

# Horse PWR

<https://horsepwr.co.uk>

Commentary on the  
British Horseracing Authority's  
"Welcome to Horse PWR" website  
by

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## Overall Impact

This is very clearly a public relations document. It is designed to convince readers that the welfare of Thoroughbreds is first class and that their welfare management is in the good hands of dedicated, technically expert people during all activities related to racing, all under the watchful eye of the British Horseracing Authority. As indicated below, it is carefully crafted to put the best spin on each area, either by extreme overstatements which undermines credibility, by what comes across as misleading presentation of information, or by omission of specific details that, if presented, would enable the reader to assess the veracity of implied or explicit declarations that all is well racehorse welfare. Every statement made by the Authority about Thoroughbred welfare, and their claims about the expertise of those responsible for managing it, are undermined by the fact that their notion of what constitutes animal welfare is at least 20 years out of date. This is at odds with other horseracing authorities internationally that have included state-of-the-art understanding of equine welfare as the lynchpin of their commitment to, and practical strategies for, managing it. The Authority also espouses the flawed notion of racehorses being *equine athletes*, claiming that: "*Racing gives these athletes a purpose. It's in their DNA and what they were born to do.*" Unsupported hyperbole such as this further undermines the readers' confidence in the information provided in this website.

What follows is a critique of the material in each section in the first half of the website.

# THE FACTS

## Injuries and Fatal Injuries

The fatality rate as reported is below 1%. This means that in 2023 158 racehorses were injured seriously enough to die or require euthanasia.

### ***Comments:***

Death is the most severe outcome in welfare terms. By celebrating the low death rate, they ignore the welfare implications for all horses that were injured but not seriously enough to die or be euthanized.

No figures for serious but recoverable injuries are reported. Nor are figures reported on retirement from racing due to serious injury.

It is hard not to conclude that their intention is to mislead the reader into believing that the injury rate is as low as the fatality rate.

## The Whip

Offenses against rules regarding whip use are less than 1% in 2023. Yet, limited whip use is still permitted.

### ***Comment***

Any whip use is a matter of welfare concern, no matter how sanitized that use is by referring to its role in maintaining safety and as an initiative to prevent flogging.

## Equine Medical Control and Anti-Doping

### ***Comment***

The purpose here is clearly to indicate that cases of potential performance enhancement by drugs given for medical purposes and/or 'doping' drugs illegally given to enhance performance are rare. However, the table and details provided are singularly uninformative, a strategy which, it is hard not to conclude, is intended to leave the cursory reader with the uncheckable impression that such occurrences are very rare.

## Post Racing

The statistics provided are detailed and informative. If effective, the Vulnerable Horse Scheme on the face of it is a worthwhile safeguard.

### **Comments**

It would be informative from an equine welfare perspective to know the reasons for retirement from racing, e.g., were the horses healthy but just not fast enough or otherwise unsuitable for racing, or did they have unresolved injuries or behavioral problems that occurred whilst training or racing.

It is also important to note that the welfare of all horses that enter post-racing competitive activities or other roles depends on the knowledge, skills and commitment of those responsible for them. Just because horses have entered other competitive equine arenas or 'retirement' does not mean that they will be free of significant welfare compromise. True, they are no longer the responsibility of those in racing, but silence on this matter in this document implies without supporting evidence that all is well with these horses.

### **Abattoir**

*Comment:* It is heartening that horses registered for racing in Britain are banned from being slaughtered.

## RACEHORSE BREEDING

*Quote:* “***Nothing*** matters more to British racing ***than*** the health and wellbeing of our horses.” [bold italics mine]

*Comment:* In making such an ***extreme overstatement*** the British Horseracing Authority undermines its credibility, and thus any confidence the reader might have in their commitment to racehorse welfare.

*Quote:* “300 years of careful breeding has developed the Thoroughbred to the ***elite sporting specimen*** we see today.” [bold italics mine]

### **Comments:**

The phrase, “*elite sporting specimen*” here is an early indication of a recurring theme in this document, i.e., that sport horses and sport humans have rather similar motivations. This is contestable.

Less tendentiously and more accurately, this should be recast as “... careful breeding has developed in the Thoroughbred the *exceptional athletic abilities* we see today.”

Also, the phrase “elite sporting **specimen**” smacks of the horse merely being a thing for human use, and not a living, feeling being that can suffer.

**Quote:** “Large hearts, a highly efficient circulatory system, supercharged lung power, spring-like muscle tendons which propel them at high speed... the Thoroughbred has been selected for its attributes which enable it to run and jump at speeds and over long distances.”

**Comment:** This is all true up to a point. Thoroughbreds do indeed have extraordinary physiological capacities, especially regarding their cardio-respiratory and musculo-skeletal attributes that underlie their *exceptional athletic abilities* (e.g., Mellor and Beausoleil 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

Note, however, that the Rules of Racing and the requirement to use a bit or bits prevent these physiological capacities from being fully effective, often leading to welfare-compromising pathophysiological conditions (Mellor and Beausoleil 2017). For example, the respiratory and circulatory systems are impeded by use of the bit, leading to pulmonary edema that compromises breathing. Likewise, use of horseshoes that prevent expansion and contraction of the hoof at every step impedes the associated pumping of blood from the legs back to the heart, further reduces circulatory effectiveness.

**Quote:** “Racing gives these athletes a purpose. It’s in their DNA and what they were born to do.”

### **Comments:**

As just accepted, horses undoubtedly are supremely “athletic” physiologically.

**BUT, there is a major distinction between being “physiologically athletic” (which in their natural habitat enables them to escape danger by “running”) and being an “athlete” with its underlying human connotations.**

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<sup>1</sup> Mellor, D.J. and Beausoleil, N.J. (2017). Equine welfare during exercise: An evaluation of breathing, breathlessness and bridles. *Animals* 7(6), 41; doi:10.3390/ani7060041. Click on: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/7/6/41>

Human athletes engage in races and other competitive activities *voluntarily*. They do it by *choice*. And they certainly gain personal satisfaction of numerous kinds from their *voluntary participation in competitive events*.

*Explicit anthropomorphism* applied to competitive events involving *horses*, represented as “athletes”, leads to regular statements to the effect that horses *enjoy* such events, that they *like* competing, and so on.

Let us be clear, horses do *NOT* engage in these activities voluntarily. We breed them, train them, equip them with restricting, often painful tack, including bits<sup>2 3</sup>, tongue ties<sup>4</sup>, and tight nose bands<sup>5 6</sup>, and require them to participate in events we have contrived for our enjoyment, not theirs.

Horses involved at elite levels in competitions are highly valued monetarily. This leads to human demands on them to perform athletically at the highest levels. This in turn inevitably increases the levels of aversive coercion applied during their training in order to ensure that they meet our human demands on them during these events.

Horses at lower levels of achievement (e.g., local competitions) are also subjected to coercive practices which, given the opportunity, they would not undertake voluntarily.

It is hard not to conclude that calling competition horses “athletes” is a euphemistic way of sanitising the extent of coercion we routinely apply to them at pretty well all stages of their *non-voluntary participation*.

Just because we have domesticated horses, does not mean that coercive procedures are more ethically acceptable than when we coerce lions, elephants, bears, monkey and other “wild” animals to engage in activities that we find entertaining. These activities are now widely regarded as ethically unacceptable.

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<sup>2</sup> Mellor, D.J. (2020). Mouth pain in horses: Physiological foundations, behavioural indices, welfare implications and a suggested solution. *Animals* 10(4), 572; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10040572>

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, A. (2023). A Bit of a Problem in Equine Welfare: What is the Role of Veterinarians? Center for Veterinary Education, Control and Therapy Series, Number 6001. Issue 313, pp23-26.

<sup>4</sup> Marsh, L.; McGreevy, P.; Hazel, S.; Santos, L.; Herbart, M.; Franklin, S. The effect of tongue-tie application on stress responses in resting horses. *BioRxiv* 2019, 634717. Available online: <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/634717v1.full>

<sup>5</sup> McGreevy, P.; Warren-Smith, A.; Guisard, Y., 2012. The effect of double bridles and jaw-clamping crank nosebands on facial cutaneous and ocular temperature in horses. *J. Vet. Behav. Clin. Appl. Res.* 2012, 7, 142– 148.

<sup>6</sup> Doherty, O.; Conway, T.; Conway, R.; Murray, G.; Casey, V. An objective measure of noseband tightness and its measurement using a novel digital tightness gauge. *PLoS ONE* 2017, 12, e0168996, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0168996.

**Quote:** “From tailored nutrition to state-of-the-art training, **every aspect of their development and care is curated** to safeguard their health and realise their **athletic potential**.” [bold italics mine]

**Comments:** This is a clear statement of the totality of **human** coercive management of Thoroughbreds aimed at achieving the **human** objective of the horses reaching their highest athletic potential so that they can win lucrative horseraces.

In the context of **care**, it is interesting that the impacts of painful tack, including bits, tongue ties and tight nosebands, are not considered.

**Quote:** “There are around 14,000 horses in training at any one time, **receiving dedicated care** from a team of more than 8,000 racing staff, **and the quality of life they lead can be seen in their physical condition on the racecourse**.” [bold italics mine]

**Comments:**

Making a link between **dedicated care** and racehorses’ **quality of life**, implying good states of welfare, lacks credibility when the caregivers’ understanding of animal welfare is out-of-date or deficient, which this statement clearly indicates.

There is no doubt that those responsible for Thoroughbreds work **to maximise their physical condition**, **BUT** a horse in top physical condition, which implies good health as well, does not automatically enjoy a good state of welfare. **To state or imply this is ~20 years out-of-date.**

The **gold standard** for assessing and managing animal welfare is the internationally recognised **Five Domains Model**.

It had a 25-year evolution to accommodate, at each stage, the then latest scientifically supported understanding of animal welfare. First proposed in 1994, it was updated in 2001, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2017; the latest version being the **2020 Five Domains Model (Mellor et al 2020)**<sup>7</sup>. Since its publication, this peer-reviewed paper has been downloaded 91,790 times and cited in scientific and professional publications 554 times.

The Model’s strengths include its comprehensive coverage of factors that contribute to animals’ welfare states, and the now international scientific

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<sup>7</sup> Mellor, D.J., Beausoleil, N.J., Littlewood, K.E., McLean, A.N., McGreevy, P.D., Jones, B. and Wilkins, C. (2020). The 2020 Five Domains Model: Including Human–Animal Interactions in Assessments of Animal Welfare. **Animals**10(10), 1870; doi.10.3390/ani10101870

recognition that ***an animal's welfare critically relates to what it experiences subjectively.***<sup>8</sup>

The first four Domains are: 1. Nutrition; 2. Physical Environment; 3. Health; and 4. Behavioural Interactions with (a) the Environment, (b) other Animals and (c) People. Domains 1 to 3 mainly focus attention on factors that are critical for survival, and Domain 4 mainly draws attention to animals' perceptions of their external circumstances.

Each of these Domains employs objectively measurable indices of welfare-relevant states, and these are used to cautiously infer the presence or absence of associated subjective experiences. These experiences may be negative or positive and are assigned for consideration to Domain 5, Mental State, which aligns closely the animal's welfare state.

The literature should be consulted for full details of the Model and its use.

Note, it is possible for a horse's nutritional needs to be met fully, its physical (meteorological) environment to remain within easily tolerated limits, and for its physical health to be robust, when at the same time it is facing environmental (e.g., facilities), animal, and/or human interactive challenges that generate a range of significant welfare compromising negative subjective experiences.

***Thus, simply focusing on fitness and health is not adequate for credible assessments of racehorse welfare. For example, a horse experiencing pain caused by bits and breathlessness from compromised breathing cannot be regarded as being in a good welfare state, no matter how fit and healthy it may be otherwise.***

### ***Uptake of the Model***<sup>9</sup>

Organisations and financial corporations are aligning their welfare standards and guidelines with the Model.

#### ***Professional and Research Bodies***

- Australian Veterinary Association
- British Veterinary Association
- New Zealand Veterinary Association
- American Association of Zoo Veterinarians
- Association of Shelter Veterinarians

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<sup>8</sup> Mellor, D.J. (2019). Welfare-aligned sentience: Enhanced capacities to experience, interact, anticipate, choose and survive. ***Animals* 9(7)**, E440; doi:10.3390/ani9070440

<sup>9</sup> Source: *Horses and People*; Latest update: March 2024

- Faunalytics
- Wild Animal Initiative
- Companion Animal Psychology (Canada)
- The Pet Professional Guild
- New Zealand Animal Law Association
- All New Zealand organisations that undertake animal-based research, teaching and testing.

### ***Equestrian and Racing***

- New Zealand Thoroughbred Racing (NZTR)
- International Federation of Horseracing Authorities (IFHA)
- Pony Club Association of Australia (PCA)
- Equestrian Australia (EA)
- International Dressage Officials Club (IDOC)
- Swedish Equestrian Federation
- Racing Victoria (RV)
- Harness Racing Victoria (HRV)
- Queensland Racing Integrity Commission (QRIC)
- Harness Racing New Zealand
- Horses and People magazine
- Greyhound Welfare & Integrity Commission (NSW)
- Greyhound Racing Victoria
- Greyhound Racing New Zealand

### ***Charities and NGOs***

- ***World Horse Welfare***
- World Animal Protection
- Earth Animal
- The Animal Welfare Foundation
- International Whaling Commission
- Wild Welfare UK
- Four Paws International
- RSPCA Australia
- RSPCA Western Australia
- SPCA New Zealand
- SPCA Certified
- SPCA Education Teachers Portal
- SPCA Kids Portal
- Canada's Federation of SPCA's and Humane Societies
- Alberta SPCA (United States)
- Brooke Horse Sanctuary
- The Donkey Sanctuary (UK)

### ***Zoos and Marine Parks***

- World Association of Zoos and Aquariums
- Zoo and Aquarium Association Australasia
- British & Irish Association of Zoos & Aquariums
- Sea World Australia
- Dolphin Marine Conservation Park (Australia)
- The Zoo Scientist
- Zoos Victoria
- Zoos South Australia

- Sydney Zoo
- Wellington Zoo
- Auckland Zoo
- Hamilton Zoo
- Ocean Pak Hong Kong
- Toronto Zoo

### *Government Departments and Advisory Bodies*

- Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
- Animal Heath Australia
- New Zealand National Cat Management Strategy
- Wellington City Council (New Zealand)
- The National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, New Zealand
- The National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee, New Zealand

### *Corporations*

- Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA)
- Australian Grain Fed Beef
- Australian Good Meat
- Fonterra (New Zealand)
- Maple Leaf Foods (Canada)
- Chemunique (a food development company in Sub Saharan Africa)
- BRF (Brazil-based but global meat and poultry company)
- Tyson Foods (United States food production company)
- Cargill (an agriculture company in 70 countries)
- Progressive (Countdown Supermarkets in New Zealand)

## **THOROUGHBREDS DESERVE THOROUGH CARE**

**Quote:** From the moment a thoroughbred is born, expert teams oversee **every aspect of their development and care**. With more than 16,000 dedicated professionals in British racing and breeding working 365 days a year, the **health, safety and welfare** of horses is in the safest of hands.

### **Comments:**

Hyperbolic overstatements like this automatically invite doubt.

“Every aspect of their development and care”: BUT (see above) this is limited to health related to athletic performance, which does not address many other features of welfare management.

“Health, safety and welfare”: safety and welfare are linked, so that the limited understanding of welfare applies here too.

# RISK IN RACING

**Quote:** If a horse falls or is injured during racing, **teams of expert vets respond** in less than 60 seconds.

## **Comments:**

Regarding the jockeys, medical attention would indeed be quick because of the ambulances that during each race follow the horses around on the inside of the track.

Regarding the horses, if a vet is not in the ambulance, veterinary attention would likely be delayed for more than 60 seconds. Notice the wording, however. Teams of expert vets “**respond**”, which does not mean that they reach the fallen horse’s location within 60 seconds. Again, this carefully chosen wording would to the cursory reader likely be misleading, suggesting a much more rapid response than would be practically possible.

Note also, provision of expeditious emergency care is most worthwhile. However, more important is determining and avoiding the causes of falls in the first place. Unfortunately, pathophysiological causes related to welfare compromising tack have yet to be taken seriously<sup>10</sup>.

**Quote:** ...we’ve reduced the number of horses that fall by a third and fatalities to 0.2% of nearly 90,000 yearly runners.

**Comment:** This is commendable, but the pathophysiological impacts related to welfare compromising tack present in each fall and fatality have not yet been investigated rigorously.

**Quote:** Over the last 20 years 47 million (pounds UK) has been invested in cutting-edge research, veterinary science and *education to find ways to reduce the risk and **discover safety and welfare breakthroughs.***

**Comment:** It is a pity that the educational efforts of the British Horseracing Authority did not discover the Five Domains Model, which has now been applied to racehorses in various jurisdictions for several years (see above).

**Quote:** British racing also works with welfare organisations such as **World Horse Welfare**. They describe themselves as “critical friends” to the sport,

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<sup>10</sup> Harvey, A. (2023). A Bit of a Problem in Equine Welfare: What is the Role of Veterinarians? Center for Veterinary Education, Control and Therapy Series, Number 6001. Issue 313, pp23-26.

which means they provide honest, frank views on how we can improve our safety and welfare record.

**Comment:** As *World Horse Welfare* is one of the international organisations that have recognized the Five Domains Model (see list), it is surprising that British racing appears to be unaware of its beneficial uses in the arena of racehorse welfare assessment and management.

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This analysis was drawn to a close here.