, two riders were eliminated from the individual show jumping competition: one for extreme whipping and the other for overuse of the spurs. Indeed, pictures from the Rio Olympics showed horses subjected to excruciating artificial aids including metal bits and tight nosebands. Drooling, excessive foaming at the mouth and painful mouth trauma can be caused by severe bits and bridles.

Jo Macarthur, from the Norfolk Horse Training Club, said regarding the treatment of the horses at the Rio Olympics: "Human athletes made mistakes; they did not get whipped by their coaches afterwards. In addition to forced head carriage we witnessed excessive whipping for non-performance and punishment for not achieving the rider's objective, which is totally unacceptable."

Paul Estermann, who competed at the 2012 London Olympics and many other senior competitions, has been involved in court cases and appeals since 2017. The animal cruelty charges related to accusations that he whipped his horse so forcefully and frequently that the horse reportedly had "swelling and bleeding wounds". This culminated in a guilty verdict from the Lucerne Crown Court at the end of 2022. In April 2023, the Swiss Equestrian Federation banned him from riding for seven years, and said that Estermann's "wilful, selfish and aggressive behaviour" illustrated "blatant disregard for the well-being of horses". After Estermann appealed, this suspension was reduced to four years.

A Scottish showjumper James Smith has been barred from competitions after being accused of jumping a horse who was allegedly being 'rapped' – where a horse is hit in the legs to make them lift their legs higher over a jump. Rapping or 'poling' is banned by the FEI, but again, who knows what continues to happen behind closed doors.

EVENTING

Eventing at the Paris Olympics will be a three day event: with a dressage, cross country and showjumping phase.


At the 2020 (delayed till 2021 due to covid) Tokyo Olympic Games, a horse named Jet Set was killed after appearing lame at a fence in the middle of the cross country course. He received emergency veterinary care but was 'put to sleep' on 'humane grounds'. There is nothing humane about this – he was forced to compete in a challenging event all for the benefit of humans – and was injured and killed after trying his best.

Eventing is also muddied by numerous tales of abuse. Horses pushed into events, constrained and restricted with painful aids to make them more 'controllable' and punished with spurs and whips when exhausted.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

"Learned helplessness is a methodology (often practiced by people who are unaware it's what they're doing) that punishes the horse for being a horse."

When an animal feels as if they have no agency, no ability to influence their surroundings or what happens to them, they can experience 'learned helplessness'. In essence, they learn that no matter what they do, they can't stop humans harming them.



This condition is linked with depression in humans, and interrogation strategies (essentially torture – a person being subjected to so much pain they ‘shut down’).

Learned helplessness is often deliberately, although maybe not knowingly, induced by trainers in order for horses to ‘submit’ to them and ‘do as they are told’. We are socialised into thinking ‘breaking a horse’s spirit’ is an acceptable step in order to achieve ‘glory’ or ‘fame’ in equestrian sports. Negative reinforcement techniques are rife across equestrian sports. However, breaking an animal’s spirit, and creating an environment in which they perform an activity because they fear punishment if they do not, or feel powerless to refuse, is unquestionably cruel.

“Some show jumpers spend most of their lives in draw reins, their heads pulled up to their chests. Some event riders overuse their whips every time a horse looks at a jump. And the natural horsemanship program of desensitizing horses to stimuli, if overused, is akin to the research dogs who don’t move when they get shocked, because moving doesn’t make it stop”. – Equisearch.com Horse Journal.

“The rider dominates the horse like the predator that holds him on the ground. He is helpless.” As a result, “The horse learns that the rider does not respond to his signals, but that he must continue, whether he is in physical balance or not, whether he can see or not. In technical terminology, it is called ‘learned helplessness,’ in which the horse must react with exaggerated movement, because not reacting means even more stress.” – Dr Ulrike Thiel, a German trainer and clinical psychologist.

All animals should have agency; they should be free to express themselves and live in peace without fear of human exploitation.

46 EQUINE WELFARE RECOMMENDATIONS

Ahead of the Paris Olympics, the French Government produced a list of 46 recommendations for equine welfare at the games. This is in attempt to a) alleviate animal welfare concerns following the disturbing abuse at the Tokyo Olympics and b) to be a leader in equine welfare. The proposals include welfare measures such as a paddock for 'free movement', officials 'on the ground' who can step in when there is threat to a horse's welfare, and more 'robust approach to recording any medications' (as an antidote to doping fears). Whilst these welfare measures are welcome, they do not deal with the root of the problem: the exploitation of innocent animals for human gain. Only a ban on equestrian sports at the Olympics can begin to safeguard these horses.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This haunted history highlights that tales of abuse are not isolated cases. They are visible shoots from deep rooted cruelty that is entirely woven into the fabric of equestrian sports.

Even if the horses are treated with kindness – as we know many will be – using them in sports is still wrong. From an animal rights perspective, animals are not here for us to use in any way: from food, to clothing, to drug testing, to entertainment. This is because as soon as we start to use an animal, we are treating them like an object, rather than a sentient being with desires and agency entirely of their own. It is simply unacceptable to sentence an innocent animal to a life of gruelling demand, a painful training regime, risk of injury and total subjugation. They have no choice; but you do.



**DROP YOUR SUPPORT FOR
EQUESTRIAN 'SPORTS'.**

**IT'S TIME FOR THE
OLYMPICS TO GO ANIMAL-
FREE.**

