

WELFARE HORSE SPORTS

A BLUEPRINT FOR
POSITIVE CHANGE

LISA ASHTON



CRC Press
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WELFARE HORSE SPORTS

What if horse sports didn't just include welfare, but were built around it?

In this timely and transformative book, equine educator and welfare advocate Lisa Ashton offers an evidence-based approach to the use of horses in sport. She presents a compelling blueprint for integrating welfare within the very heart of equestrian practice.

Through a clear and actionable 'welfare map,' Ashton guides riders, coaches, and trainers who are ready to shift their mindsets and skill sets toward more ethical, sustainable approaches. Rather than treating welfare as an add-on, she introduces the concept of welfare horse sports: a model where equine well-being is foundational, not optional.

Drawing on an intersectional and empowering approach, Ashton emphasises that meaningful change doesn't require a title or a platform. It starts with one equestrian—one coach, one rider, one trainer—bringing their unique voice, influence, and compassion to a shared mission: a better life for sport horses.

Welfare Horse Sports is not just a call to action. It's a roadmap for a more ethical and informed equestrian future. For anyone ready to earn public trust, elevate standards, and future-proof horse sports, this book is your starting point.



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DEDICATION

For my incredible parents and dear friend, Jen Brown-Watson.

Welfare Horse Sports is fundamentally about the principle of leaving every horse we interact with better. This ethos of continuous improvement, driven by a commitment to truly understanding horses, mirrors the unwavering support you have each provided throughout my equestrian journey.

To my cherished friend, Jen Brown-Watson, thank you for being an indispensable part of my community. This book underscores the vital role of communities of practice in shaping narratives and modelling welfare. Your shared passion for horses, equitation science, and your willingness to engage in open and honest conversations, even when challenging conventional norms, perfectly embody the spirit of collaboration and shared values that are crucial for cascading positive change for horses. Our friendship has been a psychologically safe space where curiosity and growth could flourish. Your unwavering belief in me has been a constant source of strength, empowering me to go first and become the horse's advocate, even when facing difficult conversations. Just as this book champions the horse's perspective, your support encourages me to speak up and contribute to a future where horse welfare is truly prioritised.

Thank you both for being steadfast companions on this continuing path toward deeper understanding and the pursuit of doing better for all horses. Finally, I extend my enduring gratitude to the horses themselves, who have enriched my life, shaped my thinking, informed my practice, and continually inspired my curiosity and capacity for deeper connection.

With heartfelt gratitude, Lisa



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FOREWORD

Horses and humans share more than the space of the arena—we share the same fundamental needs: to feel safe, competent, and resilient. This, as Lisa Ashton beautifully concludes, is the ultimate goal of working with horses. And, as I came to realize while reading *Welfare Horse Sports: A Blueprint for Positive Change*, it is equally the goal of working on ourselves.

Lisa's blueprint for creating Welfare Horse Sports and always leaving horses better than we found them, reaches far beyond the schooling arena. It invites us to reflect deeply—not just on what we do, but on how we think, feel, and choose when it comes to our horses. Guided by the First Principles of Horse Training (ISES) and the Five Domains Welfare Framework, her words ask us the essential question: “If you knew better, would you do better?”

Through the reflexive questions at the end of each chapter, I found myself pausing—not only to consider my actions with horses, but also my choices as a person. Her examples from outside the equestrian world make it clear: curiosity and self-awareness are the true agents of change. Curiosity has helped me work through obstacles that, at first, felt insurmountable. It reminds me that learning, for

both horses and humans, requires the same gentle persistence and courage to try again.

Coming from a background as a traditional GP showjumping rider, my own shift toward a horse-centred, evidence-based approach—built on empathy, science, and respect—has not always been comfortable. Change rarely is. But in Lisa's writing, I felt seen. She gives language to the discomfort, compassion to the process, and structure to the journey. Her work encourages us to build authentic connections—not only with our horses, but with each other as equestrians.

This book reminds us that while horses have no direct voice in our policies or practices, we do. We are their advocates. And advocacy, as Lisa reminds us, begins with courage—the courage to know our values and to live into them, even when it's hard.

Welfare Horse Sports offers not just philosophy, but practical pathways—small, compassionate actions that make a real difference to a horse's quality of life. And in doing so, it leaves not only horses better, but equestrians too.

Reading this book has strengthened my own equestrian voice. It has reminded me that how we make people feel is as important as how we make our horses feel. When we, like our horses, feel seen, heard, and valued—we find connection, community, and the resilience to change.

May this book inspire you, as it did me, to stay curious, to lead with empathy, and to work—for horses and for ourselves—toward a shared sense of safety, competence, and resilience.

Susan Kjærgård

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Lisa is the founder of Equicoach.Life, a global coaching platform committed to advancing ethical, evidence-based horse training. Recently elected as Education Officer for the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES), Lisa educates coaches, riding schools, and welfare organisations in applying evidence-based equitation (EBE). Her consultancy experience includes delivering long-term equine ethics, animal welfare, and cultural change at Mount St John (MSJ) Stud, Blue Cross, Redwings, and the Horse Trust. Her work embeds the Five Domains (2020) Welfare Framework and the application of the First Principles (ISES) in horse training.

Lisa brings an intersectional, rigorous, evidence-based approach to equestrian education, with experience as a Senior Lecturer leading equine cognition and learning, equine welfare and ethics, and equitation science. She is the co-host of the popular podcast *The Other End of the Reins* with Dr Andrew McLean and winner of the ‘Expert in Their Field’ StAR Award (as voted by students) at Hartpury University. Lisa’s outreach is rooted in 20 years of education in the application of learning theory, dedicated to advocating for ethical, sustainable equitation practices through coaching, scholarship, leading, and managing communities of practice (CoP). Her published work includes book chapters on equine behaviour, welfare, and the role of the horse in equestrian coaching, with peer-reviewed contributions in *Animals* and the *Journal of Veterinary Behaviour*.

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Shaping

- *Definition:* Shaping is the process of teaching a horse a new behaviour by rewarding small steps that lead toward the desired behaviour. Instead of expecting the horse to perform the full action right away, you reward them for each small progress in the right direction.
- *Example:* If you're teaching a horse to step back, you first reinforce (release pressure) for a shift in weight, then a small step, and gradually more steps until the horse can back up easily on cue.

Self-carriage

- *Definition:* Self-carriage means the horse is able to maintain a specific gait/movement without needing constant signals or pressure from the rider. The horse should keep going or stay still (immobility) until signalled/cued otherwise.
- *Example:* When a horse is in self-carriage, you can ask them to walk and they will keep walking without needing you to keep applying leg pressure/leg cues. Similarly, when you ask the horse to stop, they stay immobile, without needing to repeat rein pressure.

Classical conditioning

- *Definition:* Classical conditioning is when a horse learns to associate one thing (a cue) with another thing (a response). This happens when you repeatedly pair a neutral cue (like a cluck) with a known response (scratch) so the horse starts responding to the cue automatically.
- *Example:* If you cluck with your mouth before you add a scratch, the horse learns at hearing the cluck, the scratch is coming, because they have associated that sound with the delivery of scratching.

Parasympathetic nervous system

- *Definition:* The parasympathetic nervous system is the part of the horse's body that helps them relax and rest. It is often activated when the horse feels safe and calm, leading to relaxation responses like slower breathing, relaxed muscles, and blinking more frequently.
- *Example:* When you scratch a horse in its 'sweet spot,' such as the base of the withers, the horse may blink slowly and lower its head, showing that its parasympathetic nervous system is helping it relax.

Valence (affective state)

- *Definition:* Valence refers to whether a horse's emotional state is positive or negative. A positive valence means the horse is experiencing something enjoyable or pleasant, while a negative valence means the horse may be feeling distress or discomfort.
- *Example of positive valence:* A horse that is clucked at and scratched for standing still at the mounting block will begin to associate the mounting block with a positive experience, experiencing a positive valence at the mounting block (context of repeat scratches).
- *Example of negative valence:* A horse receiving clashing signals from a rider—being asked to stop while also being squeezed from the calves to go—horse may at best be confused, leading to a need to resolve this conflict by doing behaviours such as rearing, bucking, or bolting, as a result of experiencing a negative valence.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As pressure grows to demonstrate horse sports with welfare following a series of critical global incidents and ‘immense societal change,’ questions are being asked about the welfare of sport horses; do equestrian sports push horses to the point of abuse?

Welfare Horse Sports is a blueprint for equestrians curious or currently undertaking shifts in mindset and skills to future-proof horse sports.

We already have books that explore the application of learning theory in horse training in great depth. This book is not one of them. Instead, *Welfare Horse Sports* is written for equestrians who are ready to update their skills and shift their mindset—reframe their approach in order to enhance welfare outcomes. At its heart, this book is shaped by the final part of Maya Angelou’s well-known quote: ‘Then, when we know better, we do better.’ It looks backwards through the lens of ‘now we know better,’ not as a value judgement on the ethicality of heritage practices, but as an invitation to critically reflect and move forward. It specifically leans into the intersection of learning theory, animal welfare science, and ethics—not as separate silos, but as interwoven forces guiding a new paradigm in horse–human relationships. Just as restoring an old building requires discerning what to preserve

and what to modernise, so too does updating equestrian heritage. Traditional practices can be held up to the test of First Principles (International Society for Equitation Science [ISES]). Those that stand up remain part of the structure. Those that do not can—and should—be updated. This book encourages you to observe all horse–human relationships, past and present, with the same evidence-based lens: ‘know better, do better.’ That includes revered equestrians of history. We must objectively assess the horse’s lived experience—even in the past.

This is not a book comparing today’s horses to those 100 or 200 years ago. But if it were, we would begin by identifying their negative experiences, evident in equine facial expressions captured in historical art—paintings, sculptures, and artefacts. These cultural documents reveal a great deal, especially when we notice consistent facial expressions that reflect discomfort, pain, confusion, or fear. Equipment on the horse’s head in those times, often glorified as traditional or classical, must also be re-examined through the lens of the horse’s physical and mental state.

This is why the notion that classical equitation represents a time when horses were spared negative experiences must be met with critical discernment. That is, the ability to stop, look closely, and ask: what was really going on for the horse? When you read, watch, or listen to equestrians referencing historical practices—whether under the banner of classical equitation or positive tradition—practice discernment. Hone your ability to detect nuance, interpret the evidence, and choose wisely. Discernment is a thinking superpower—a blend of insight, ethics, and emotional awareness guided by observing critically the lived experience of the horse. Applying evidence-based knowledge—particularly *The International Society for Equitation Science First Principles of Horse Training*—means, for example, that how we apply the aids must be grounded in Principle 9—Correct Use of Signals or Cues. Any consistent rider posture or body position that occurs simultaneously with primary aids can become part of the aiding system through a form of learning called compound conditioning (a subset of classical conditioning—see *Modern Horse Training: Equitation Science Principles & Practices* by Dr Andrew McLean, 2024).

Understanding Principle 9 (ISES) (Principle 6 in Federation Equestre Internationale [FEI])—Correct Use of Signals or Cues—is crucial. It helps explain why some horses are labelled as ‘dull,’ ‘lazy,’ ‘difficult,’ ‘hot,’ or ‘naughty.’ These are not behavioural flaws; they can be as a result of unclear or conflicting signals from the rider. Coaching riders to maintain a consistent riding position becomes an act of discernment. Research shows that riders with better pelvic mobility and control produce significantly fewer conflict behaviours in the horse. In *Welfare Horse Sports*, how we apply knowledge is as important as what we know—procedural knowledge. Discernment is what allows us to move from knowing to doing better—for the horse, and with the horse.

1. *From Control to Collaboration*: Embrace evidence-based knowledge of how horses learn. Apply learning theory to communicate with clarity, expanding a horse’s competency and resilience. Rather than controlling horses with tight nosebands, strong bits, and whipping, apply evidence-based knowledge. Shift from controlling horses to skills that provide horses with predictability and controllability of their world, not fear, pain, and confusion.
2. *From Static Expertise to Lifelong Learning*: Through the practice of curiosity, the skill of unlearning, learning updated evidence-based knowledge, and the application of equitation science within leave horses better (LHB) communities of practice (CoP).
3. *From Reactive to Proactive*: Earn public trust by safeguarding horses. Gain insights into the small deposits that leave horses better.
4. *From Fear of Forced Change to Trusting in Co-Creation*: Recognize evidence-based equitation (EBE) enhances the lived experience of horses, empowering equestrians to enhance horse welfare outcomes.

Practising shifts in our beliefs and attitudes starts with curiosity, followed by unlearning, learning, and finally the practice of reflective thinking before the cycle starts again, constantly repeating as we update our prior knowledge. In an era of misinformation and changing societal attitudes, this book is the equestrian’s

blueprint for positive change for horses. As Chapter 1 will detail, the equestrian world is experiencing a significant shift due to increasing societal scrutiny and a deeper understanding of horse welfare. This growing pressure necessitates a fundamental change in how we approach horse sports. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for this transformation by exploring the urgent need for a welfare-centred approach, driven by evolving societal values and ethical considerations. It also begins to examine the ingrained mindsets and historical beliefs that often hinder progress.

Chapter 2 illustrates why a new perspective is essential for the future of equestrianism, paving the way for the welfare horse sports mindset.

Chapter 3 explains how the application of the Five Domains (2020) and First Principles (ISES) frameworks provides the evidence of welfare and ethical literacy, introducing how we leave horses better.

Chapter 4 explains CoPs, the impact of a LHB CoP with a practical strategy for communities to lower resistance to change and update prior knowledge with the application of Five Domains (2020) and First Principles (ISES).



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THE SHIFT

Why *Welfare Horse Sports* now? Public trust is eroding, and equestrians face growing scrutiny from both within and beyond. Welfare breaches—once hidden in plain sight—are now broadcast and debated on the global stage. The public is watching, and increasingly, not liking what we see. Yet within this discomfort lies the possibility of reform. If we reimagine horse sport through the lens of equitation science, animal behaviour science, animal welfare science, and systems thinking science, we create a future not built on tradition, but on trust—earned through consistent, visible welfare improvements. What could horse sport look like if we centred the horse’s lived experience? And what becomes possible when we do? You’re reading this book, so I don’t need to convince you of the case for welfare horse sports. Fortunately, it is not up for debate. However, as a curious equestrian, why is my book called *Welfare Horse Sports*? Without a collective witnessing of blue tongues, tight nosebands, hyper-flexed necks, whipping, and equine pain faces in different horse sports, I would not be writing about doing positive change for horses. This book is my invitation for us to explore actionable, observable, meaningful for horses, ways to leave every horse we interact with better. It is a blueprint for doing positive horse welfare and enhancing welfare outcomes for all horses.

Our obsession with the type of connection we have with horses (Jones McVey, 2023) coupled with a commitment to *do* better, because we now know better, has challenged equestrian attitudes towards the use of horses in sport (EEWC, 2022). Instead

of thinking about doing horse sports *with* welfare, this book is my invitation to leave every horse we interact with, better.

In Chapter 2, I present a welfare horse sports *mindset*, taking an intersectional approach (see Figure 1.1) to *how* we know what we know, *what* we know that optimises horse welfare outcomes, and *why* different ways we show up can leave horses better (mentally, not just physically). At the heart of how, what, and why is a *welfare horse sports mindset*. Updating the equestrian mindset is actioned by the practice of *reflective praxis*. Observable behaviours of a welfare horse sports mindset are evidenced by *doing* reflexive praxis (actions focused on introspection). Building upon the identified need for change in Chapter 1, this section introduces the core concept of this book: the welfare horse sports mindset. This mindset represents a fundamental shift in how equestrians understand and interact with horses in sport, moving beyond traditional practices



Figure 1.1 Whole Systems Thinking: The Heartland of a Welfare Horse Sports Mindset

to prioritise the horse's well-being in every aspect. It is the essential framework for responding to the 'shift' discussed in Chapter 1.

Attitudes are valence estimations of positive or negative qualities. Often, attitudes are mixed up with beliefs. Beliefs are estimations of whether something is or is not true. Attitudes are mental and emotional positions towards specific ideas, people, and situations. In biology, when organisms have the capacity to change but there is little encouragement to do so, the organism remains mostly the same from one generation to the next. But when the pressure to adapt increases, the pace of evolution increases in response. Over long timescales, patterns emerge: stretches of sameness punctuated by periods of rapid change. In horse sports today, we see this pattern, known as the punctuated equilibrium. This book is to help equestrians implement ethical horse training, using a welfare horse sports mindset to navigate through equestrian punctuated equilibrium—a rapid pace of change due to changed societal attitudes. When the human brain receives new information and feels uncertain, we use our current understanding, pieced together from previous experiences, to make sense of new knowledge. Brains do this via two mechanisms Piaget, J. (1952) *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York: International Universities Press. We try to assimilate new knowledge into our existing models. When assimilation fails, we feel viscerally uncomfortable and resist accommodation by trying to apply our current models of reality to the situation. It's only when we accept the existing models will not resolve the incongruences that it updates the model itself by accommodating the novelty. The result is an epiphany, the conscious realisation that our minds have changed. Great conversations encourage accommodation as everyone trades unique ideas and perspectives. Our mental and emotional position towards the use of horses in sport can no longer incorporate incongruences, and when we update our priors, it isn't the evidence that changes, but our attitude (mental position towards whether something is true or not), creating a paradigm shift. As our collection of attitudes builds up over time, they require us to seek different explanations for what we previously thought was settled and understood. At a certain point, what we thought was 'a good life' for animals is now a 'point of balance.' Our minds have changed. Sport creates a

collection of attitudes, and this book provides the equestrian with up-to-date attitudes towards the use of horses in sport, enriching sport horses by *doing* on purpose, enhanced welfare outcomes, and leaving horses better, because of our interactions. A welfare horse sports mindset is a mental framework enhancing horse welfare outcomes. Like the growth mindset, a tool for learning and overcoming challenges, a welfare horse sports mindset influences your behaviour, decisions, and overall approach to horse welfare. By applying a welfare horse sports mindset, equestrians can individually make a difference towards horses living ‘a good life.’

The welfare horse sports mindset is a mental model prioritising *learning*. However, it is the ability to update our prior knowledge (we did the best we could with what we knew at the time) through *practice*; procedural learning of evidence-based knowledge. The welfare horse sports mindset ‘calls in’ evidence-based knowledge *at the right time*, doing what makes an actual difference to the individual horse. Procedural knowledge requires lots of practice, having not learned the procedural part of knowledge. For example, identifying conflict behaviour (evidence-based knowledge) *in* competition (application of knowledge) is having a welfare horse sports mindset. Conflict behaviour was recently redefined by scientists as knowledge of learning theory (learning processes), biomechanics, and an understanding of horses’ possible reactions to pain. By applying a welfare horse sports mindset, the multidisciplinary approach investigates the function of conflict behaviour (‘calling in’ pain) as stress-induced behavioural changes arising from conflicting motivations, especially when avoidance behaviour is prevented. In equitation, conflict behaviour may be caused by the application of simultaneous opposing signals such as stop and go cues, with the horse unable to avoid enduring pain/discomfort from relentless rein tension and leg pressures. The mindset of doing procedural learning to enhance horse welfare is *applying* evidence-based knowledge of conflict behaviour (bolting, shying, freezing, bucking, rearing, head-tossing, tensing up, tail swish, open mouth, tongue out, and teeth grinding), intersecting the function of the unwanted behaviour. The judge applying a welfare horse sports mindset recognises conflict behaviours *and* recognises that the behaviour is serving a function—an attempt

by the horse to *resolve* their negative experience. Researchers studying the effect of the rider on conflict behaviour, rein tension, physiological measures, and rideability scores found riders significantly affect rein tension, heart rate, and increases in saliva cortisol concentrations, as well as specific conflict behaviours. This contribution to knowledge of the lived experience of sport horses highlights the impact *riders* have in enhancing welfare outcomes, with some riders inducing *more* discomfort in horses. A welfare horse sports mindset is a framework for approaching the use of horses in sport. Prioritising the skill of applying evidence-based knowledge at competitions, practising skills development, curiosity, unlearning, and procedural learning is the *welfare horse sports* driven mindset. It is a mindset guiding equestrian choices to enhance horse welfare outcomes.

Curiosity (willingness to challenge our assumptions and biases) and unlearning (traditional ways of thinking) to *renovate* (keep what works, replace what doesn't) horse sports is the right thing right now. At this moment in the arc of horses in sport, there cannot be a more important book for equestrians. A welfare horse sports mindset is a mental model of service and learning. Serving horses by asking *ourselves* 'how is my horse *feeling*?' Prioritising understanding horses is an attempt to satisfy *their* needs, not our own. Having a serving mental model (like abundance or problem-solving) is essential where collaboration and support are foundational.

Doing the right thing for the horse necessitates evidence of equine enrichment. Not just because horse sports are heavily commodified, or due to the fear that 'public fasting' equestrian sport will impact revenue. Not even the 'dancing horses with blue tongues' streaming into living rooms is *the* only reason to enrich horses. It is changed societal attitudes towards sentience and supremacy. There is a shift from 'being right' to 'getting it right' (for horses). This book is your roadmap to applying evidence-based integrative approaches to improve horse welfare outcomes. Instead of criticising different 'knowings,' we get to dive deeper, beyond tradition. The welfare horse sports mindset is founded on curiosity, exploring research in *diverse* domains. How we know what we know, a domain called epistemology, is the study of the origin

and validity of knowledge. A belief is a subjective attitude towards a proposition that is true. Knowledge passed down/along from coach to coach, for example, ‘use your inside leg to outside rein,’ is a belief (subjective attitude) that inside rider leg pressure applied *with* outside rein pressure is going to improve your horse’s ‘way of going.’ When riders use one leg pressure, inside leg, as a cue for the horse to accelerate (go response), it is likely the horse will fall out with his shoulders. Thus, bringing the shoulders back to the direction of travel by applying outside (light) rein pressure to the direction of the horse’s midline corrects the falling out. Inside leg then outside rein, sequentially, aligns with the knowledge of how horses learn, specifically the mode of learning called *operant conditioning* (light pressure to cue a behaviour followed by the release of light pressure for the behaviour [or any slight behavioural change towards the desired behaviour]), demystifying ‘ride inside leg to outside rein.’ A rider’s belief (a subjective attitude that the proposition is true) does not require introspection. Evidence-based knowledge demands introspection. Procedural learning, that is, applying evidence-based knowledge to horse training, aligns with the horse’s cognitive and biomechanical realities. Reflexive riders (skilled in introspection) can challenge tradition and equestrian beliefs (knowledge). A welfare horse sports mindset is formed first from cultivating curiosity, the antidote to uncertainty, followed by practising the skill of unlearning, learning evidence-based knowledge anchored in introspection, and the skill development of reflexive praxis.

My experience of translating evidence-based knowledge (coaching equitation science) involves the importance of a ‘grab’ to motivate (motivational grab) riders to apply introspection. Introspection is anchored in reflexive praxis—where knowledge informs practice, and practice, in turn, refines knowledge. How we know what we know (epistemology) and understanding equestrian beliefs (subjective attitude towards knowledge is true) requires reflexive praxis competence; the skills and ability to identify reflexive practice skill gaps. Education in *procedural knowledge* recognises that ‘inside leg to outside rein’ is just one part of the required physical adaptations from the horse, on their unique performance journey that, may require the ability to collect.

The problem with holding a belief (a subjective attitude towards a proposition as true), is it does not require active introspection. Riders do not consider if the horse can even respond to both inside leg and outside rein pressure together. They cannot. However, it is the subjective attitude that both leg and rein pressure together must be true for the horse to improve, ignoring procedural knowledge that horses, like many animals, cannot respond to two pressures (cues) at once. An animal training phenomenon known as ‘overshadowing’ is when two cues/pressures are applied simultaneously, only the most salient (loudest pressure) will motivate the horse to respond. Overlapping leg and rein pressure fails the First Horse Training Principle (International Society for Equitation Science [ISES]), Principle 9: *Correct Use of Signals or Cues*. Unclear, ambiguous, or simultaneous signals lead to a mental state of confusion. This mental confusion can be seen as an observable behaviour to equestrians and is referred to by equitation scientists as conflict theory. A functional behaviour for the horse is attempting to resolve a negative experience. A conflict behaviour is a response by the horse to stress (in this example, confusion, but the cause of conflict behaviour also includes fear), helping the horse overcome/resolve the acute stressor. A welfare horse sports mindset identifies the observable response by the horse to the clashing aids and understands that the horse is simply trying to resolve his/her their confusion, thus procedural knowledge matters to enhance horse welfare outcomes, correctly identifying the observable behaviour as conflict behaviours, as opposed to projecting labels like ‘naughty horse,’ ‘moody mare,’ or ‘a psychopath.’ Rider/handler aids need to be easy for the horse to discriminate different responses, with each aid having only one meaning and all aids having different responses that are never applied concurrently. The final application of evidence-based knowledge (procedural knowledge) is an aid applied in time with limb biomechanics. For example, by applying an aid at the start of the swing phase of the limb, your aid is motivating a response. If the opposite happens, the stance phase, we just wait until the limb *can* respond to the rider’s light aid biomechanically.

There were also beliefs held at that time in the world, where introspection was not required from equestrians. Few, historically,

have carefully considered the horse's aversion to them, assuming the horse is the problem, framing their narrative that the horse's avoidance is because the horse is 'naughty,' 'moody,' 'disrespectful,' 'stubborn,' or 'lazy,' of which the horse is none. A welfare horse sports mindset identifies the negative experience *for the horse*, and understands the conflict behaviour (bucking, rearing, spinning, teethgrinding, tail swishing, napping) is the horse's attempt to resolve the negative experience. Taking an equi-centric perspective, I discuss later the telos (e.g. 'horseness of a horse') as the core tenet of a welfare horse sports mindset.

The German term 'Wissenschaft' refers to the interdisciplinary nature of scholarly activities, recognising that knowledge spans multiple fields beyond what is traditionally considered 'science' in English. It bridges the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and formal sciences under one over-arching umbrella, the pursuit of knowledge. The heart of welfare horse sports; evidence-based knowledge, multidisciplinary approaches, and agility in addressing intersectionality in order to get closer to the truth about horses, leaving horses better than when we met them (positive change).

Horses were legally recognised as sentient in the United Kingdom as recently as 2022. Enriching sport horse lives is not just morally or ethically right. In Switzerland, France, Spain, Germany, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, it is also legally right. The change in societal attitudes towards animals experiencing emotions as sentient beings ended a tradition where animals entertained humans for decades. While the circus in the United Kingdom died, the zoo was renovated, and today these thrive in the face of changing societal attitudes. Using animals *for* entertainment shifted theatrical performances to evidence of enhancing animal welfare and education. Captive animal collections (zoos) have been redesigning animal enclosures to align with species-specific behaviours (also referred to throughout this book as *telos*) for some years. Teleology (telos) is the needs of a species being satisfied, demonstrating captive animals can progress towards 'living a good life' by satisfying the needs of the species in captivity. Coined 'meaningful movement' enclosures, redesigning a tiger enclosure was the 'vehicle' that provided captive tigers with positive

opportunities to thrive; navigation, novelty, agency to exert control, experience diversity, and behave socially (www.carefortherare.com/meaningful-movement). These ‘meaningful movement’ enclosures led to positive change in the lived experience of the captive tiger. Shaped by changed societal attitudes, satisfying the telos of a species is referred to throughout the book as having a mindset ‘update.’ Future-proofing (sustaining) the use of animals in entertainment is vital. Sea World updated its theatrical performances with welfare and education ripples; increasing visitor engagement and understanding of orca behaviour. Choosing to bring the functional complexity of a species’ wild environment into managed environments was a mindset shift. In *response* to shifted societal attitudes, it is crucial to integrate the animals’ needs *with* the needs of humans. Changing societal attitudes challenge the status quo. A triple bottom line strategy: planet, people, profit, is an example of the business mindset shift required to survive today in business to achieve long-term sustainability of an industry. A shift from entertaining to elevating animals’ quality of life is identical to the welfare horse sports mindset facing equestrians. Ripples are created by doing positive change. In the ripples evolution research, positive change practices may never fully be measured. That said, ripples do result in *cascades* of change. Zoos have embraced societal attitudinal change with responsibility (ability to respond) and accountability for both the *mental* and physical states of animals held captive by humans. Zoos have worked collectively for the past decade, progressing captive animals towards ‘a good life.’ A ‘good life,’ as defined by the Good Life for Equids White Paper (2024), is a life balanced between *fluctuations* of positive and negative experiences through the life cycle of a horse, resulting mostly in positive experiences.

In a relatively short space of time, the digital age has positively disrupted traditional ways of ‘doing life’; from blockbuster to Netflix, taxis to Uber, hotels to Airbnb, society has unlearned traditional ways of thinking in less time than dignity was granted legally to all relationships (legalising gay marriage). The post-pandemic societal and economic shifts, escalating climate change and impacts and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) make today’s pace of change unprecedented. As the digital era migrates into

the infodemic era, the overwhelm and paralysis as information floods in (both accurate and false) creates confusion and moral uncertainty to *do* right by our horse. It is this democratisation of information, where anyone with internet access can access knowledge, empowers individuals, and at the same time proliferates falsehoods. The ease of spreading misinformation and disinformation destroys trust in organisations and media. Echo chambers and filter bubbles multiply online, reinforcing long-held and outdated equestrian beliefs that ‘this is how we have always done it’—a certain companion in these changing societal attitudes. Captured eloquently by Major Timmis in his horse training book published in the 1930s; ‘The average horse-dealer thinks no one knows as much as he does...to convince them they are in the wrong is impossible.’ The welfare horse sports mindset, at its core, is the ability to think *critically*.

With the rise in quantity and quality of equitation science research, interdisciplinary research is making small and meaningful steps towards knowing what it is like for a (telos). A welfare horse sports mindset keeps thinking critically at the centre of this mental model (see Figure 1.1). Critically reflecting on peer-reviewed knowledge, the powerful emotion, regret, ‘rears its necessary head’ albeit at different times on our individual equestrian journeys. According to regret researchers (Pink, 2022), ‘looking back’ in order to move forwards is the power of regret. By enlisting our regrets, they can serve as motivation to change an immediate situation for the better. Pink urges ditching the cliché ‘no regrets’ and instead using the power of regret to *rethink* what we thought we knew and explore our ability to unlearn.

With pressure escalating (inside and outside of equestrianism) to address horse welfare gaps, why is an ability to unlearn and renovate horse sports so hard? It seems the struggle to rethink what we know is not a modern horse training challenge. The way cultural patterns are cued and encoded, like a domino effect, means horse advocates can learn how to initiate changes that harness positive ripples. Historical equestrian encoding to ‘be the knower’ made us act in ways that mesh the knowledge of the equestrian minds around us (groupthink). Humans have even evolved specialised

brain systems to share knowledge within groups. If someone in your foraging band dislodged a coconut from the tree, learning by watching, soon the whole group shared this skill, resulting in clear coordination with each other, all following the shared script. Different groups around the world developed different pools of common knowledge, resulting in *different* cultures. Group membership to a culture makes a behaviour of the culture a behavioural norm, making the behaviour even more advantageous. As even more similarity reinforces the cultural norms; predictability and culture begins to experience a sense of 'us'—an expansion of identity beyond kinship to the broader group. If equestrians are historically coded (culturally reinforced not to change our mind or challenge what we know in the face of sharper logic or stronger evidence), it is easy to find empathy for reverting to our cultural coding '*this is how we've always done it,*' despite seeing horse welfare gaps exist. Without renovating for enhanced welfare outcomes for horses, there is uncertainty towards the future of using horses in sport, especially in light of immense societal change. However, welfare horse sports is a mental model bringing in the field of cultural evolution science. The field of cultural science explains culture does change across generations. The process of cultural evolution has been expressed in complex mathematical models; the central insight is that cultural transmission hinges on *learning processes*. As culture evolves, some elements are learned (patting horses) and others are overlooked (tightening nosebands) as the rising generation *recreates* society. Studies implicate biases in social learning, specifically conformity bias. Widespread behaviours are more likely to be learned (patting horses) than rare behaviours such as equestrians scratching (not patting) at the base of the wither, mirroring the behaviour of horse behaviour (mutual grooming). Cultural science explains that bias towards continuity with deep tradition inhibits cultural change. In addition, our impulse to mesh social approval/validation and peer instinct with backward-gazing nostalgia is part of our ancestral instinct. Finding comfort in tradition and the duty we feel to maintain traditions is a human instinct. These instincts are inside all of us; the conformist who seeks belonging and the traditionalist who cherishes continuity. According to research, a third instinct, the hero instinct, drives contribution and aspirations for esteem and

success. Each instinct guides people in adaptive directions. Our shared equestrian culture (behaviours) for enhancing horse welfare brings together a myriad of individuals, ideas, and experiments for individual and community (pony club, riding schools, sport disciplines) *unlearning*.

In July 2024, the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI) unlearned the ancestor instinct; ‘this is how we have always done it,’ publishing a Welfare Strategy born from the 37 Equine Ethics and Well-being Commission (EEWC) recommendations and accepted in full by the FEI. Just weeks later, tongues of equine Olympians were visibly blue, professionally captured by photographers in attendance at the Paris Olympic Games, and later published online. Vets and equitation scientists declared, ‘organs turning blue is never a good thing’ (Uldahl, as quoted in *The Times*, 2024). Holding up the ancestor instinct ‘we have always done it this way’ are the riders and trainers benefiting from the status quo. The peer instinct is uptaken in the absence of research (evidence), as opposed to erring on the side of the horse (a mindset that the horse is a sentient being). The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, reminded to us by the EEWC following FEI riders, trainers, and some scientists persistently responding to the images of blue tongues with the statement ‘we need more research.’ This is in contrast to using the precautionary principle, where practices questionable towards the welfare of the horse are sought to be solved or discontinued immediately. Any incentivisation of pain (the winning of medals with blue tongues) or confusion (evidenced by conflict behaviours; mouth opening, tail swishing, spooking, and bolting) reveals incongruence between the use of horses in sport and FEI storytelling for many years, ‘a happy equine athlete.’ Unlearning the ancestry instinct; ‘this is how we have always done it’ is possible. The FEI launched the Be a Guardian campaign in 2024, as its ‘vehicle to get the community on board’ with its Welfare Strategy and Action Plan: ‘In order to bring the community of riders, coaches and judges along with us,’ said FEI President Ingmar de Vos.

This book is a blueprint for unlearning equestrian ancestry: the mindset of ‘this is how we’ve always done it.’ It serves as a companion for exploring how beliefs, attitudes, and mental frameworks

shape our perception of horse behaviour and our response to the accelerating pace of change in equine welfare science. *Welfare Horse Sports* is presented here as a lens: one that sharpens our ability to be responsive to the horse and reflexive about our own practices throughout the horse's entire life cycle. At the end of each section, you'll find reflective activities titled 'Reflexive praxis.' The more deeply you engage with these, the more meaningful your contribution to improving welfare outcomes for sport horses, both individually and collectively. This mindset—a combination of responsiveness to the horse and reflexivity in ourselves—arises from a growing consensus: what truly matters is the horse's own perception of their physical and emotional state, from birth to death. A horse living a good life requires more than the avoidance of suffering; it requires the opportunity for positive experiences. That's the essence of welfare—or more fully, fairing well.

Welfare Horse Sports puts the horse's perspective first, (telos) honouring their mental and physical state. To the author's knowledge, this is the first resource of its kind to support equestrians in unlearning inherited practices and choosing instead to update their knowledge using evidence-based approaches. It's about replacing tradition with intention, and habit with humane science. For example, rather than expecting a foal to 'know' how to lift a leg on command, a *Welfare Horse Sports* practitioner understands how horses learn. They apply light pressure to motivate the response, release immediately once the leg lifts, pair this with a consistent auditory cue (like a cluck), and reinforce with a scratch at the withers—a species-specific affiliative behaviour (allogrooming). This layered, thoughtful interaction makes the horse more likely to offer the behaviour in the future, and with a positive emotional state. Instead of simply 'adding welfare' to sport—like applying a noseband taper gauge to prevent excessive tightness—*Welfare Horse Sports* asks us to reimagine sport itself. It seeks to design positive experiences from the start, not just mitigate negative ones. And if you're still asking 'So what?'—the answer is simple: because it's the right thing to do. Because welfare science tells us we must. And because when we make decisions through the lens of what it's like to be a horse—not a human projecting onto a horse—we naturally begin to rebuild public trust. Trust we will need if we are to have a future for horses in sport at all.

Welfare is:

The state of the animal's body and mind, and extent to which their nature is satisfied.

Fraser et al. (1997)

Our horses cannot experience having their species-specific needs satisfied if we still believe that welfare is care. Before engaging in a welfare conversation, ask what is *their* understanding of welfare? Actively listen. Not to respond. If you hear what you think sounds like care—a basic minimum physical state (may include mental state, i.e., negative emotions)—then discussing opportunities for horses to experience positive mental states; joy, curiosity, etc. may be a few more conversations away for the time being. Later, I share how we can try and meet horses and humans where they are, instead of educating at people. However, if you do find yourself in any discussions where replacing welfare with ‘well-being’ is gaining momentum (due to negative associations with welfare), ask this one question—To what extent is the horse’s nature being satisfied? Welfare is the physical state and performance is important, so too is the horse’s subjective experience—as perceived by the horse. When we recognise that ‘welfare’ means different things to different people, just knowing this can, in some instances, instigate positive change for horses.



REFLEXIVE PRAXIS

The point of learning is not to affirm what we currently believe. It's to evolve what we believe.” (Grant, 2025). Steer discussions from removing/avoiding the word *welfare* in our community spaces, in person and online, to inconvenient conversations that help identify that welfare is beyond the physical state of the horse. Ask to what extent is a horse’s nature being satisfied? The telos of the horse (horseness of a horse). This calibre of conversation sprinkles ‘seeds’ of trust, evidenced by the different objective ways (evidence-based knowledge) the needs of horses are being satisfied.

Welfare is a physical state and performance is important, but so too is the horse's subjective experience—as perceived by the horse. The field of animal welfare science has agreed that welfare is: Today, society places its spotlight, rightly, on both the physical *and* mental condition of animals. We have expanded our consideration 'bandwidth' to the experiences (as perceived *by the horse*) *equally* alongside physical state, together, offering *their* welfare state. Welfare, the word, is necessary because it represents the individual's *mental* state. The extent to which a horse's nature is satisfied requires us to update our priors about species-specific knowledge; ethology, cognition, anatomy, and physiology. Learning (unlearning) the updated (evidence-based) knowledge of the horse takes equestrians closer to understanding how the horse views the world. A welfare horse sports mindset is making decisions towards enhancing the mental and physical state of the horse (welfare) by providing opportunities for the sport horse to experience *telos*, the Greek word for fulfilment. A welfare horse sports mindset is intentional choices towards satisfying the specific needs *of the horse*. Why does having a fulfilled life matter? Or perhaps the better question is—"So what?" Considering the cumulative life experiences of the sport horse is necessary when assessing the quality of life of the sport horse.

Originally developed to assess the welfare of experimental animals, assessing quality of life is relevant to all animals today, with some arguing even more relevant to the use of horses in sport. Quality of life is becoming increasingly important in animal welfare and is not a one-off welfare assessment. The Quality of Life Framework provides an insight into the balance of all the negative and positive welfare experiences a horse might have during their lifetime. Three categories for quality of life have been recognised (Farm Animal Welfare Council [FAWC] report): a life not worth living, where the negative experiences outweigh the positive—the animal would be better off dead than alive; a life worth living, when, although some pain, suffering, distress, or lasting harm may occur, on balance, the animal's positive experiences outweigh the negative; and a good life where positive experiences heavily outweigh the negative beyond any reasonable doubt; certain husbandry practices are proscribed and others prescribed.