Clothes make the rider? Equestrian competition dress and sporting identity

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Abstract

Tailored jackets, long boots and white gloves are clothes not normally associated with sport, yet they make up required competition dress within equestrianism. The modern equestrian sports of dressage and show jumping have their origins in the military and on the hunting field, and this highly formal, masculine style persists in contemporary equestrian circles. Perceived by many non-participants as archaic, comical and distinctly unsporty, equestrian competition dress requirements have remained relatively unchanged for a century and are one factor (amongst many others) that visibly marks equestrianism as different to most other sporting practices. This paper draws on an ethnographic study of equestrian sport in Britain in order to consider how participants today relate to and experience formal competition dress in the course of regular sporting activities. Formal competition dress is an important aspect of individual sporting identity for contemporary riders and is understood by participants to represent the unusual ethos of equestrian sport.

Keywords: dress; equestrian; gender; identity; sport

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Introduction

> Sensing the completeness of the horse, man has sought to equal in raiment and accoutrement, that simple splendour, that physical ideal. The highly refined domain of the horse is a polished, highly stylized realm reflecting the glory and exhilaration he inspires. (Vreeland, 1984, p.9)

There is nothing very athletic about the appearance of equestrian sport competition dress. Riders competing in dressage and show jumping – the foci of this article – bear little resemblance to common-sense understandings of 'an athlete'. Rather than some variation on shorts and vest or a lycra bodysuit or even a leotard or swimming costume, moulded to the contours of the human form, the bodies of (human) equestrian athletes are almost completely covered by relatively thick, formally styled garments, with only the face on display. Attired in long leather boots, white breeches, a formal jacket and shirt, gloves and a helmet or hat the equestrian athlete inspires ideas of grace, elegance and formality, as described in the opening quote, but not of sportiness, athleticism and action. Yet equestrian sport is highly athletic, requiring physical skill, fitness, balance and strength in varying measures. In this article we draw on an ethnographic study of the social world surrounding equestrian sport to consider some of the meanings and significance of this seemingly archaic and highly formal sporting attire for contemporary riders in Britain.

Dress has been marginalised in the sporting literature, confined largely to discussions related to the suitability and durability of specific materials and styles, and shopping preferences for sportswear (see Casselmann-Dickson & Damhorst, 1993; Fowler, 1999; Chae et al., 2006; Bae & Miller, 2009; Mitchka et al., 2009). Yet dress warrants much greater consideration in relation to sporting activities and identities. Dress is a powerful medium through which people make statements about who they are, how they think of themselves and how they want others to perceive them (Swain, 2002). Appearance is a primary form of communication – deliberate and not deliberate – in the construction of identities at individual and group levels (Strauss, 2003; Hansen, 2004). Sporting dress has to be functional, maximising performance for elite and grassroots athletes, but it must also be comfortable and aesthetically pleasing,

providing the wearer with a sense of herself as an athlete, and specifically identifying her with her chosen sport, team or other affiliation (Wheat & Dickson, 1999; Dickson & Pollack, 2000). Sporting dress can both empower and undermine athletes, having consequences for athletic performance (Steinfeldt et al., 2013), and so a large industry has built up around active sportswear. Increasingly complex designs utilise fabric, cut and technology to provide innovative solutions to clothing and supporting the athletic body, contributing to seemingly-miniscule improvements in sporting performance – improvements that can nonetheless make the difference between winning and coming second.

On first impressions equestrian sport appears to have remained largely unaffected by these technological and design innovations that have taken hold in the wider sporting world. Equestrian competition dress has not changed markedly since these sports developed at the turn of the twentieth century (see Bryant, 2008). The influences of the military and the hunting field can still be seen in the formal and ritualised styles of contemporary equestrian dress, contributing to perceptions that equestrian sport is not 'real sport' and is just a play form for the rich and privileged (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013). However, equestrian sport is increasingly popular with people from widely divergent socio-economic backgrounds who have no direct links to these equestrian traditions and is enjoyed particularly by women, who it might be expected would dislike the formal, masculine styles of equestrian competition dress (BHS, 2012). Yet, as we discuss further below, there are rarely calls to change competition traditions and attempts to update equestrian dress and make it appear more 'modern' and 'sporty' have been met with resistance from within the equestrian world.

The equestrian world is not completely impervious to design and technological change and innovation, however, and the large equestrian clothing industry has found ways of making subtle yet significant changes to competition dress to make it more stylish, flattering and functional, whilst still maintaining the traditional appearance of formality and grace prized within this social world. At the same time riders themselves have adapted elements of equestrian competition dress, for example through the popularity of specific hairstyles within different subgroups or through the adoption of 'bling' – added sparkle and glamour for both horse and rider. The equestrian social world is a complex mix of tradition and modernity, and a context in which ritual and heritage are prized alongside respect for change and innovation (Dashper, 2014, In press a). Equestrian competition dress provides a clear visual representation of some of these paradoxes of contemporary equestrian sport.

We begin this article by considering some of the issues pertinent to discussions of sporting dress, and particularly links between such attire and personal identity of the wearer. We then move on to discuss equestrian competition dress in more detail, exploring its historical roots and contemporary expressions. After presenting the method employed in the study on which this paper is based we draw on ethnographic data to explore how riders in the UK negotiate the boundaries between tradition and modernity, and custom and innovation through their choice of and feelings about equestrian competition dress. We argue that the seemingly opposing tendencies that are so visibly represented through equestrian competition dress illustrate the importance of attire to sporting identity, both for individual athletes and for an entire sport.

Dress, sport and identity

Dress is a marker of identity for many different groups and individuals (Schofield & Schmidt, 2005; Omair, 2009; Kelly, 2010). The ways we dress are historically, socially and culturally specific and are influenced by a variety of factors including age, gender and class (Twigg, 2007; Peters et al., 2011). Goodman et al. (2007) developed the concept of 'doing dress' to argue that dress is a complex process that is about much more than just putting on a specific garment. Rather, dress is an important part of social interaction and how we attempt to manage, communicate and police identities in different contexts and social spaces. They argue:

> Individuals utilize dress to create expressions of who they are in relation to others. Doing dress can become a struggle between how one perceives oneself (identity) and the expectation of a certain criterion of the western American society/culture in which one lives (context). (Goodman et al., 2007: 102)

In relation to sport, these tensions between the expression of individual identity and conforming to expectations about appropriate dress for a particular activity or competition are often felt by athletes. All sports require that participants wear some kind of sportswear and in formal sporting competitions there may be rules and regulations about what athletes can and cannot wear. Team sports often have uniforms for athletes, with variations in colour and adornment for different clubs or teams (Wheat & Dickson, 1999; Steinfeldt et al., 2013). Uniforms can act as a means of instilling discipline and conformity and increasing performance be that in school, the workplace or sport (Compton & McAllister, 2005).

Uniforms ostensibly reduce individual variation so that performance is judged on merit more than aesthetics and presentation. However, although uniforms reduce variability between individuals in terms of appearance, the wearing of a uniform does not completely remove the agency of the wearer to adapt aspects of that uniform to express elements of their individual identity, as well as their membership of a team, club or sport (Williams, 2015)

For athletes, opportunities to express individual identities through clothing are somewhat limited by the norms of their particular sporting culture, as well as other factors such as the age, sex, ethnicity and/or sexuality of the athlete, exemplifying some of the complexities within Goodman et al.'s (2007) concept of doing dress. Attitudes to athlete appearance and athletic dress codes and standards can expose and amplify many tensions already inherent in the organisation and practice of sport. McDonald and Toglia (2010) show how clothing can be an important marker of racial and ethnic identity. They discuss the NBA's 2005 implementation of a new dress policy for players, requiring them to wear 'business casual attire' when on NBA business. Many commentators saw the policy as unproblematic but for others it was a direct attack on 'the hip-hop generation' represented by the largely black players in the league, by the white management of the NBA. McDonald and Toglia (2010) argue that this case exemplifies the usually invisible workings of whiteness in corporate sport, and illustrates how dress and dress codes are loaded with social, cultural and political meanings.

Dress is important to sporting practices and identities in various nuanced ways. Although there are often similarities between the dress worn for different sports, each sport has its own set of norms, rules and regulations when it comes to appropriate competition attire, linked to historical and social specificities of different sports. In the next section we consider the development of the highly unusual, in sporting terms, dress that is required in competition in equestrian sport.

Equestrian competition dress

Humans have ridden horses for centuries, but the equestrian sports of dressage and show jumping which form the basis for this paper emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. With strong links to the military and the hunting field, these equestrian sports were highly formal and masculine, and this was reflected in the dress required for competition. Dress is an important part of equestrian circles and there are often subtle differences in the styles worn

by different subgroups, from the race-goers (Fox, 2005; Goodrum, 2015) to the side saddle ladies (Goodrum, 2012, 2014) to the horsey, countryside style that characterises spectators at contemporary equestrian events (Goodrum & Hunt, 2011). Equestrian competition dress is dictated by the rules and regulations of the corresponding sports organisations (British Dressage and British Showjumping, in the context of this article) which themselves are informed by equestrian traditions passed down from the military and the hunting field.

For centuries hunting with hounds was an extremely important rural activity, and continues to be so in many equestrian circles today. Marvin (2003) suggests that hunting is a cultural performance enacted in the countryside, in which dress is an important constituent. Hunting dress is functional – it has to withstand a full day's riding in all weathers, to support the rider and not interfere with the horse, and to protect the rider in the event of a fall. Yet hunting dress is also symbolic, based on ritual and customs that have been developed over 1000 years (Mackay-Smith, et al., 1984). Hunting expert Thomas (1933) explained how 'certain precedents have developed conventions of dress that lend dignity to the chase' (p.163) and detailed how different colours and styles are linked with the history of certain hunts and delineate the status and position of different actors on the hunting field. Hunting is a ritualistic activity and correct 'turnout' of both horse and rider is a prerequisite for attendance and is seen as a mark of respect to the hunt, staff and hounds. Talking of some American riders who arrived at a meet, Thomas (1933: 168) lamented:

> Frequently not only will their clothes be inappropriate, but, what is worse, they will be unworkmanlike, and to appear unworkmanlike in one's sporting clothes is inexcusable; or, to quote Whyte Melville in *Riding Recollections*, "To be correctly dressed is a compliment to society".

The idea that equestrian dress should be smart, follow conventions and be functional has been translated from the hunting field into the show ring. Another important attitude to dress that can be traced to hunting is the idea that to be dressed correctly is a moral position – it denotes respect for oneself, for other riders and actors (be they huntsmen or dressage judges), to equestrianism more broadly and to the horse, the generous partner in human equestrian activities. These notions are expressed frequently by contemporary riders, as we show below.

The other important historical influence on contemporary equestrian competition dress comes from the military. Both show jumping and dressage developed from military circles, and competition at the Olympic Games was restricted to commissioned officers until 1952 for

dressage and 1956 for show jumping (FEI, n.d.). Many of the military officers involved in the development of show jumping and dressage in the first part of the twentieth century were also active on the hunting field (Williams, 1968). The combined influence of the military and hunting led to formal standards of dress for equestrian sport as well, and the style seen today – boots, light breeches, jacket, shirt and tie or stock, hat and gloves – owes much to its military and hunting backgrounds. The purpose of equestrian competition dress was thus not to look 'sporty' but more to display elegance and dignity whilst also enabling the rider to move with and on the horse without impediment.

Both the military and the hunting field are masculine domains (Riedi, 2006) and consequently equestrian dress is masculine in style and appearance. Equestrian sport is unusual in being the only Olympic-level sport in which men and women compete against each other on equal terms at all levels and in all competitions (Dashper, 2012) and so, unusually, styles and standards of competition dress apply equally to men and women, with no major exceptions. Although men perform disproportionately well at the elite levels of equestrian sport (Dashper, 2013), women dominate dressage and show jumping numerically at all other levels and equestrianism is often described as a feminised domain (Dashper, In press a). Given this, it might be expected that equestrian competition dress would have changed to become more feminine in style, with changes to cut, design and form to reflect the body shapes, tastes and preferences of a largely female participant group, but this is not the case at all. There have been relatively few changes to formal equestrian competition dress in a century.

Bourdieu (1978) argued that sport is one way in which different social groups distinguish themselves, with embodied knowledge, physical prowess and dress used as markers of distinction between insiders and outsiders. Involvement in equestrian sport can be seen in part as an outward display of social status, as these sports do require significant financial and cultural capital (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013), and equestrian competition dress is a visual mark of distinction. Certainly historical texts on equestrian dress, equestrian art and equestrian sport emphasise ideas of dignity and status that come with riding such a noble animal as a horse, an idea reflected in the quote at the beginning of this article. Equestrian dress embodies these concepts through its formal, dignified and timeless styles.

Although equestrian sport and competition dress are strongly tied to equestrian heritage and tradition – and the ideas of status and privilege that these imply – these are not the only meanings important to understanding the continuance of these formal styles into the

contemporary period. Over the last thirty years equestrian sport, along with most other sports, has undergone a rapid period of modernisation and professionalization that has changed the practices of the sport and opened it up to a much broader demographic (Dashper, 2014). For all its tradition and links to rich historical roots, equestrian sport is just that – sport. As such, equestrianism has had to adapt to a changing sporting environment, becoming more streamlined, slick and attractive to wide audiences and investors. Competition dress is an element of this modernisation and many clothing designers and manufacturers have made subtle changes to equestrian attire to make it more effective and attractive.

For some commentators outside of equestrianism, competition dress presents an image problem for the sport making it look archaic, inaccessible and even faintly ridiculous (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013). As such an important and visible outward display, all dress – even active sportswear – needs to make the wearer feel good, be that in terms of looking and feeling 'cool' or even sexy. Many sports' participants adapt sportswear with changing fashions and trends (Thorpe, 2004), but in relation to competition dress, such adaptations seem to have largely evaded equestrian sport. In 2008 British Showjumping (BS) decided that the sport needed a shake-up to attract new audiences, sponsors and TV viewers. At the 2008 British Masters dress codes were relaxed and riders wore polo shirts with their names on the back, rather than the traditional jacket. To accompany this new more relaxed and sporty look BS launched an advertising campaign featuring high profile female riders in few clothes, posed provocatively with whips and hay bales. This attempt to sex-up show jumping was an effort to shake up the image of the sport, exemplified through traditional competition dress, and show a new more fun and exciting side. This attempt backfired. Sponsors voiced their dissatisfaction with the new approach (Daniels, 2008) while equestrian discussion forums were ablaze with disgust at the 'tacky' and 'desperate' campaign (Horse and Hound forum, 2008). This was a bold attempt by the sport's organising body to change the visual image of show jumping through adapting the dress of athletes and an accompanying marketing campaign that aimed to show that the sport was exciting, modern and sexy, rather than traditional and formal. That such an attempt brought censure from both within and outside the equestrian world shows that the image of equestrian sport, and riders themselves, is deeply entrenched in its unique history and heritage that marks it out as visually different to all other competitive sports. In the study on which this article is based we sought to understand better how contemporary riders feel about competition dress in relation to their own sporting identities and the identity of equestrian sport more broadly.

Method

Equestrian competition dress raises lots of interesting questions relating to sporting and gender identities, and tensions between modernity and tradition. As part of an eight-year (2008-2015) multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreigh, 2010) the first author observed many occasions during which horse riders paid attention to their dress, in terms of preparing for competition, psyching themselves up for the sport and adapting garments to suit them better. As a participant observer in the social world surrounding equestrian competition, and a long-time rider and competitor herself, she had engaged in these practices countless times and conversed with numerous people about the specificities and peculiarities of equestrian dress.

The second author is a master tailor, designer and creative director for international sports and fashion brands. Relatively new to the equestrian world, he was filled with questions and surprise about competition dress and its seeming lack of advancement in design and technological sophistication, especially given the high financial investment in the sport in relation to other matters.

Our idea for the current paper came from conversations in which our differing backgrounds and positions – one as equestrian specialist, the other as design specialist – drew our attention to the importance of dress in defining the equestrian world. We recognised that competition dress is representative of equestrian tradition and heritage, but also reflects contemporary attitudes about the uniqueness of this unusual sport involving partnership between human and horse (Dashper, In press b). In order to explore these issues further, the first author included a new theme within her ongoing ethnographic fieldwork (2014-2015), relating to competition dress.

The following sections are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted within the equestrian world in Britain, involving a wide range of methods including observation, participant observation, formal and informal interviews, focus groups, document analysis and online materials. Observations, interviews and discussions involved riders from a variety of equestrian backgrounds (such as show jumping, dressage, and trail riding) and encompassing professional and leisure riders, and included male and female participants aged 16-70. Ethnographic field notes recorded informal conversations and observations on a regular basis. In total over 80 formal interviews were conducted, many of which included discussions of

rider identity, dress and appearance. Dress became an explicit topic of discussion in 15 of the interviews, in relation to this article. Thirty-three interview respondents were professional riders, and while the rest are amateurs or hobbyists, many engage in equestrian competition – often alongside professional riders - and thus wear competition dress. Equestrian sport is female dominated numerically and this was reflected in the interview sample, as 28 participants were male and the rest female. Observation and participant observation took place at a wide range of locations, mainly in England but including some venues in Scotland and Wales, over the full 8 year period of the study. These locations included equestrian competitions (encompassing different equestrian disciplines and levels, from grassroots to elite), training clinics, livery yards and private facilities where horses are kept.

We analysed this wide-ranging data thematically in relation to the topics discussed in the earlier sections of this paper, drawing on our different practical and theoretical backgrounds. In the next sections we present examples that illustrate various ways in which contemporary riders in Britain think, feel, act and talk about competition dress in order to explore some of the contradictions inherent in this unusual sporting attire and its significance to riders and the sport as a whole.

Results

A number of different themes emerged from our analysis. For the purposes of this paper we have focused on two interconnected themes that illustrate complex and often contradictory responses to preserving or reworking tradition and demonstrate how competition dress is important to the development and sustenance of the sporting identities of individual riders and the identity of equestrianism as a sport.

Individual rider identities

Many sporting practices are imbued with ritual, and athletes often develop their own pre-competition customs in order to calm their nerves and try to court good fortune (Schippers & van Lange, 2006; Rudski & Edwards, 2007). Many equestrian athletes also have pre-competition rituals, some of which involve competition dress. Unlike most other sports, horse riders have to think of another being in addition to themselves in terms of preparation – the horse. The horse must be prepared before the rider can ready herself for competition. For

many riders, changing from everyday equestrian clothes (worn when cleaning and preparing the horse) into formal competition dress is more than just a change in garments – it is a symbolic transformation in purpose and attitude.

> It [competition dress] makes me feel smart, special I suppose. I put on my white jods [jodphurs or breeches] and jacket and I feel different, I feel ready. She's [her horse] clean and plaited and now I look the part too, it's the whole picture, it feels really good (Emma, dressage and show jumping).

Many riders expressed similar sentiments, suggesting that the act of putting on competition dress triggered some kind of internal transformation in how they felt, turning them into a 'proper' rider. Johnsen et al. (2008) argue that dress actually affects how people behave and respond to each other, and many of the participants in this study certainly felt that wearing formal competition dress affected their mental attitude and often their riding practice:

> It [competition dress] affects how I ride, I'm sure it does. When I'm all dressed up I definitely ride better, I sit up more, I keep my head up, I perform, I suppose. Even when things are going wrong underneath me and Piper's [her horse] not listening and going rubbish, I sit up, bring my shoulders back, smile and tell myself 'I'm a princess, I'm dressed like a princess, ride like a princess!' (laughs) It helps, I'm sure it does, I've made all that effort for us both to look great we're damn well going to win! (Vicki, dressage).

The act of wearing the formal and traditional styles of equestrian competition dress enables riders to feel like they are tapping into a rich equestrian heritage and that the sports competition is an occasion, it is out of the ordinary and something special. Being dressed in formal competition clothes makes many riders feel different to how they normally feel when they ride; in wearing competition dress they actually *become* a competition rider.

For Anna, quoted below, removing her competition dress at the end of a day's competing is almost cathartic as she returns to her more relaxed, non-competitive self when she takes off her white breeches, shirt and dark jacket:

> I feel good in it [competition dress] and I love the contrast between the white jods and the dark boots and jacket, I think it looks really smart and I feel proud when I wear it. But I love taking it off as well! It's like putting pyjamas on after a long

> day at work, I take off my competition stuff and put my normal gear back on and I can just breathe and relax and be me again (Anna, show jumping).

The formal style makes equestrian competition dress very unusual in terms of sporting attire. Many riders suggested that the smartness and tradition of the required dress was a cherished part of equestrian competition but also very impractical for wearing around horses:

> It [competition dress] looks good, I know it does, but it's so impractical. It's ridiculous when you think about it. White jodhpurs and horses just don't mix! One snort and you've got green snot down your leg! And it's hot to wear as well. The modern designs are pretty lightweight but they're still hot in the summer, and you've got half a ton of sweating horse underneath you as well (Rachel, dressage).

Rachel was asked if she would consider taking off her jacket to compete in the summer:

> Well it depends on the judge I suppose. Some say it's ok to take off jackets when it's really hot and you do see some riders just in their shirt sleeves but not many and I don't think I'd do it either. I mean you're only in the ring about 6 minutes, I can sweat it out for that long. It just looks so much better when you've got the jacket on too. It's so much smarter and more correct and I know it shouldn't matter to your [dressage] marks but I think it does. It's all about the overall impression, looking the part is half the battle, and you just don't look like a dressage rider in your shirt sleeves.

Over the course of this study riders were observed competing without jackets in very hot weather, but this was rare. Most riders appear to agree with Rachel that to be taken seriously requires that riders embody the ideal of a (dressage) rider – and this is tied closely to wearing the full competitive dress that is standard in this sport.

As argued above, the style of equestrian competition dress is masculine, yet the majority of riders below elite level are female, as were many of the participants in this study. Women's bodies are physiologically different to men's in terms of shape, mass, movement and function and so women's sporting attire needs to be designed differently to that of men's (Bye & Hakala, 2005). Some participants in this study felt that the designers and manufacturers of equestrian competition dress did take into account the differing body shapes and needs of female riders, describing competition jackets as "tailored", "sculpted" and "fitted". However,

women whose bodies do not resemble those of the models seen in equestrian media[i] – because they are relatively short or heavy, for example – felt that the styles and options available to them were more limited:

> I'm quite big across the shoulders but I've actually got a waist somewhere underneath these layers of jumpers, believe it or not! So I have to buy men's jackets because the women's don't fit my back and are half way up my arms, but the men's jackets are for men, of course, so they just hang off me round the middle. They make me look really masculine and like I've got no shape. I have to have my jackets adjusted and nipped in at the waist otherwise I look awful (Toni, dressage).

For Toni the range of styles and sizes available are not suitable for her needs and make her feel masculine and unattractive in her competition dress, which is in marked contrast to the positive feelings expressed above by other riders. Dress is an important part of gender identity (Goodman et al., 2007) so the ways that standard competition dress make Toni (and other larger women) feel masculine is unsettling for her. Feeling uncomfortable and unattractive in competition clothes can have detrimental effects on sporting performance (Dickson & Pollack, 2000; Steinfeldt et al., 2013) so the lack of diversity in style and cut in equestrian competition dress may unfairly disadvantage some female riders.

However, although equestrian competition dress is masculine in style, in terms of formality and use of jackets and ties, many men in the sport feel that the range of styles available to them is also limited, particularly when it comes to legwear (breeches or jodhpurs). Many men and women in the sport mentioned that tight breeches are not flattering for men and male participants expressed a desire to ensure that they could source breeches that were at once functional (and thus not too baggy or loose to get in the way during riding) and flattering and not too revealing when they are not mounted on the horse:

> It can be difficult, as a man, to find something that fits. I mean I'm quite tall and everything and I can't just go into any saddlery and find something that fits. There's loads for girls and women and little boys but for men? Not so much. And so I end up spending quite a bit to find something that fits, that isn't too short, or too tight, or too revealing, if you know what I mean! (Pete, show jumping).

Throughout this study no riders expressed dissatisfaction with the overall style of equestrian competition dress, although there was some frustration with the sizes, cuts and cost of such

apparel and there are gendered attributes to this supposedly gender-neutral style. For all riders in this study formal competition dress is a fundamental part of equestrian sport and wearing such clothing makes them feel like a competitive rider, regardless of whether they are amateur or professional riders. Competition clothing is thus important to the formation and sustenance of individual rider identities but also feeds into a wider collective identity based around equestrian sport.

The identity of equestrian sport

The collective identity of a particular practice is important for participants and people become involved with different sports, teams and events in part in order to associate themselves with this collective shared experience (Green, 2001). Equestrian sport has a strong identity, linked to its rich heritage and tradition, as discussed earlier in this article. Equestrian sport is visibly different to other sports: it is the only Olympic-level sport in which men and women compete against each other on equal terms; it is the only Olympic-level sport which involves a nonhuman animal; and it is the only active sport that requires participants to wear such formal attire for competition (Dashper, 2012, In press b). For the participants in this study these visual distinctions are an important part of what makes equestrian sport special and a source of collective pride and interest for those involved:

> I think it [competition dress] makes equestrian sport special, different, you know? Like in the Olympics it just looks like something special, even if you don't ride you'd look at Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro [double gold medallists at the 2012 Olympic Games] and think they look amazing, everything about them is just perfect (Kerry, dressage and show jumping).

The image presented by elite level riders in their formal competition dress was upheld as a positive visual expression of what is different and special about equestrian sport, creating an inspiring model for amateur riders to emulate:

> For us, you know, horsey people, they're [elite riders] our celebrities I suppose. They're the people we read about and look up to and when you see them all turned out perfectly and looking so smart you think 'I want to look like that'. Like when Ellen Whitaker [British show jumper] was at the top of her game, all the little girls wanted to look like her and ride like her and be her. You'd see this red-

> jacketed small rider enter the ring and you'd just know it was her before she was announced, and the image is so important in making the sport look and feel special (Amy, dressage and show jumping).

Sporting icons can be powerful motivators and unite enthusiasts around a sport (Dashper & Fletcher, 2013). In equestrian sport the image of the elite rider in formal competition dress is something that amateur riders want to emulate and feel connected to through their own competition dress and style. In such ways a collective sporting identity is reinforced based around the unusual and distinctive styles of dress in this sporting field.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that cultural taste is class-related, with different groups attracted to different activities. The habitus of groups and individuals within different social contexts refers to a particular set of dispositions and ways of being that embody the field and social location of those within it. In relation to equestrian sport the habitus is complex and made up of a variety of factors including embodied skill and knowledge, connection to others and comportment – including dress. Equestrian competition dress is a clear marker of distinction between those embedded within this field and everyone else. Dress can be used to both include individuals, as outlined above, and to exclude and mark the boundaries between those who are full members of the equestrian field and those on the margins. Many participants in this study felt that equestrian competition dress was potentially excluding some riders from equal participation in competitive events:

> It's [competition dress] so expensive, well the good stuff is anyway. And you can really tell the difference between the cheap stuff and the good stuff. So like at riding club you've got two kids in the same class: one's got wealthy parents who buy her a flashy pony, expensive boots and jacket, all the gear, and she does really look the part; then you've got the other one whose parents can't afford to splash out, she's on an old hairy pony, borrowed clothes, and she's hacked[ii] three miles just to get to the show field. Well with the best will in the world it is the first kid who looks better and it's so hard for a judge to look at the hairy pony and the scruffy kid and see the same as the other one, she just doesn't look as good. And it's such a shame because it shouldn't be about who can afford the best clothes and the flashy pony but it becomes that way unfortunately (Katrina, dressage).

The visual image of equestrian sport is one of elegance, poise and prestige, passed down from hunting and military traditions. This marks equestrian sport out as perceptibly different to other sports and this is certainly a mark of distinction, linked to the prestige and status of riding in previous times. This can be exclusionary and contributes to wider perceptions of equestrian sport as elitist (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013).

However not all participants in this study saw equestrian sport, as exemplified visually through competition dress, as elitist and exclusionary. For many the formality of competition dress represents the culture of the sport which is based around respect – for the horse, for the judge and for other riders – passed down from the hunting field:

> It's a question of respect really. Like you don't have to plait up [plait the horse's mane], but I think it shows respect for the judge. It's the same with your own clothes and turnout. You can go in scruffy, dirty boots and hair flying about, but that just seems rude. The judge is giving up time to share her knowledge and opinion, the show organisers are mainly volunteers giving up their Sunday, the horse is willingly doing what you ask, the least you can do is make an effort to look smart. It's kind of a thank you to them really, a sign of appreciation and respect for what riding is all about (Amber, dressage and show jumping).

For Amber, and many others, equestrian sport has a unique ethos based around respect. Competition dress exemplifies this spirit and marks equestrian sport out as special and different to other sports.

Conclusions

Equestrian competition dress is striking and different in the world of sporting attire. As a sport heavily steeped in tradition and heritage, equestrianism retains strong links to its historical roots in the military and on the hunting field and this is reflected in the style of competition dress. With connotations of prestige, grace and status, equestrian competition dress is formal, masculine and not very sporty, and thus may appear outdated and inappropriate for modern sporting competition. However, as we have demonstrated throughout this article, participants in equestrian sport value this unusual apparel and the distinction and uniqueness it offers equestrianism within the wider sporting field.

Dress is an important marker of individual and collective identities, even when dress is constrained by rules and regulations as is the case in relation to sports uniforms and dress codes. For riders, their competition dress is important to their sense of themselves as a competitive horseperson and many feel that it elevates their sporting performance. The participants in this study value the tradition and heritage of equestrianism that is reflected through formal competition dress, yet they also appreciate design innovations to make clothing fit better and perform under the demands of competitive sport. In such ways equestrian competition dress is a visual representation of some of the paradoxes of contemporary equestrian sport, caught as it is between the competing demands of tradition and modernity.

Competition dress is important in relation to individual rider's sporting identities and sense of themselves as competitive horse people, yet it is also symbolic of equestrian sport at a broader level. Dress is an expression of who the rider is, would like to be, and want others to think they are and so equestrian competition dress is revealing about the culture of equestrian sport. This is a sporting world which values tradition, espouses a rhetoric of respect, and is somewhat elitist in style and approach. As with any sport, equestrian sport is constantly changing and is opening up to a wider demographic who enter the field and have the potential to challenge and transform elements of the dominant culture, including competition dress. Equestrian sport has changed markedly in recent years in relation to the demographic of participants, competition formats, media outlets and fashionable breeds and types of horses (Dashper, 2014; In press a). Yet change is not happening in relation to equestrian competition dress and attempts by the sport's organising bodies to transform the sport's image through changing dress standards have met with resistance and outright opposition. This suggests that participants in this sporting world value current dress standards and what it says about equestrian sport. For participants in this study, equestrian sport is special and different to other sports for a variety of reasons, and to have this difference visually expressed through competition dress reinforces their engagement in this sporting world.

Equestrian competition dress acts as a marker of belonging within the horse world and sets equestrian sport out as visually different to other sports. Competition dress unites riders across different competition levels, as amateur riders wear the same styles and seek to emulate the look of their professional idols. Although seeming somewhat elitist, strict dress codes can diminish differences – be that between men and women, professionals and amateurs, or across age or ethnic boundaries. One of the unique and progressive aspects of

equestrian sport is that it is relatively egalitarian, in all ways expect for in relation to cost. It is one of the few sex integrated sports at all levels; there are no age barriers to participation and competition (although some events include junior (under 16) and senior sections), and amateurs and professionals frequently compete against each other in the same competitions. Equestrian competition dress helps to minimise these differences and create a visual level playing field, although this is constrained by financial status and ability to pay for high quality apparel.

Although the participants in this study were broadly positive about equestrian competition dress there were some areas of dissatisfaction raised that warrant further consideration. A lack of diversity in styles, sizes and fit can make competition dress unappealing to women with certain body types and shapes and can emphasise the masculinity of this formal style. This may make some women feel uncomfortable in their competition dress which may have adverse effects on their sporting performance (Wheat & Dickson, 1999). Men may also struggle to find competition clothing which is both comfortable and flattering. The high cost of certain garments is another limiting factor and reinforces negative assumptions about equestrian sport as elitist and exclusionary – despite the potential for breaking down visual barriers and markers of difference, as suggested above - and this may be to the long term detriment of the sport in terms of sponsorship and TV deals. The mismatch between the elegance of current styles and the practicalities of being around horses is a further issue to be considered, possibly through the use of innovative new materials and techniques. There are clearly areas for improvement for designers and manufacturers to address and for researchers to explore in more detail. However, equestrian competition dress is not likely to change significantly in terms of style and look as riders are deeply invested in the image represented through this sporting dress. This study shows how important dress is to this particular sporting sub-world in relation to the sporting identities of individual riders and, perhaps more importantly, in terms of visually characterising the ethos and culture of this sporting field.

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[i] Advertising and fashion shoots in equestrian media use models of similar shape and size to that seen in mainstream fashion media – i.e. tall, very slim, and toned but not overly muscular.

[ii] Hacking is an English term, similar to trail riding. To hack is to ride a horse outside of an arena, in open space or on the road. In the context of this quote the rider has 'hacked' to a competition, meaning that she rode her horse there and did not transport the horse on a trailer or lorry. Hacking to competitions is uncommon today in the UK due to the volume of traffic on the roads and associated safety concerns, and only a rider who does not have access to horse transportation would consider hacking to a competition, so this is an indication of the financial status of the rider.