When does use become abuse in equestrian sport?

The recent Animal Welfare Science Ethics and Law Veterinary Association (AWSELVA) conference explored the question of where the boundary lies between what it is reasonable and unreasonable to ask an animal to do. It covered, amongst other subjects, whether it is reasonable to ask assistance dogs to perform dual-purpose ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’ roles, and whether it is reasonable, in this technological age, to risk the lives of army dogs in the theatre of war. Shortly after the conference, news of positive tests for banned anabolic steroids in racehorses broke across the British press (for example, http://www.horseandhound.co.uk/News/Eleven-Godolphin-Horses-Test-Positive-For-Banned-Substances and http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/horse-racing/22295639). Another question that had been addressed at AWSELVA – whether the use of horses for competitive sport is ethical – once again became a matter of public debate (McLean and Magee 2010). [For examples of earlier public discussion of the ethics of using horses in sport see ‘Is horseracing too dangerous’ http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/13/grand-national-horse-racing-dangerous and ‘The Last Hurdle’ http://www.horsesandpeople.com.au/article/the-last-hurdle].

Some argue that people should simply not use animals at all, for any purpose (Francione 2010). A voluminous philosophical and ethical literature addresses the issues of whether other animals matter, and if so, what rights they have (for review, see Chan and Harris 2011). I do not intend to engage with such discussions here, but wish instead to tackle the question of how, given the current consensus in many societies – including the UK – that human use of animals is morally acceptable, we define the boundary between use and abuse in equine sport.

The argument is sometimes advanced that the use of animals for competitive sport is less ethically justifiable than other uses of animals, because sport is a trivial type of use. Equestrian sport is not economically trivial. In the UK, the gross output of the nonracing equestrian sector is estimated by the British Equestrian Trade Association (2011 report) to be £3.8 billion per annum. Racing contributed a further £3.45 billion to the UK economy in direct, indirect and induced expenditure and £275 million in tax revenues in 2012 (Deloitte 2013). In New Zealand, the current economic impact of the horseracing industry is equivalent to that of the wine and seafood industries. [New Zealand Government 2013]. Nor is equestrian sport trivial in a social sense – racing was second only to football for attendance figures in the UK in 2012 (Deloitte 2013). Sport is anyway no more trivial than any other use of animals that is not truly essential to human well-being – for example the eating of meat by those who have no medical need to do so.

Human use of animals is an historical and biological matter of fact – one of our characteristics, indeed part of our felos (Rollin 2011) or the ‘humanness of humans’, is our ability to use animals, either by force or by persuasion. The relationship between human and horse certainly has the potential to be abusive, yet the nobility of the horse means that it can also be cooperative. Although the benefits of the human-horse interaction to psychiatric health are recognised in a clinical context (e.g. Bubu et al. 2003; Masini 2010), the ‘biophilic’ (Wilson 1984; Katcher and Wilkins 1995) attraction of human to horse is hard to rationalise in scientific terms. Nonetheless, the strength of emotion inspired in those watching horses compete – be it the Queen at Ascot or the ‘nonhorsey’ public watching Olympic dressage – is striking. Such an anthropocentric defence of using horses for sport is one which many animal ethicists would dismiss as being ‘speciesist’ (Singer n.d.; Schmidtz 2011). However, it is one which I adopt here unashamedly because I hope to show that one can simultaneously believe both that human use of horses in sport is ethically justifiable, and that we need to give careful consideration to the way in which we use horses in sport for that justification to be sustainable. If we start from the premise that it is ethical to use horses in sport (at all), then when does use become abuse, and where should we draw the line between reasonable and unreasonable use? For any human use of animals, once (if) the premise of the use is accepted what becomes ethically important is how we use them. For example, one can believe that it is generally ethically acceptable to eat meat, but only if certain welfare standards relating to the management, transportation and slaughter of that meat are adhered to. If those welfare standards are not met, use becomes abuse. In equine sport, two key factors in identifying when use becomes abuse are when risk is not minimised to the fullest extent possible, and when avoiding suffering is allowed to occur. (Risk can always be removed and suffering avoided, of course, by discontinuing an activity. This is addressed later in this article.)

No sport is without risk. The argument that there is a difference between human and equine athletes because human athletes choose to compete is an over-simplification. Professional sportmen, for example, may be ‘forced’ into competing despite injury and to the detriment of their long-term health in order to protect a place on a team and their livelihood (Anderson and Gerrard 2005). Nonetheless, equine athletes undoubtedly have less choice about whether to compete than do human athletes, and the notion that there is a level of risk beyond which it is unreasonable to push horses is one that has gained popular currency. Many of the modifications that have been made to the Grand National race for example, such as changes to fence construction and alteration in the length of the run-up to the first fence, have been a reflection of the fact that a society that used to condone high, unforgiving fences no longer finds the sight of multi-horse falls, injuries and fatalities acceptable. The steps that have already been taken to reduce risk in equestrian sport are in some ways analogous to those that were taken to reduce risk in Formula One racing in the late 1990s, which allowed Formula One racing to continue in the aftermath of high-profile deaths despite some calls for the sport to be banned.

If we are to reduce the risk to competing horses as much as we can, we need to think beyond the high-profile, ‘iceberg indicators’ (FAWC 2009). Reasonable and ethical use of horses for sport requires that we identify the causes of risk, and develop ways of minimising risk during training as well as during competition. Existing research in this area ([for example Weller...
et al. 2006; Lam et al. 2007; Walters et al. 2008; Ely et al. 2009; Murray et al. 2010; Reed et al. 2012; Nagy et al. 2013; Parkes et al. 2013; Reardon et al. 2013) needs to be built upon. An important part of increasing the evidence base about risk factors for equine injury during training will be developing a mechanism for clinicians to provide information about such injuries to sports governing bodies and researchers without breaching client confidentiality (Campbell 2013).

Reducing risk is but one way of reducing suffering. To justify our continued use of horses for sport we need to think beyond the suffering that can occur as the result of injury, and to take a holistic look at the way we manage competition animals. The expression ‘unnecessary suffering’, although embedded in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, may not be helpful in relation to the use of animals for sport, because any suffering associated with sporting use is ‘unnecessary’ in the sense that it is not strictly ‘necessary’ to use the animal for sport at all. It may be more helpful to think about ‘avoidable suffering’ (Morton 1993). Such a distinction enables us to address the welfare issues associated with sporting use of animals even if one believes (and I do not) that the use of animals for sport is fundamentally unethical. In other words, even if one believes that using animals for sport causes unnecessary suffering, so long as society allows that use one can still work to reduce avoidable suffering within it.

The changes in the whip rules in British racing (see http://www.britishhorseracing.com/inside_horseracing/about/whatweedo/disciplinary/whipuse.asp) and FEI rules on the use of hyperflexion or ‘rollkur’ of dressage and showjumping horses (see http://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/rollkur-rules-give-rewards-give-punishment) are illustrative examples of regulatory reaction to public concern about avoidable suffering. The correlation between ‘suffering’ and ‘abuse’, however, is not always obvious. In more extreme examples of animal abuse, such as the practice of ‘soring’ the legs of high-stepping gaited horses in the USA (see https://www.avma.org/kb/resources/reference/animal-welfare/pages/soring-horses.aspx), it is obvious (because there are visible and painful lesions) that suffering occurs and is avoidable. The line between use and abuse has clearly been crossed, and this is reflected in the fact that ‘soring’ contravenes sporting regulation and animal welfare legislation. The use of systemic anabolic steroids in racehorses also contravenes sporting regulation in the UK. The uniform impression given by press coverage of the recent positive tests for banned anabolic steroids in racehorses in the UK was that the use of steroids constituted an abuse. What was less clear, however, was why steroid use constituted an abuse – was it an abuse of the animals involved because it caused them avoidable suffering, or was it an abuse only in the sense that it was cheating, and an attempt to win by breaking the rules? It is interesting to reflect that in the Lance Armstrong case (see http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/cycling/21066354), media and societal concern revolved around issues of cheating and the undermining of the sport of professional cycling rather than around the health of the athlete(s) involved. ‘Abuse’ in this interpretation seems to relate more to the abuse of the public or puter’s faith in the integrity of sport than it does to suffering caused to the athlete. To confuse matters further, the anabolic steroids, which may not be administered to horses at any time under the rules of British racing, are allowed during training by other racing authorities, notably in Australia and the USA.

The use of banned drugs in equine sport relates to the much broader issue of ‘animal enhancement’ (Yeates 2013). ‘Animal enhancement’ is poorly defined (Yeates 2013), but in the current context could be taken to mean trying to improve a horse’s competitive performance by pharmacological means. Is such action ethically acceptable? In so far as the underlying reason for trying to enhance horses by administering anabolic steroids is to gain an unfair competitive advantage [Pitts and David 2007] (i.e. to cheat), their use is unethical. But above that, and independent of ethical considerations about cheating in sport, the use of anabolic steroids is also unethical because it constitutes an abuse of the welfare of the horses involved. There is a legitimate use for anabolic steroids as a treatment in debilitated animals. That is not why they are being used in racehorses, however. The drugs are being used not to benefit the horse by treating illness or disease, but to make the horse ‘better than well’ (Yeates 2013). Any benefit to the trainer/owner of enhancing an individual animal’s performance is surely outweighed both by the cost to the individual animal and by the combined cost to many animals if the use of anabolic steroids became so rife that all trainers felt that they had to use them for their horses to be competitive (Yeates 2013). There is a dearth of information about side effects of systemic use of anabolic steroids in equids, but in man they are known to cause hepatic, cardiovascular, reproductive/endocrine, dermatological and psychiatric problems, and have been shown to have adverse cardiac effects in mice. Similar side effects might occur in horses. Even if they did not, the treatment of horses with anabolic steroids with the sole aim of enhancing performance is fundamentally unethical, and independent of the avoidable suffering – therefore we should not allow horses to compete on omeprazole if we aim to reduce avoidable suffering. On the other hand, one can argue that gastric ulcers are an unavoidable consequence of the intensive management and international travel experienced by elite competition horses, and that since omeprazole relieves the painful symptoms of gastric ulceration we should allow horses to compete on omeprazole if we aim to reduce avoidable suffering.

This brings us back to the distinction between unnecessary and avoidable suffering, and the need to look holistically at the way we manage sporting horses. If gastric ulceration is an unavoidable consequence of travelling horses internationally and/or keeping them stabled all or most of the time with
limited access to grazing, then we need to reassess whether such management practices are necessary. Research on the causes and treatment of diseases to which management can contribute, such as gastric ulceration and developmental orthopaedic disease, needs to be extended into research into the consequential effects of altering the management that can contribute to those diseases. As an example, what effect any would shifting management practices away from stabling flat racehorses to keeping them extensively have on the incidence of orthopaedic injury during training and competition? Could existing work on the effect of different surfaces (Murray et al. 2010) be extended to provide recommendations on whether the frequency with which dressage horses are worked on a surface ought to be restricted, and whether hacking horses (on the flat or on hills?) has any effect on their incidence of lameness?

Underlying this discussion of risk and unnecessary/avoidable suffering is an implicit cost/benefit analysis in which the costs to horses are being weighed against the benefits to man. This framework will seem unsatisfactory or at least incomplete to those who believe that moral values such as virtue ethics or rights ethics are equally valid, or even superior. Cost/benefit analyses have their limitations (Sandoe and Christiansen 2008), but nonetheless provide a useful method for addressing the ethical problems that currently confront equine sport because vets are familiar with cost/benefit arguments (Morton 1993), and because they are easy to apply in practice.

Throughout this discussion, I have allowed human interests to trump animal interests in the sense that one could remove benevolent and avoidable pain simply by not using horses for sport at all. Such an abolitionist position, as I indicated at the outset, is exactly what I am trying to avoid. The use of horses in sport is not, in my view, any more unreasonable or unethical than any other use of animals. However, if we are going to use horses in sport we ought to do so reasonably and ethically. Society’s views on what is reasonable and ethical are changing – a recent letter to Horse and Hound magazine (Hustler 2013) in support of the ‘softer’ fences at this year’s Badminton Horse Trials stated: ‘This is 2013 and the public will not tolerate horses falling and being injured . . .’. The horse industry needs to be proactive in adapting practice to reflect the shifting consensus of public opinion. The multi-faceted relationship between veterinarian, horse owner and trainer means that it is not always easy for veterinarians to act in the horse’s best interest (Campbell 2013). However, if as a profession we are to fulfil our over-riding obligation to ‘safeguard the welfare of animals under our care’ (http://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/#declaration), it is essential that we endeavour to act as advocates for equine athletes. In terms of treatment, this means ensuring that avoidable suffering does not occur as the result of unnecessary medication or treatment carried out at the behest of owners or trainers rather than on the basis of clinical need. In terms of research, this means continuing to develop an evidence base that identifies the causes of sport-associated injury and disease, minimises risk and avoidable suffering, and maximises the lifetime welfare of horses being used for sport.

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