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Tools of the trade or part of the family? Horses in competitive equestrian sport

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Abstract

The horse-human relationship is based on mutual respect and understanding, and the development of trusting partnerships may be particularly important in elite equestrian sport, where horses and humans rely on each other to tackle sporting challenges. The increasing commercialization of equestrian sport is eroding aspects of the horse-human relationship, as the commodity value of sports horses increases and the pressure for quick results threatens the formation of deep bonds between horse and rider. This article presents data from an ethnographic study of competitive equestrian sport in England, including interviews with 26 elite riders, to explore how the changing nature of elite equestrian sport is altering the basis of the horse-human relationship, changing the horse from a trusted partner in sporting pursuits to a commodity to be bought and sold for human commercial benefit.

Keywords: commercialization; equestrian sport; horse-human relationships; professionalism.

Introduction

The relationship between horses and humans is complex, long-standing and changing, as the role of horses in human societies has shifted from a utility-based connection linked to agriculture, transport and warfare, to a more consumption-based relationship grounded in sport, leisure and tourism. These changes in the bases of the horse-human relationship have impacted on the nature of those relationships. Many humans are now paying greater attention to trying to understand the horses in their care (Birke, 2007) and are questioning the moral status of those horses and the duty of care owed to them by humans (Hanrahan, 2007; Jonsson, 2012). At the same time, the financial and commercial value of sports horses is rising, the importance of breeding and performance is increasing, and the expanding equine industry is providing a proliferation of products and services to horse enthusiasts (Cassidy, 2002a; Gilbert & Gillett, 2011). The horse-human relationship is thus fraught with contradictions and tensions between ethics of care, respect and responsibility, and the output-focused pressures of commercialization and commodification.

Within the field of competitive equestrian sportⁱ that surrounds the Olympic disciplines of dressage, show-jumping and eventing, these pressures are particularly pronounced. If the ultimate goal of riding is to achieve “a oneness with the horse, a kind of fluid intersubjectivity” (Birke & Brandt, 2009, p.196) then professional riders must build strong relationships with their horses, based on mutual trust and respect, to produce a successful partnership in competition (Wipper, 2000). These relationships take time to develop. However, equestrian sport – as with all other modern sports – has become progressively more commercialized since the latter part of the twentieth century, with an increasing emphasis on quick results and returns on investment for sponsors, “owners”ⁱⁱ

and, consequently, riders. This results in what Gilbert and Gillett (2011, p.9) describe as a “microwave era” – a pressure for immediate success without the necessary groundwork and time that has traditionally been seen as essential for the development of effective horse-rider partnerships.

The changing nature of equestrian sport impacts on how professional riders view their horses. Whilst most riders still feel a duty of care towards their animals and would not act to deliberately harm them, commercial pressures are encouraging a more instrumental attitude towards their horses. If a horse does not show the capacity and ability to perform at the elite level, he will be sold to make space for an animal who can compete in that arena. Competition horses are thus reduced to the status of commodities to be bought and sold. At the same time, the dependency of most professional riders on “owners” and sponsors to fund their riding careers means that riders are put under increasing pressure to put sporting performance and success before horse welfare, horse and human safety, and the quality of the horse-human partnership. This can have serious consequences for the horses involved in elite equestrian sport as they occupy a liminal position: at once friend and partner in sporting pursuits, yet easily discarded if they prove to be not good enough in relation to the demands of that sport (Fox, 2006).

In this article I explore some of the tensions inherent in modern equestrian sport. Drawing on an ethnographic study of competitive equestrian sport in England, including interviews with elite-level riders, I consider how the demands of commercialization and the pressure for quick and visible results are changing the nature of the horse-human relationship within this milieu. This has consequences for both human and horse actors and highlights some of the

moral issues and ambiguities involved in contemporary horse-human relationships as experienced through the filter of modern sport.

The professionalization and commercialization of equestrian sport

Most modern sports were originally predicated on the ideals of amateurism - playing for love and passion rather than material rewards and praise (Mangan, 2000). However the origins of the contemporary Olympic equestrian disciplines are to be found within the military, and for the first part of the twentieth century Olympic equestrian competition was limited to military riders only (Bryant, 2008). As such, the development of equestrian sport was strongly linked to discipline, order, and certain class-based forms of masculinity (Reidi, 2006) and the ideals of amateurism did not pervade the subworld of competitive equestrian sport until competition was opened up to civilians (including women) in the mid-twentieth century. Equestrian sport thus developed as a mix of military discipline and tradition, and a certain middle- to upper-class understanding of amateurism where the dedicated owner of a supposedly talented horse was seen to be capable of competing, and winning, on the international stage (Martin, 1979).

Towards the end of the twentieth century sports became increasingly commercialized and commodified, with the input of large sums of money in the forms of sponsorship, media deals and product endorsements, and significant investments from individual wealthy patrons, cities and national governments, with the aims of using sport to make their team, city, or nation perceived to be successful and desirable (Slack, 2004; Horne, 2006; Rein & Shields, 2007).

The concept of commercialization used here follows that of Edwards and Corte

(2010) wherein it is seen as a multi-faceted process conducted by multiple collective and individual actors who often have competing agendas in relation to equestrian sport, as discussed further below. Perhaps due in part to its historical social and class –based roots, equestrian sport was slow to professionalize and held onto many of its amateur ideals and aspirations until the end of the twentieth century. However, equestrian sport is part of the wider sports nexus and global sports industry and so could not resist the encroaching demands of professionalism and commercialization that were taking hold elsewhere.

The economic impact of the horse industry in Europe is estimated at 100 billion Euros per year (European Horse Network, 2010), 39 billion US\$ in the United States (American Horse Council, 2005) and approximately 6.3 billion AUS\$ in Australia (Berger, 2006) – three of the regions where equestrian sport is most popular. These figures indicate that equestrian sport is more than just an amateur activity. It is a potentially lucrative and commercially appealing milieu, and as such equestrian sport has followed the rest of the sporting world down the road away from amateurism and towards professionalism, commercialism and commodification.

The influx of market-driven ideals that elevate profit-making over love for sport are often seen as negative developments, reflecting a growing divide between professional sport and passion for sporting involvement and achievement (Dubal, 2010). However, professionalism and commercialism have brought benefits to sport in terms of improved standards of sports medicine, improved sporting performances and securing the economic viability of many niche sporting practices (Howe, 2004; Peterson, 2008; Edwards & Corte, 2010). Within competitive equestrian sport commercialization has also had

contradictory effects, especially relative to the relationship between competition horses and the humans involved in elite equestrian sport.

Horses and humans within elite equestrian sport

The use of horses in human sport is a contested issue. Whilst equestrian sports are extremely popular, and many advocates of such activities stress the importance of harmony, communication and partnership between humans and horses (Wipper, 2000; Birke, 2007), horses do not choose to take part in equestrian sports and so their position will always be somewhat subordinate in relation to human athletes who usually do have the choice over whether or not to take part in sport (Jonsson, 2012).

The equestrian sports that form the focus of this article are often considered to be less physically damaging to their equine participants than the more confrontational and violent sport of rodeo (Larson, 1998), or the high rates of injury and attrition inherent in horse-racing (Arthur, 2011). Since Xenophon's (430BC/2006) influential treatise on equestrianism first appeared, classical riding and training has stressed harmony and co-operation between horse and rider. However, although modern equestrian sport (which is still based largely around the core principles of classical training) stresses harmony and partnership, equestrianism also contains reference to submission and a hierarchical relationship, which the human "partner" ultimately dominates (Goodwin, 1999). The contradictions inherent in equestrian rhetoric of partnership and harmony, combined with equine submission and human dominance, are epitomized in the debates surrounding the use of "Rolkur" – hyper-flexion – as a training technique (von Borstel, *et al.*, 2009). The horse-

human relationship as experienced within the context of elite sport is thus likely to be fraught with tensions and contradictions between harmony and co-operation on the one side, and the need for elite performance on the other. Relationships between humans and animals are frequently characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity, and this may be exacerbated for animals that perform some kind of service for humans, be that work, protection or sport (Sanders, 2006). Within the context of elite equestrian sport this ambivalence may be heightened further by the additional complication added by the high commodity value of elite sports horses.

The ambivalence of the horse-human relationship within equestrian sport is reflected in the language that surrounds horses and humans in this milieu (Stibbe, 2001). As stated, elite sport horses have a high commercial value and consequently few professional riders could afford one such animal, let alone the string of top quality horses necessary to compete successfully on the international stage. Riders are thus dependent on “owners”, who buy the horses, pay for their keep, and decide which rider should be given the chance to compete their horses. “Owners” are powerful within equestrian sport. They have the ability to move their top horses from one rider to another if a rider does not achieve the desired results, or to sell the horse with little notice to the rider if offered large sums of money, putting riders in a precarious position and subject to the whims of “owners”. British show jumper David McPherson had his potential Olympic horse, Pilgrim, sold out from underneath him at the beginning of the Olympic year in 2008. He was reported as saying,

You just can't put into words how you feel, but as much as I hated losing Pilgrim, in show jumping this is one of the facts of life. It's a business and horses exchange hands for an extraordinary amount

of money. There's not much you can do if owners choose to sell.

(Quoted in *Horse and Hound*, 2008).

“Owners” are in a position of power over riders, whose careers they effectively sponsor through providing the horsepower necessary for success. “Owners” are also in a position of power in relation to sports horses. Within elite equestrian sport, sports horses are seen as commodities and as such are “owned” by these wealthy humans. As the quote above illustrates, the buying and selling of sports horses is seen as business, and the feelings, hopes and aspirations of the rider, and the well-being of both horses and some humans (the rider), are secondary to the business of horse sales.

Although sports horses are often seen as commodities and must perform in human sport to maintain their position with a rider or an “owner”, equestrian sport is not a simple case of equine subordination and human dominance. Many riders, and sometimes “owners”, do develop strong relationships with horses in their care. Most sports horses have “show names”: official names used in competition and for breeding. Yet most also have a “stable name”, a more informal name used by those who know the horse and interact with him on a daily basis, and horses are often attributed personalities, likes and dislikes by their human carers, in similar ways to human-pet relationships (Stibbe, 2001; Fox, 2006). This reflects a more co-operative and humane relationship between horses and humans than that suggested by the “business” side of equestrian sport and suggests that many humans do recognize the subjectivities of sports horses and the need to understand and work with individual horses. Riders also often talk about the strong bonds and feelings of affection that develop between them and some of the horses they ride and train (Fox-Pitt, 2007; King, 2009). Thus the relationship between sports horses and

humans (especially riders) in elite equestrian sport is complex, as a balance is sought between the demands of the commercial, business side of elite sport and the more caring, collaborative bonds that develop when horses and humans work together. As Robinson (1999) argues, the horse-human relationship takes many different forms and can be understood on a multitude of levels, depending on the role the horse performs in human society and the nature of individual horse-human bonds. There is thus need to understand better these inter-relationships as enacted within a variety of horse-human interactions, to enable the development of more meaningful encounters to the benefit of both equine and human partner.

Methods

The following sections are based on an ethnographic study of the subworld of competitive equestrian sport in England, 2007-2009. As a competitive rider I was able to immerse myself within this subworld, taking part in daily activities of horsecare, training and competition, as well as the social and leisure activities that surround this milieu. My “insider” status as a rider was important to gaining the respect, co-operation and confidence of participants within this social world (Cassidy, 2002b).

In addition to participant observation I also conducted interviews with riders competing at the eliteⁱⁱⁱ level in dressage, show jumping and eventing. I contacted these riders through a variety of sources, including personal contacts, a snowball sample and direct emails/requests on competition discussion boards on the internet. I interviewed 26 elite-level riders, including 15 women and 11 men. There were 11 dressage riders, 7 show jumpers and 8

event riders. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 60, with a mean age of 35. Due to the ethnographic nature of the wider research project and the research aims to achieve depth of understanding rather than generalization of results, I did not attempt to gain a representative sample of elite riders in England.

Additionally, in common with Cassidy's (2002b) experiences of the world of Thoroughbred racing, I found the elite equestrian milieu relatively closed and self-contained, and it was only through personal contacts and my prior knowledge and experience of equestrian sport that I was able to gain access and acceptance from informants, and so the use of snowball sampling was an essential feature of the project. Despite these caveats, my interview sample is broadly reflective of the demographics of the wider elite equestrian sport world, encompassing male and female riders of varying ages and backgrounds, yet of exclusively white/European ethnic origin. Therefore, although I do not claim that the findings presented below are fully representative of the elite equestrian sports world, they do offer a variety of viewpoints and opinions which are revealing in terms of exploring the horse-human relationship within the context of commercialized sport.

Interviews were loosely structured around broad themes related to: participants' involvement in equestrian sport; how that involvement fits in with or clashes with other areas of life (such as family and personal relationships); goals and motivations within the sport; and, attitudes to the horses they ride. For the purposes of this paper I have focused on the last of these themes. Interviews were transcribed in full and thematically analyzed (Boyatzis, 1998). The following discussion is based predominantly on data from these interviews, backed up by observations from my daily involvement within the subworld of

competitive equestrian sport. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of participants.

Results

A number of key themes emerged in relation to the horse-human relationship within the subworld of competitive equestrian sport and the ways this is influenced by the encroaching demands of professionalism and commercialization. These include: the changing nature of equestrian sport, the influence of “owners”, and the feelings of mutual respect and genuine affection that can develop between horses and humans.

The changing nature of equestrian sport

As discussed above, equestrian sport – as with most sports – is in a state of change and modernization. Almost all participants in the study pointed out how the sport is becoming increasingly competitive and commercialized and that this was changing the nature of the sport and the relationships between riders, horses and other key stakeholders, such as “owners”.

Older participants were particularly vocal on these issues of change, and all felt this was a negative development with potentially damaging outcomes for both horse and human partners. Fiona, 54, specifically identified the commercialization of equestrian sport as a problem in terms of the development of horse-human relationships.

When I started out it was very different to now, now everything to do with the horse world's just so commercialized. We used to work on a relationship with our animals, they were our friends. We learnt how to take care of them, it was all about gaining a standard of welfare for your horse. Welfare and care for your animal and creating a relationship was much more important than the competitive side, and I think it was much healthier.

Nick, 60, agreed with Fiona, in relation to the ways in which increased emphasis on money and competition negates the positive elements of the horse-rider relationship:

When I bring horses through it's for the long haul. If it takes me five years to get to intermediate or advanced, so be it. I don't think, 'oh next year we've got to be going here, oh next year it's got to be worth 50 grand', I just take the time it takes for that horse, to develop a relationship. A lot of event riders these days, I don't think a lot of them even like horses, they're horrible to them, they treat them like polo players treat their horses, they just can't be bothered with them. They have to have the horses to do the job, obviously, but I don't think they have any sort of feelings for them.

For Nick and Fiona, the horse-rider relationship is fundamental to equestrian sport, and their words echo the nature of the partnership described by Wipperfurth (2000). In these terms, horse and rider are mutually dependent collaborators in sporting goals, and such a rapport takes time to develop and requires empathy, care and genuine affection. This may be incompatible with the "microwave era" of modern, commercialized equestrian sport where quick competition success

has become an expectation, with implications for the nature and quality of relationships between horses and riders (Gilbert and Gillett, 2011, p.9).

This is not to say that all younger riders do not want to develop such bonds and collaborative relationships with their horses. All the riders I interviewed stressed the importance of communication, respect and trust between horse and rider, but the younger riders tended to be less willing (and less able, in financial terms) to take time to develop such relationships. Melissa, 18, an aspiring event rider, catches the complexity of the horse-rider relationship for those young riders seeking to break through into elite competition.

I've got a lovely mare at the moment, but I'm definitely going to have to sell her so I'm trying my hardest not to get attached to her. You do have to have a bond, a relationship – you know, trust – to be able to perform at such a level and do well, but you have to be ready to sell them if someone wants to buy them. I need to get a lorry this year so I'm going to have to sell that mare to pay for it. There's no other way.

For Melissa, and many other riders, developing a relationship with the horses they ride is essential if they are to form a successful riding partnership. Such emotional bonds may also be inevitable when horse and rider work closely together over a period of time. However, as Melissa explains, the commodity value of horses means that riders may have to sell horses in order to fund their competitive careers. Horses thus sit in a liminal position – neither fully friend and partner, nor machine and commodity (Fox, 2006).

The commodity value of horses is highly unstable. A horse may be worth huge sums of money as a result of breeding lines, or competition record, but this value can be wiped out if the horse suffers an injury or a decline in performance. Riders (and “owners”, as discussed further below) must be able to make judgments regarding the best time to sell a sports horse to achieve maximum economic value, and this encourages a more instrumental attitude towards horses who are assessed on their financial value, more than their individual subjectivities. Hannah, 34, explains:

I do get attached to a lot of them [her horses], of course I do, especially those that I've had for a while, but I don't treat them like pets, they've got to earn their keep. The two youngsters I've got now are great, luckily they're coming on to where they need to be so I've not got to sell either of them yet, but if I need to I will just sell them. And quickly, before they get too old really, before they start to lose money. In dressage if they're not at the level they should be at by a certain age, they do decrease in value pretty quickly, so you've got to know when to sell them.

For Hannah, her horses are the tools of her trade in elite dressage, and so they have to be capable of performing at the level at which she wants to compete. If the horses are not sufficiently talented, she must sell them and replace them with more talented animals that will enable her to be competitive at the elite level. This somewhat instrumental attitude to her horses is indicative of the subordinate position of horses within equestrian sport, as these animals are subject to the goals, aspirations and judgment of humans. Sports horses are thus in a vulnerable position as their commodity value is highly subjective and changeable. This does not mean these riders do not care for their horses, or

wish to treat them well and prioritize their welfare. However, the demands of the elite sporting world do not make space for failure (Hughes and Coakley, 1991) – be it human or equine. As a result, riders may be discouraged from forming close bonds with their horses, in the ways common for leisure riders (Brandt, 2004), as the relationship will probably be transient.

Horses are bought and sold regularly, and this is a necessary part of equestrian sport. Riders need a constant string of talented horses to be competitive at the elite level, and this means less talented, old, and injured horses have to be sold to make space. As Anna, a 45-year-old show jumper explains, “you’ve got to keep selling them on, you just can’t keep them all. I’d end up like the donkey sanctuary if I did, full of OAPs”.

In many ways, riders do appear to be becoming less caring, less patient and less willing to put in the time and effort to develop strong bonds and relationships with their horses. This may be an outcome of the increasing value of sports horses, which makes riders more reliant on external “owners” who may have different priorities and expectations from their involvement in equestrian sport.

The influence of “owners”

As indicated above, “owners” play a significant role in elite equestrian sport. Due to the increasingly high costs of the sport and the horses involved, equestrian sport has moved away from the amateur model common in the twentieth century in which a relatively wealthy rider would ride their own horse in competition, to a more commercialized basis where a rider will seek

patronage/sponsorship from an external source (“owner”) to fund the horses needed for success at elite level. This changes the dynamics of equestrian sport and accounts for some of the issues discussed in the previous section. Isobel, 44, sums these changes up.

When I started out you used to be able to take a difficult horse – many people took ex-racehorses which weren’t really worth very much – and you could turn them into event horses. But the competition’s got so hot now that you need a £30,000 five year old really, you need money behind you, you need several top horses. It’s become really difficult to make it now, very difficult, it’s getting more and more professional.

The role of “owners” has thus become increasingly important to equestrian sport, and this poses additional problems. As Edwards and Corte (2010) argue, when sports become commercialized multiple actors emerge to influence the development and direction of commercialization, and these actors may have competing agendas. This is the case in relation to “owners”, riders and horses in elite equestrian sport. “Owners” are frequently not horse riders, and thus their interests in equestrian sport may differ markedly from those of riders. This may not always be in the best interests of the horses.

John, 45, told me how many of the “owners” he had dealt with during his show-jumping career had little or no experience with horses, and so keeping the “owners” happy whilst ensuring he did his best for the horses and remained competitive within the sport was a difficult balancing act.

A lot of the owners, they've not been into horses for long so they don't know very much about them, but they think they do. They come to me with stuff they've read about natural horsemanship or whatever, all this politically correct stuff that's completely inappropriate for competition horses, and it's really hard to bite my tongue sometimes when they're telling me how to look after the horses. But I have to do it, they're owners, and they pay the bills, after all.

Emma, 57, is an event rider who has achieved significant success on the international stage. She has had even more problems with some of her "owners", and this has prompted her to question the values of the sport and the ways that increased money and commercialization impacts on horse welfare:

It's all a statement of wealth for some of these people, people buy horses as tools for their egos and they're just not bothered about welfare and partnership. You have this intensive, rather unpleasant attitude that the animal is a tool, and it offends me greatly.

Emma made the brave and unusual decision to stop having "owners" when she was at the height of her career. She explains why she did this.

If I went somewhere and the ground wasn't right then I could withdraw without any discussion or stopping. These people, many owners, they go to events and they say, 'but I've traveled five hours to see my horse run, he must run.' And I'd explain that the ground was like a rock, it was dangerous, but they'd say, 'never mind, he's got to run, I haven't wasted all this time and money.' Well, people

only said that to me once, I couldn't live that way. So I decided not to ride other people's horses anymore because it was just too difficult to protect the horses from their owners.

This had serious implications for Emma's competitive career and income, but she felt it was worthwhile to protect her integrity and love for the horses and the sport as she chose to practice it.

I muddle on. I'm broke, I'm completely broke, but that's the way I prefer to live 'cos I couldn't exploit the horses because of someone else's ego.

Emma's principled stance indicates that the consequences of over-reliance on "owners", many of whom have limited knowledge about horses and may be more concerned with reflected glory than welfare, can have serious consequences for both horses and humans (riders) involved in elite equestrian sport. Emma's response was radical, but many riders simply could not afford to continue in the sport without the support of "owners", and so are not able to walk away from such patronage. This may be particularly the case for young riders who, unlike Emma, are struggling to make a name for themselves within the sport and so may be more reliant on outside patronage and support. Laura, 18, demonstrates the vulnerable position of many young riders. Laura is heavily reliant on the financial backing of "owners" for her burgeoning dressage career.

They're very funny, owners, you have to really suck up to them. You have to be really nice to them and they can be so hard to work with. I suppose they're paying a lot of money out, and it is their horse,

their money, and you have to just put up with it. There's a lot of pressure on you as a rider, I think, to make sure you perform and get quick results 'cos even if you do get an owner it's really hard to keep them. A lot of owners have lots of money but they really don't know what they're doing but you have to agree with them just to try and keep them, you have to do what they want, go to the shows they want you to go to, get good results just to keep them happy.

This third party in the horse-human relationship in elite equestrian sport – “owners” – complicates the relationship and puts increasing emphasis on quick results and performance over developing successful horse-human partnerships and the welfare of sports horses. This increases the commodification of sports horses who are seen in terms of their monetary value and performance potential much more than in relation to any concepts of intrinsic worth and value.

Respect and affection

Although the pressures of commercialization and professionalism may be changing the bases of the horse-human relationship within elite equestrian sport, this does not mean that strong bonds and partnerships are not still formed, often in spite of these commercial pressures. As Wipperfurth (2000) notes, competitively successful horse-rider partnerships are built around “a unique alchemy” (p.56), based on respect, trust and “mutual dependency” (p.57). Equestrian sport cannot take place without the presence of at least two beings – a horse and a human – and each is essential to the partnership, as horses and humans work together in the pursuit of sporting goals. Although I found

many examples of the commodification of sports horses in elite equestrian sport, the study also revealed many cases of close horse-human relationships.

Eleanor, 38, told me how the horses in her care became more than just competition animals.

We [her and her family] do tend to fall in love with them, I suppose, they become part of the family, but without humanizing them. We don't humanize them, they know they're horses and they should respect us, and equally we respect them. We take our responsibilities to our horses extremely seriously, we do love them.

For Eleanor, her horses become honorary family members, and there is real affection in the way she speaks about them. However, unlike domestic pets (Fox, 2006), the riders in this study were careful to draw distinctions between humans and their horses, even when those horses were held up as valued, loved family members. These horses are sports animals, first and foremost, and with that comes a certain mutual respect that may be less present in human-pet relationships. Abby, 36, explains.

They're [her horses] not pets, they're athletes to me. They're athletes, and they have to be treated as such. They mustn't be patronized, 'cos if they were human beings and they were a high jump athlete, or someone who was doing triathlon, like eventers, they wouldn't want to be patronized, they'd want to be treated like an intelligent person, and so do the horses.

Although Abby's conceptualization of her horses as "an intelligent person" is a little contradictory, her point illustrates how many riders respect their horses and appreciate the important role they play in enabling them to take part in and do well in equestrian sport. This suggests that although horses are not knowingly consenting participants in equestrian sport (Jonsson, 2010), their role is recognized, respected and appreciated by their human partners. Within elite equestrian sport, horses may be subordinate to human whims, wishes and judgments, but this does not necessarily diminish the mutual respect and dependency that is a necessary and enjoyable part of inter-species sport.

Discussion

Elite equestrian sport is a professional, commercialized milieu. This study has revealed how, at this level, the horse-rider relationship differs markedly to that seen at lower levels of competition and with leisure riders (Brandt, 2004).

Horses within elite equestrian sport are athletes with high commodity values, and although the relationships between horses and riders still require a level of trust and mutual respect, these relationships are also frequently transactional, transient and instrumental. Horses and riders work together in elite equestrian sport to produce quick, successful competition results, but the status of equine and human partners is not equal, raising questions about the moral status of horses within elite equestrian sport.

The use of animals in sport raises ethical concerns, as animals cannot give informed consent to their participation in human sport (Jonsson, 2012).

However, this does not make all animal sports inherently unethical, and horses in equestrian sport often experience high levels of nutrition, veterinary care and

routine care in return for their role in human pleasure. The riders in this study reveal that the horse-rider relationship within elite equestrian sport is complex and can take different forms. For these athletes, the horses they ride are reduced neither to the status of production machines, as many farm species may be (Novel, 2005), nor are they excessively humanized, in the way many pets are (Fox, 2006). The riders in this study respect their horses as athletes, and as horses, not surrogate humans.

This study of elite equestrian sport in England reveals the highly ambiguous status of sports horses and the complex, often contradictory, nature of the horse-human relationship within this milieu. The changing role of the horse in human societies – from a largely functional, work-based status, to that based more around sport, leisure and consumption – has placed the modern horse under new, potentially harmful demands related to their performance and achievement in human pleasure. Rossdale (1999, p.4) argues that the horse is “mans’ (sic) most willing and co-operative animal companion” but that the “pressure for excellence” (p.4) in equestrian sport makes the horse vulnerable to physical and psychological harm, placing increased moral responsibilities on humans to safeguard equine welfare. As the discussion in the previous sections indicates, these problems are exacerbated by the growing commercialization and associated financial pressures of modern equestrian sport, resulting in a “microwave era” where quick competition successes (and associated financial pay-offs) push the horse-human relationship onto an instrumental, often short-term basis (Gilbert & Gillett, 2011, p.9).

All of the riders in this study were aware of the implications for the nature and quality of the horse-human relationship of equestrian sport becoming increasingly commercialized. This was the case across all three equestrian

disciplines – show-jumping, dressage and eventing. The commodity value of horses at the elite level across the three disciplines is now extremely high, requiring most riders to rely on “owners”. This study suggests that “owners” are both valued (for their financial support) and resented (for their lack of knowledge) within elite equestrian sport. In much the same way as Sanders (1994) found in relation to the animal – owner – veterinarian relationship, the horse – owner – rider relationship is complicated by the presence of three distinct actors with differing levels of expertise, emotional involvement and physical engagement in the situation. Thus within elite equestrian sport it may be necessary to move beyond thinking of the human-horse relationship as a dyad, and instead to explore the dynamics of the three-way human-horse-human relationship.

As I have argued above, the nature of equestrian sport is changing onto a more commercialized, professional basis than was the case throughout much of the twentieth century. The ways in which riders are responding to these changes, and the implications this has for the human-horse relationship, differed according to the age of the participants in the study and the length of time they had been involved in equestrian sport. The older riders lamented the changes in the sport, seeing the shift to a more transactional, commercial basis as a threat to the development of horse-human partnerships long seen as essential to classical training and riding (Odberg & Bouissou, 1999). The younger riders demonstrated a more accepting attitude towards the commercialized elements of equestrian sport and a willingness to try to maximize the effectiveness of the triad of human-horse-human that characterizes the modern sport. These generational differences suggest that there has been a marked and fairly quick change in the nature of elite equestrian sport. The implications of these rapid changes on equine welfare, sporting performance and horse-human interaction

warrant further consideration if equestrian sport is to remain both commercially and ethically sound.

Conclusions

Modern sport is highly commercialized and requires the input of significant resources (money, time, energy, physicality, emotion etc.) (Slack, 2004). Equestrian sport is no exception. The “pressure for excellence” within elite equestrian sport (Rossdale, 1999, p.4) turns sports horses into commodities, who exchange hands for large sums of money. At the same time, sports horses are also sentient beings in themselves, and the talents, personalities and quirks of individual horses are some of the most challenging and exciting aspects of equestrian sport, as each rider attempts to form a successful sporting partnership with individual horses. This ambiguous relationship between horse and rider is epitomized in the words of Charlotte Dujardin, double gold medal winner at the 2012 Olympics. Dujardin did not own her Olympic partner, Valegro, who was initially to be sold for an extremely high sum, following their success on the world stage. Dujardin described her reaction to this situation

It's very sad [that Valegro will be sold] because he has become my best friend. It was a really strong partnership I had with him. But as tough as it's going to be – and it is heart-wrenching – it's something I knew was going to happen. He is not my horse and they had already kept him for me to ride. It's what makes the world go round.
(London Evening Standard, 2012).

The world of elite equestrian sport is indeed driven by financial pressures, yet strong partnerships between horse and rider remain essential to outstanding

performances at this level and frequently lead to the development of close bonds of friendship, mutual respect and even love between humans and horses. These competing pressures of commercialism versus friendship make elite equestrian sport a complex and demanding milieu for both horse and human partners, and reveal some of the complexities and ambiguities in human relationships and interactions with non-human animals.

ⁱ Throughout this paper the term “equestrian sport” is used to refer exclusively to the Olympic disciplines of dressage, show jumping and eventing and does not include other horse-based sports like racing.

ⁱⁱ The term “owner” implies a hierarchical relationship between human and non-human animals, and so it usually not used out of respect for the autonomy and pride of non-human animals. However, within equestrian sport the term “owner” is used to indicate the human individual(s) with financial responsibility for the horse and so the term is used in this context throughout this paper. Frequently the “owner” is not the rider or main caretaker of the horse, as discussed further.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Elite” level was taken to be advanced eventing, Prix St George level and higher in dressage, and county level show jumping where riders regularly competed in classes of 1.30m and higher.

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