



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/JULIA SHEPELEVA

OPINION

# Equestrianism and Animal Rights

BY ELYSE SCHENK

## A Close Look at the Horse-Human Relationship

Recently, animal rights activists have amplified conversations regarding the proper treatment of the precious animals with whom we share our planet and homes. While animal rights organizations have improved the welfare of animals within many industries, their focus has recently begun to shift towards the equestrian community. Many animal rights activists, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), have announced arguments against the use of

horses for any and all riding purposes.

Thus, now is the time to analyze the relationship we share with horses and ask ourselves the difficult questions: Do horses share our joy in riding? Or is our passion a one-sided arrangement that ought to be reconsidered?

We must face the criticisms head-on in order to find a fair and honest answer that prioritizes the well-being of our beloved horses, and secondarily protects the horse industry from toxic, slanderous

reputations and unreasonable regulations.

The current objections to riding horses are evaluated below, followed by an opportunity to reflect upon the ethical challenges of the activities we engage in with our horses.

### **“Horses deserve to live their lives as nature intended.”<sup>1</sup>**

Nature has become romanticized as an innocent, peaceful, and righteous place, representing the optimal state to live. Because nature is idealized, a current belief is trending that a “natural” way of life is inherently better in all respects, while its “adversary” (human civilization) is the source of all oppression and cruelty.

However, we mustn't forget that the purpose of human civilization is to protect us from nature. While nature should be respected and appreciated, the apathetic brutality of its mighty forces made necessary the protective shelter of human infrastructures and institutions.

Thus, horses deserve better than to live as nature intended. Since nature is too unforgiving and harsh for most humans to voluntarily inhabit, how is it preferable to subject horses to the like? Domesticated horse breeds today would especially suffer in the wild after generations of genetic and environmental adaptation to human dependence.

While horse care and living conditions certainly vary across the philosophically, socioeconomically, and ethically diverse horse industry, equine advocates should still take pride in the unique human ability to provide horses with a home — one free from predators, with reliable access to food and water, generous attention to health, and abundant affection. The reality is that domestication offers horses security and comfort, both luxurious accommodations compared to the struggles of living “as nature intended.”

### **“We can and must challenge our old patterns of thinking if we want to treat animals ethically — not as subservient to us but as our equals.”<sup>1</sup>**

If horses preferred to be treated as equals, then they would choose to interact amongst each other with equal authority in a human-free, natural herd setting. Yet, anyone familiar with horses knows that this is far from reality, as hierarchical structures are a pillar of equine behaviour. Specifically, horse herds consist of a spectrum of dominance and submission. Even in the exceptional

cases when the pecking order isn't perfectly linear or neatly organized, the presence of dominant horses remains extremely consistent within herds.

In fact, not only are horses accustomed to having a dominant leader, they prefer this association, as a leader is a figure of reassurance to a horse. While individual horses vary in their willingness to forgo authority, they almost always accept a human leader to show them the way once the person offers clear guidance, purpose, and safety, all of which are precious gifts to a prey animal.

This principle is what makes the horse-human relationship possible. The trust a horse grants a human is what motivates him to jump fences, to dance for his rider, or for a dancer to vault upon him. A trusted leader inspires their horse to gallop directly into a water bank; to venture for kilometers into rough, unexplored territory; to climb mountains; and to leap down steep inclines. The single fundamental act of a prey animal calmly accepting a rider aboard its back

**A wild mare with her foal at foot. Research has shown that horses in the wild live shorter lives and are at greater risk of disease and injury. Horses have survived and evolved from prehistoric times, because they learn from previous experiences and are able to habituate themselves to their environments. Adapting to lifestyles managed by humans has made it possible for horses to live longer, safer lives, and their trainability is what has made the horse/human partnership so successful.**



PHOTO: ISTOCK/ONE PONY

is a phenomenon made possible by a familiar and comforting leader-follower relationship. Essentially, a horse will do anything within his power for a leader he trusts, and he will do so not out of fear, but with a willing tranquility and enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, and tragically, exceptions do exist, and horses are sometimes compelled to perform through force, discomfort, or fear of punishment. This dynamic almost always limits performance capability, is deservingly unsustainable, and calls for condemnation to avoid conflation between bullies and true horsemen. Animal rights advocates mustn't confuse these ugly instances for the standard bonds between humans and horses that derive from trust and compassionate leadership.

### **“The decision to take part in horseback riding is made solely by one individual with little benefit to and no input from the other.”<sup>1</sup>**

Unlike toy horses, humans cannot physically overpower or outrun these animals in order to play the game desired. This leaves us with two options for approaches to riding — manipulative control, or communicative connection.

First, as acknowledged, tyrannical control does indeed occur in the equestrian world through various methods of forceful submission, and ought to be criticized from all directions for inflicting distress upon horses. In most cases, however, true horsemen recognize that forceful domination only results in a tense and fearful horse, one that will never outperform an animal who trusts and understands his rider. Thus, the impracticality and cruelty of equine oppression means that working with

horses is nearly impossible without their input and consent, leaving us with the preferred approach to riding: connection.

Although horses cannot speak the language of humans, nor formally consent to be sat on by verbal permission or contractual agreement, humans have impressively learned to speak the language of horses, enabling us to understand their input and encourage their consent.

Specifically, input and consent are achieved through a silent conversation. A rider suggests an action from their horse by applying gentle pressure, and the horse may reply in various fashions, but ideally consent is returned in the form of cooperation, for a horse communicates consent by willing cooperation. Otherwise, the alternative is a refusing

horse, discouraged by confusion, fear, discomfort, or lack of trust in his rider. His rider would then acknowledge this feedback, review the integrity of their connection, and the discussion should then clarify and continue.

Ultimately, horse riding is an ongoing, wordless dialogue between the two separate species — both listening intently to what their partner is saying, and aiming to act out the game of riding. This conversation is built upon the horse's input and consent. Any remaining skeptics should pay attention to horse

and rider pairs that appear to read each other's minds, those which are completely connected and magically choreographed. Whoever remains doubtful should explain how such seamless harmony is possible without the horse's permission.

**“We can connect with horses in our care and have a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship with these sensitive animals without climbing on top of them.”<sup>1</sup>**

As a species, humans are unique in their ability to transform the world, thus burdening society with deciding the fate of the beings whose habitats they consequently transform. Thus, the reality of earth's human-animal cohabitation is that species thrive the more they integrate with human lives and hearts. The uncomfortable truth is that the weaker the emotional connection an animal shares with humans, or the lesser the benefit a particular species provides to humans, the weaker the motivation for humans to work for the animals' conservation.

Consider the general distaste for disease-spreading raccoons, filthy rats, dangerous snakes, or predatory wolves, whose welfares are commonly ignored due to the disturbance, emotional distance, and destruction they pose to human lives. The morality of this egocentric tendency is debated, and rightly so, but ignoring the force of its reality will only increasingly harm animal welfare, without exception.

If the goal of animal rights extremists were to be realized and horse riding outlawed, then the integration of horses with human lives would strain severely. While many people connect with horses “without climbing on top of them,” the reality is that horses are popular because of their exceptional physical and behavioural traits that give them unique rideability. Clearly, the goal of riding has never been to simply steer horses around like mindless vehicles; rather, humans and horses work and play together in a partnership that simultaneously gives horses a place in our society, just as it has for thousands of years.

When the horse was domesticated some 6,000 years ago and its speed and power harnessed, its stature was elevated from that of a source of meat, and it began to play a role that would help shape civilization. Wherever it went and in every aspect of life, the horse changed lives and influenced the course of history.

For the majority of today's horsemen and women, riding is the ultimate goal, and the connection shared between human and horse is inspired by this purpose. This uniquely beautiful activity has enabled meaningful connections with the strength to bond the two species throughout history, and to endure the technological revolution when horses became mechanically unnecessary, resulting in the beloved riding partnership in hobby and sport that we enjoy today. Riding is the heart of our mutually beneficial, human-horse relationship as it sustains the purpose of our interspecies connection.

**CAN-AM**  
ALL BREEDS  
EQUINE EXPO  
MARKHAM FAIRGROUNDS

BETH UNDERHILL  
OLYMPIC SHOW JUMPER

ticketweb.ca

**APRIL 3-5, 2020**  
CLINICIANS  
SHOPPING  
EDUCATION  
FAMILY FUN  
EVENING SHOW

DAVID COWLEY  
Two Way Trust  
Horsemanship

ROCK BEAUPRE  
Barrel Racing Trainer

TERRY JENKINS  
Canadian Cowgirls

DR. SCOTT HIE  
Equine Chiropractor

LAUREN BODE  
Animal Communicator

TINA IRWIN  
Pan Am Dressage  
Gold Medalist

DR. RUSSELL  
MACKECHNIE-GUIRE  
Equine Biomechanist

Featuring  
**BOBBY KERR**  
MUSTANG ACT

RAM  
KODIAK  
CANAMEQUINE.CA

When two species provide for each other's lives in this rare and enhancing manner, we ought to fear the threat of a severe divorce. Should this happen, most likely both humans and horses would lose a major degree of purpose, devastatingly misplacing us all. Ultimately, the abolition of this purpose would decrease horses' integration with human lives, cursing them to vulnerability and isolation without the protection of human conservation. For equestrians, such a fate would be apocalyptic.

Similar to any industry, outliers exist who misrepresent the equestrian community as a whole. To combat this injustice, though challenging and uncomfortable, considering the criticism from non-equestrian animal rights activists will provide the outside perspective necessary to prioritize the best treatment for our beloved horses. More importantly, we must never settle when it comes to promoting equine welfare using the voices within the industry, for equestrians and horsemen are the true horse welfare experts and must use their knowledgeable power for this greater good.

However, the indiscriminate resistance to all forms of horse riding is dangerously

A true horseman learns to speak the language of horses, and communicates through an ongoing, wordless dialogue built upon trust and the horse's input and consent.

overly-extreme. If we aren't prepared to defend ourselves against the particularly extreme and unreasonable assertions of well-intentioned animal advocates, then we risk ambush. Bad press could hinder the progress of the industry through misinformation and misunderstanding. With toxic reputations, harmful policy would likely sprout. Regulations may disrupt the industry's accessibility and overall success — a bleak outcome, yet avoidable if we ensure our focus remains ethical and we maintain our capacity for thoughtful, realistic debate.

A threat to the equestrian industry doesn't merely carry economic or recreational implications — it is a risk to the meaning of life for thousands, if not millions of people. Life is adventurous and meaningful through connections shared with others, part of that including the bond between humans and horses. This bond makes humanity better, as horses teach people compassion, patience, and sportsmanship. Horses empower us to think beyond ourselves, reducing our selfish tendencies and



PHOTO: SOUL TOUCH PHOTOGRAPHY

nourishing our hearts. Thus, the perseverance of this connection also preserves the means to improve human character, today and for future generations, which the world could use more of, not less.

<sup>1</sup>www.PETA.org

# THERE'S A REASON IT ALWAYS WEARS BLACK

## PROTECTION AGAINST FLIES, MOSQUITOES, AND GNATS

- Quick knockdown and repellancy
- Weatherproof and sweat resistant formula
- Multiple sunscreens and coat conditioners including Aloe and Lanolin
- Available in 950 mL, 3.78 L bottles, and 425 g Continuous Spray

LEARN MORE AT [ABSORBINE.CA](http://ABSORBINE.CA)

The Horse World's Most Trusted Name®



©2014 W. F. Young, Inc.