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Guest Editorial

Behind the vertical and behind the times



The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) recently introduced goal-line technology to support officials' decision-making, thus increasing objectivity in soccer. In contrast, the equine industry, most notably in dressage and horse breeding, persistently relies on the subjective decisions of judges alone. Judging sport horse performance is far from simple. Humans move their mounts around with pressure (from bits and spurs) but clearly horses are not mere items of sporting equipment. Unlike soccer balls, they can suffer pain and distress. Existing technology can advance fairness in sport but can also monitor animal welfare. In particular, it can help horse sports to catch up with other pursuits that demand integrity but also fairness for participants.

In this issue of *The Veterinary Journal*, Dr Morgan Lashley and colleagues reveal that head angles in elite dressage were less correct in 2008 than in 1992, and that these flaws were associated with higher dressage scores (Lashley et al., 2014). Performances are more pleasing to judges, while true quality is declining. Together with evidence from Kienapfel et al. (2014), who found that riders at lower (but not advanced) levels are penalised when their horses evade the bit and descend behind the vertical, the findings show that judges struggle to respond to this evasion. However, blaming only the judges is too simplistic. Riders frequently flex their horses less as they transition from warm-up to competition (Kienapfel et al., 2014), indicating their awareness of correct technique.

Horses that fall behind the vertical evade the bit as a response to bit pressure. Bit pressure that does not signal deceleration is confusing for horses (McLean and McGreevy, 2010). The posture also compromises vision and airway function (Sleutjens et al., 2012) while the putative sustained gymnastic benefits have been refuted (Rhodin et al., 2009). For good reason, the FEI rules of dressage state on no fewer than nine occasions that the head should remain close to ($n = 3$) or in front of ($n = 6$) the vertical.¹

Dressage (that comes from the French word '*dresser*' – to train) is all about training. It showcases best practice. If horse welfare cannot be assured in dressage, then what hope is there for other horse sports? The subjectivity of judging in dressage exposes it to accusations of bias. So, this fresh unequivocal evidence that the rules are not being observed and judges are missing evasions is disappointing, but not entirely surprising.

Knowing that judging deficits can be at the expense of horse welfare (Hawson et al., 2010) and that being ridden behind the

vertical is associated with conflict behaviour (von Borstel et al., 2009; Kienapfel et al., 2014) is far more troubling. Arguably worse still is that the trend for hyperflexion is trickling down to the grass roots. Indeed, nowadays most dressage horses at competitions (69%; Kienapfel et al., 2014) and when advertised for sale (68%; McGreevy et al., 2010) are ridden behind the vertical. Even in the initial training of 3-year-old horses, professionals ride this way (22%; König von Borstel et al., 2011). Such fundamental departures from best practice are unwelcome news for the FEI. The organisation's stated commitment is to '*preserve and protect the welfare of the Horse . . .*'² and the Federation repeatedly assures us and the media that welfare of the horses is 'paramount'. Its 2009 decision to disband its own welfare sub-committee seems more ill-judged than ever.

We have entered a time defined by information technology, where every smartphone can record animal use and abuse. Judging decisions would be less assailable if judges could draw on such evidence-based assessment of head posture, movements, conformation or correct fit of gear. We have also entered a time when pushing horses beyond their physiological limits in the name of sport is being questioned. So now, more than ever, we have to demonstrate that horse sports are both sustainable and ethical.

The period reported by Lashley et al. (2014) covered 1992–2008, which coincides with the rise in use of restrictive nosebands that are now almost ubiquitous in elite dressage. The 'abuse of a horse using . . . artificial aids . . . will not be tolerated' by the FEI¹ but restrictive nosebands are unique as the only permitted piece of equipment designed to prevent normal behaviour. Tight nosebands prevent horses opening their mouths, a response that attracts penalties and is highly probable in horses ridden behind the vertical (von Borstel et al., 2009). The rise in restrictive nosebands and the descent of horses' noses behind the vertical are no coincidence. The nosebands facilitate the flaw, while masking the horses' discomfort. With perceived competitive advantages ensuing from tightened nosebands, the FEI must resume control of this equipment.

Fortunately, help is at hand. In a Guest Editorial published recently in *The Veterinary Journal*, Professor Vinzenz Gerber of the University of Bern underlined the growing importance of equitation science in helping to resolve horse welfare matters (Gerber, 2014). Moreover, the International Society for Equitation Science,³ the independent, scholarly organisation bringing together veterinarians and scientists

¹ Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), 2014a. Dressage rules 25th edition, effective 1 January 2014. <http://www.fei.org/fei/regulations/dressage>. Accessed 1 October 2014.

² Fédération Equestre Internationale, 2014b. General rules. www.fei.org/fei/regulations/general-rules. Accessed 1 October 2014.

³ See: <http://www.equitation-science.com>.

committed to best practice at the human–horse interface, has always aimed to assist the FEI in determining what practices are acceptable on welfare grounds. That is why it developed a standardised taper gauge to assist with noseband checks. Correctly fitted nosebands allow horses to signal discomfort to riders and judges, thus reducing the use of undue bit pressure and hyperflexion induced by bit pressure.

In conducting over 30 studies on hyperflexion, equitation scientists have responded to the FEI's 2006 call for more research on the practice. We propose that collating the results of all these studies and applying a cost–benefit analysis should clarify deleterious effects on horses and whether any costs are justified.

The time has come for horse sport organisations to show that they are leading the way, lest they be led by other authorities, such as the International Olympic Committee. Dressage, eventing and show-jumping are unique in that they are the only sports that use animals at the Olympic level. As such, they must be able to respond to concerns about animal welfare. The FEI does not need a *sub*-committee but a *full* committee devoted to monitoring and advancing horse welfare. Horses deserve such a committee that *leads* rather than reacts, that deploys new technologies to assist judges, that ensures that sound principles are held sacred, and that assures the watching world that the welfare of equine athletes is truly paramount.

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