



## Wildwood Farm CLIPS & CLOPS Oak Harbor

December 2024

YOUR NEIGH-BORHOOD HULLABALOO

CREATED & EDITED BY HEATHER CARDER

### Why it Might be Time to Stop Riding Horses

By Boudicca Fox-Leonard

Like so many horse-mad girls, Rachael Wheeler was young – just nine – when she first learned to ride. Drawn magnetically to these large, empathetic creatures, she found the process of grooming and caring for the horses at her local stables in Aberdeenshire as rewarding as learning to trot and canter.

There was, she remembers, one horse who would always try to throw people off her back. “They used to call her a ‘moody mare’ or a ‘bad horse,’” recalls Wheeler, now 31. It made Wheeler feel uncomfortable. “I had an appreciation even at that age that the horses didn’t enjoy it.”

These experiences eventually led her to conclude that horse riding wasn’t for her, even though the love of equines remained. Today she co-runs Jacobs Ridge, a sanctuary for horses and other animals in Spain, where she is the custodian of 21 rescue equines, 13 of which live in a herd – as close to their natural way as possible. “Coming here in 2015 I saw a different way of working

with horses, from the ground. I then studied equine behavior to help me understand them more.”

That “moody mare”, she now reflects, “was obviously having a hard time. She could have had physical pain and was trying to adjust. “A horse can become conditioned to suppression, learning that the easiest way is to just give in and do what’s asked of them, but she kept fighting.”

Observing the natural behavior of the herd she cares for – free of saddles, bridles, bits and, not least, humans impelling them to feats of physical prowess – has confirmed her belief that we should no longer be riding horses. Yet it is an opinion that she and her partner Julian Nicholson, have been wary of expressing publicly, worried that any accusations of “virtue signaling” would inhibit their day-to-day work of rescuing abused horses.

But they are not alone in voicing what might at first seem a radical position. A 2022 survey by World Horse Welfare, an international charity that strives to support and improve the horse-human partnership, found that one in five people do not support horses in sport. The recent leaked video of Olympic eventer Charlotte Dujardin whipping a horse will have caused many

more to question their use in sport; it led to coverage of equestrian events at the Paris Games giving more of a focus to horse welfare than usual.

Multiply that by the images of spooked and bloodied Household Cavalry horses running through the streets of London earlier this year, and more recent footage of a King’s Guard horse biting a tourist’s arm in Whitehall, this position suddenly seems glaringly obvious.

“These questions have been bubbling away inside the equestrian sector for some time, says Rosie Jones McVey, a social anthropologist at the University of Exeter who also has a background in horse training. “There’s every shade of perspective towards animal rights and welfare within the horse world. As opposed to it being at one end of a debate, you will get those with a strong animal rights perspective, who are custodians for their creatures and don’t ride them.”

The development of equitation science in the past 20 years has sought to remove anthropomorphism and emotiveness from the horse-training world and instead understand what pressures horses are under due to their use by humans. Where once a horse misbehaving might have been seen as

*Continued on page 11.*

## WHAT'S TRENDING NOW

### New Equestrian Brand Launches helmets and replacement policy after \$3M investment.

One of the biggest equestrian brand launches in recent times will soon hit UK stores, following a £3m investment. Evoke, which is part of the same stable as Science Supplements, has introduced a collection of riding helmets and jockey skulls and will follow this with a technical clothing range later in the year. The brand says it “aims to supply equestrian safety wear and lifestyle apparel that combines innovation, inspiration, comfort and style”.

Evoke has also announced the launch of a helmet replacement policy. Should a rider suffer a fall within six months of buying and registering their Evoke helmet, the scheme guarantees to provide a replacement helmet with a 50% discount.

Evoke CEO David Mitson said the business’s research has shown that many riders do not replace helmets after a fall or risk of damage owing to the associated cost. “We do not believe safety should be comprised by cost,” he said. “We want to help alleviate the burden of buying a new helmet and encourage a safety-first mindset.



Two new helmets have been revealed so far – the Evoke Callisto helmet and the Evoke Orion jockey skull. Each adhere to multiple riding hat safety standards, including PAS 015:2011, VG1, ASTM F1163-23 and the pending EN:1384:2023, while also carrying the British kitemark. Evoke is also planning to introduce styles that meet SNELL E2021 and ASTM F1163-23, as well helmets with MIPS technology.

Helen Riley, Evoke’s technical director, who has previously worked for Gatehouse and Champion, said the new brand’s aim was to launch something the market hasn’t seen before, using the latest innovations and technology. “We’ve worked tirelessly with industry-leading designers to create something totally fresh and new.”

Evoke helmets are available for pre-order at [evoke-group.com](http://evoke-group.com) and the first collection will be in stores later in the spring.



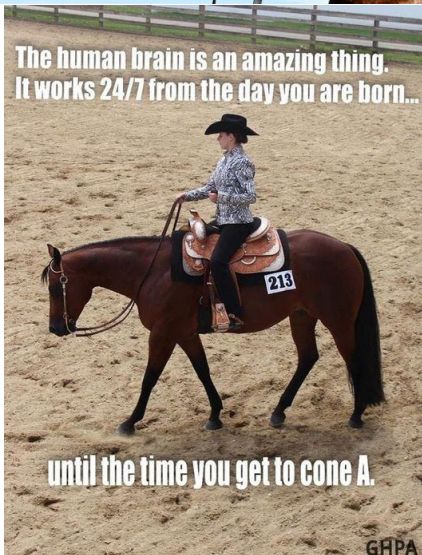
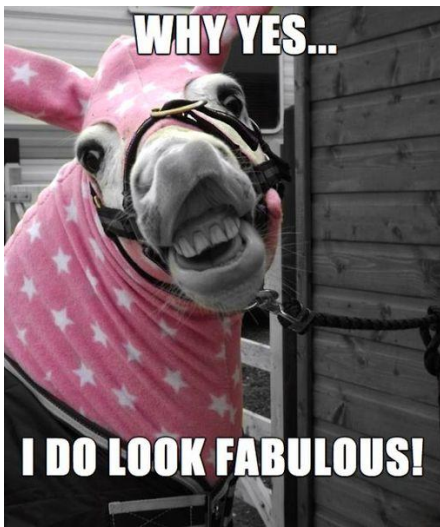
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## New Items for December





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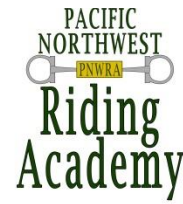
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**-Matthew 11:29**



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**-Helen Thompson**



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# New research could help breed for less 'spooky' horses

*Date: May 11, 2023*

*Source: Florida University*

Summary:

Researchers are working to identify genes that influence horses' tendency to react to perceived danger.

In the wild, horses must be alert for predators that might attack them. This means that even domesticated horses are hardwired to be aware of danger and can spook easily. Unfortunately, this so-called "startle response" or "spooking" is reflexive, and horses often cannot distinguish between the danger a Florida panther might present versus a plastic bag floating by a riding arena. Some horses react to these perceived threats by rearing, bolting, or bucking, which can create dangerous situations for owners and riders.

University of Florida researchers are working to identify genes that influence horses' tendency to react to these "spooky" plastic bags. Identifying these genetic traits would be a first step toward one day selecting or breeding horses for the temperament types we prefer. These research results might be a decade away.

Samantha Brooks, UF/IFAS associate professor of equine genetics, and her team have run an experiment on several groups of young horses that are part of the UF/IFAS breeding program that helps understand startle responses.

The horses wear wireless heart rate monitors and are loose in a round pen. At set intervals, an umbrella is opened quickly within the animals' line of sight. The team analyzed the animals' behavior and change in heart rate throughout and after the initial startle reaction.

"We can't read their minds," said Brooks. "Their heart rate tells us what is going on inside that we cannot see from reading their body language alone. It was interesting to see the stories their heart rates told us."

Two clear groups of horses emerged from the data. The first group was startled by the umbrella opening, had a spike in heart rate, maintained a reactive or hyper-alert state including more time spent looking and moving away from the umbrella. The second group startled much like the first group to the umbrella opening, but with a different outcome. The horses experienced a spike in heart rate but then calmed quickly and carried on with their day. These animals perceived the stimulus and found it startling but did not go through the behavioral patterns of avoidance, fear, etc. like the first group.

Now that two clear groups have emerged, the team will take this information and develop a study to differentiate the genetic components that make up how horses react to fear. Blood and hair samples were taken from each horse in the study for future analysis.

Knowing how genetics weigh into behavior can help horses and owners find their right fit. Perhaps the spooky horse is not the best option for a 10-year-old 4-Her. But a spookier, high-strung horse might be a better fit for a high-energy "job" like show jumping.

"Understanding each horse's genetic makeup will help you understand the type of animal you need," said Brooks. "If we learn early on what this animal's natural tendencies are most likely to be, we can make educated decisions on training and future careers to give the horse the best shot to grow into their potential, rather than becoming a problem or danger."

Funded by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, this project was a collaboration between scientists and students studying equine genetics, behavior and welfare science.

## Nutrition Corner

### Cold or Warm Water for Horses in Winter?

**Q.** Should I give my horses warm drinking water in the cold weather? What are the pros and cons of warm drinking water versus cold during the winter?

**A.** Drinking water is one of the most important aspects of horse care in any season, but during the winter, providing fresh water can be particularly challenging due to freezing temperatures. Horses do not seem to mind drinking cold water: however, research shows that overall consumption decreases as water temperature drops. Researchers have also noted that if given the choice of cold and warm water, horses will preferentially drink the cold water. This becomes a problem if, through their choice, they are drinking less than they would have if only warm water been available. The ideal temperature for drinking water is 45-65 degrees Fahrenheit, but it can be made warmer if consumption remains low. Decreased water consumption increases the risk of impaction colic, which is a major health concern and a leading cause of death. Therefore, take steps to maximize water consumption throughout the year. If you live in a cold climate where water

freezes, having the ability to offer warm water is a good idea. This could be in the form of heated water buckets, insulated regular buckets, or adding boiling water to cold water to raise the temperature even for a short period.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have shown that heating water continuously versus providing ambient near-freezing water increases horses' water consumption by 41%. They noted similar results (38% increase in consumption) when warmed water was provided twice a day versus continuously. Video footage showed the studied horses consumed most of the water within three hours of feeding. Consuming forage typically creates a drive to drink. Therefore, this might be the most opportune window in which to provide warmed water. Other important thirst stimulants that can help encourage water consumption include adding salt to feed rather than relying solely on salt blocks.

As to whether drinking cold water is dangerous, this is a myth that should be cast out. Allowing horses to drink cold water will not have negative health implications.

#### WILDWOOD FARM AND TRIPLE CROWN FEEDS.

Our partnership with Triple Crown began in 2014 through a promotion with the USEF encouraging farm members to compare their current feeding programs with Triple Crown products. We have found the TC products to be superior to other products primarily because of the EquiMix technology and the research support of a leading-edge team including independent representatives of Equine Universities, Medical clinics and top-level riders and trainers

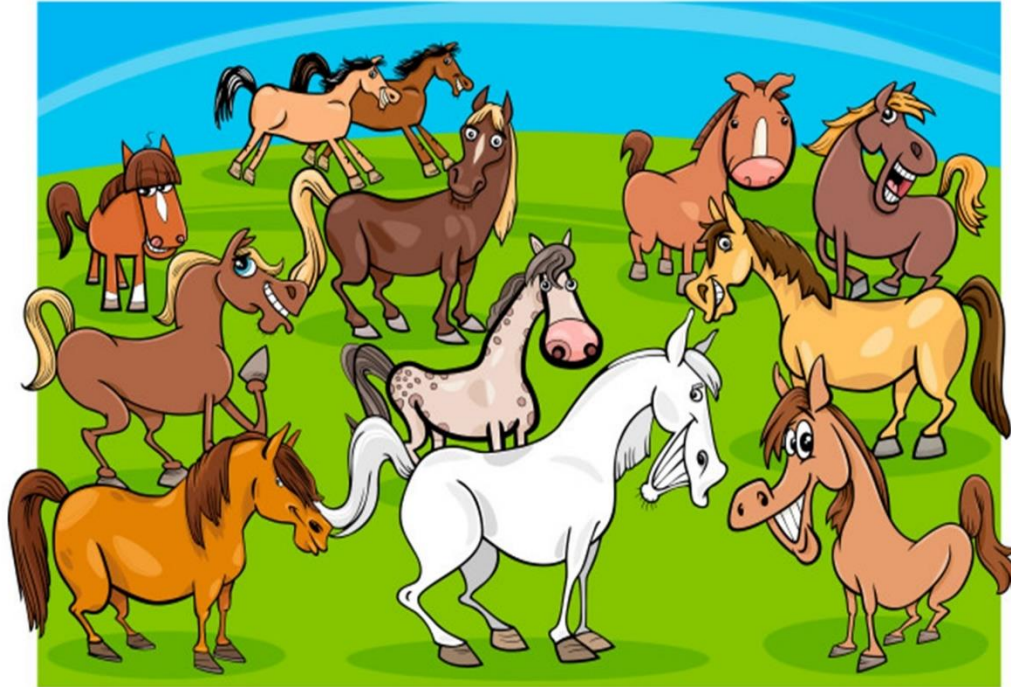
### Meet Bella-B

When we bought Wildwood Farm there were only 2 horses here. Peanuts, whom we introduced you to in October, and Bella-B. Bella-B was hanging out in the created pasture between the large 5-acre field to your right when driving onto the farm, and the training track. A simple electric wire kept her enclosed and she used the trees for shade and protection. She looked old and tired, and perhaps a little underweight.

Bella-B was one of the gentlest, kindest horses you could meet. Although she was old – well into her late 20s- she was clearly wise. She had taught her fair share of little ones in her life, and her caring personality really showed. As we did with Peanuts, we brought her into the big main barn where she could stay warm and dry with good food and a warm blanket.

We eventually found a loving home for Bella-B, a first horse for a family of 6 children. I will never forget when we drove into their little farm with Bella-B the beaming faces of all the kids that would love her – the best possible place for her to spend the twilight of her life.





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# Grave of a Man and his Horse Killed by a Train

## Walnut Ridge, Arkansas

Together they left this world, and together they shall remain for all eternity.



**NEARLY A CENTURY OF DRIVERS** have enjoyed Arkansas' State Highway system for its lush fields, punctuated by the occasional rolling hill and outcropping of trees. But before the smooth pavement proved such a powerful draw, travelers crossed America's south-central corridor via horse and rail – which could sometimes prove deadly.

Such was the case for a local entrepreneur from Walnut Ridge by the name of John A. Rhea. On February 15, 1893, the gentleman and his horse were trotting away, en route to somewhere or other, likely enjoying the same scenery that, unchanged, residents find so enchanting today, when Rhea and his steed were struck and killed by a train. No one is sure whether the collision was intentional (i.e. suicide on horseback) or accidental, but the man and his horse never stood a chance against the locomotive.

At the scene of the collision, local records report that the township quickly decided Rhea and his horse should continue their journey together in the hereafter. A joint grave was erected near a young oak tree in the middle of a field, whereupon horse and rider were buried together.

Rhea was decorated politician whose legacy in life was inextricably linked with transportation and animals, thanks to a mule-drawn trolley system he'd masterminded that brought together the townships of Hoxie and his very own Walnut Ridge. Upon his passing at age 38, Rhea left behind a family, a hotel that still remains in operation in Walnut Ridge, and, somewhat fatefully, was most known for having united his township with nearby Hoxie via a mule-drawn trolley system.

Well over a century after his death, his ornately carved headstone can be found at the peak of a tall mound in Walnut Ridge. Disappointingly the grave does not mention his steed, which is supposedly buried at his side.

### Know Before You Go

Please be mindful this gravesite sits on private property near a public park but is visible and accessible from the highway.

# The Florida Cracker Horse



The Florida Cracker Horse, like the cattle breed of the same name, traces its ancestry to Spanish stock brought to Florida in the 1500's. Preparing to return to Spain, the Spanish left some of their cattle, horses and hogs to make room for their collected treasures.

The genetic heritage of the Florida Cracker Horse is derived from the Iberian Horse of early sixteenth century Spain, and includes blood of the North African Barb, Spanish Sorraia and Spanish Jennet (gaited). Its genetic base is generally the same as that of the Spanish Mustang, Paso Fino, Peruvian Paso, Criolla and other breeds developed from the horses originally introduced by the Spanish into the Caribbean Islands, Cuba and North, Central, and South America.

Florida cowmen were nicknamed "Crackers" because of the sound made by their cow whip cracking the air. This name was also given to the small agile Spanish Horse essential for working Spanish cattle. Over the years, Cracker Horses have been known by a variety of names: Chicksaw Pony, Seminole Pony, Marsh Tackie, Prairie Pony, Florida Horse, Florida Cow Pony, Grass Gut and others.

The Cracker Horse suffered a reversal of fortune in the 1930's. The Great Depression led to the creation of a number of relief programs, one of which encouraged the movement of cattle from the Dust Bowl into Florida. With the cattle came the screwworm, which, in turn, led to changes in the practices followed in raising cattle.

Before the screwworm, cowmen used these horses to herd and drive the free roaming Scrub cows and Cracker cows; with the arrival of the screwworm came fencing and dipping vats and the need to rope cattle and hold them for treatment. As a result, ranchers turned to the larger, stronger Quarter Horse, and the Florida Cracker Horse lost its demand and became quite rare.

The breed's survival over the last fifty years resulted from the work of a few families who continued to breed Cracker Horses for their own use. It was these ranching families and individuals whose perseverance and distinct bloodlines that kept the Cracker Horses from becoming extinct. The family names include the Ayers, Harvey, Bronson, Matchett, Partin and Whaley names.

*Cont'd from page 1*

Cheeky and therefore needing the occasional reprimand, it is now more commonly understood that “cheekiness” is actually anxiety and stress and needs a completely different response.

The Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram (RHPE) was developed by the equine vet Dr Sue Dyson, with the goal of identifying behaviors associated with musculoskeletal pain in horses under the saddle. It has helped people to understand how clever horses can be at masking their pain. As a leading figure in the movement towards more positive-reinforcement training instead of punitive, Kelly Marks of Intelligent Horsemanship says, “The first place to go to when you’ve got a horse that misbehaves is the vet, not the whip.”

However, with the exception of Marks and her followers, the tradition-shod equestrian world has been slow to change. Learning to ride takes a long time, often under apprenticeship or in deference to an instructor who is more experienced. “There’s a military heritage to equestrianism in Britain and often for people who have learnt to ride in that environment there is an emphasis on obedience, both to an instructor by the pupil and [by] the horses,” explains Jones McVey. “If it’s taken you 30 years to feel like you finally have become an expert in your field, certain types of new ideas are challenging. It can be quite a threatening position for people.”

The result can be hostility to new ways of thinking. The fact that horses – who are prey animals – are so easy to train is seen as a green light to continue riding. “Horse riders tell me that their horse loves being ridden,” says Wheeler. “But it probably would prefer to have a run around without you on its back. It just wants to get out of its small stable space.”

It is not so much that horses are experiencing intentional cruelty, but that false narratives about horses’ nature have persisted for so long. “The horse people I’ve worked with in studies, the vast majority of them – nearly every single one of them – love their horses, it’s just that love takes different shapes and forms,” says Jones McVey. The Charlotte Dujardin video has sparked additional debate not just publicly, but within the horse world too, she says. “It’s an opportunity for people to mark out what they’re not. A lot of people would be keen not to be associated with that video.”

On Christmas Day in 2003, Lisa Ashton was given a gift that changed her life: a copy of *The Truth About Horses* by Dr Andrew McClean, who developed the Australian Equine Behavior Centre. Stopping only for Christmas lunch, when she finished the book, she says: “I realized I had been coached to actually harm my horse. It was my defining moment.” It set her on a 20-year journey to understand how we can do better. Ashton is now senior lecturer in equitation science at Hartpury University in Gloucestershire, known for its equine courses. Her area of special interest is the concept of social license to operate (SLO) and horse riding. Coined in 1997, SLO refers to the perceptions of local stakeholders that a project, company or industry that operates in a given area is socially acceptable or legitimate.

Applied to the equestrian world, what Ashton calls the four pillars of SLO – legitimacy, transparency, communication and trust – mean that there has to be credibility in the way horses are trained, using modes of training that enrich the horses’ lives. “Charlotte Dujardin went to one mode of learning called punishment. “There are better modes,” explains Ashton. The video clearly highlighted issues around transparency, but also showed that in terms of communication, there are those in the horse world who are prepared to use technology to reveal what is going on behind closed doors. It is Ashton’s hope that if all these points can be marshalled in the correct direction, it can result in a public perception of trustworthiness in the equestrian world.

Public suspicion around how the unnatural, exaggerated gaits and tightly tucked chins of dressage horses are achieved will never have been more acute. Can there ever be any justification for pushing a horse to the degree that an Olympic rider requires? For Julian Nicholson at Jacobs Ridge, the answer is no: “They, the horses, have no sovereignty over themselves as an athlete to choose whether to go to the extreme limits of what a rider wants to achieve.”

It is not just Eventing that needs to prove itself under the SLO framework. In April Netflix announced it was working with the Duke of Sussex on a documentary about the elite world of polo, “capturing the full story of what it takes to compete at its highest level”; hopefully this will cover the horse perspective, as well as the human one. Polo ponies (horses) are another equine welfare black spot. “When you look at the expressions of polo ponies as they are locked on and trained to follow the ball,” says Ashton, “for the public, polo would stand out as horses not looking in their optimal emotional state.” Activists point to the use in polo of the “gag” bit, to allow the rider to pull the horse around and bring them to an abrupt standstill, as cruel, as well as the use of martingales, which stop the horse raising its head so that it is constrained in a lower position, and nub spurs, used to turn a horse and to kick them on.

Anna Hall, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA), the governing body for the sport of polo in the UK and abroad, says: “We recognize that there are some welfare challenges in polo and the wider equestrian community, but we are committed to making changes where necessary. Our many rules regarding the use of tack and equipment are continually reviewed by our welfare committee, which includes several equine vets.”

Similarly, in October the prestigious Spanish Riding School of Vienna will arrive in London for the first time in eight years to perform at the OVO Arena Wembley. With the horses – beautiful grey Lipizzaners – displaying many of the same unnatural gaits trained in dressage, after the Dujardin scandal there is sure to be concerned curiosity around their training technique. The Spanish Riding School emphasizes that it upholds the principles of classical horsemanship – an ancient art of riding that centers the individual horse and its needs. “Our Lipizzaner’s’ wellbeing is always our priority and dictates their training,” said a representative of the school. It adds that the public are able to buy tickets for the horses’ Morning Exercise “to experience the partnership between our riders and horses during their training”.

Horse racing, by contrast, has long been in an existential crisis. Its continuation is only made viable because enough people still see horses as betting objects, rather than as sentient beings. Running as a herd is inherent to horses, more so than dressage, polo or performing. However, an average of 200 horses die on British racecourses every year as a result of injury in racing.

Unregulated breeding practices see an overproduction of foals worldwide in the pursuit of a magic winner, whom may never race. The most recent figures on what happens to them are from a 2015 study. Which showed that 69 per cent entered licensed training. The BHA says it is working to

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better track both the number of horses that progress from breeding into licensed training, and the ones that don't. And what happens once a racehorse's short career – on average two to three years – is over? Each year about 2,500 horses in Britain retire from the sport permanently. In 2022 the BHA changed its rules so that all racehorses in the country are signed out of the human food chain. It came months after a BBC Panorama investigation into the slaughter of racehorses in abattoirs in exchange for money.

Ashton is in no doubt that equestrianism is facing an existential threat, similar to that of the zoological and circus worlds in the 1960s. However, rather than wanting to stop horse riding altogether, she believes that by practicing SLO the sector can reassure the public that horses are cared for, not just used.

"Back then [the 1960s], the public had no appetite for either of them using animals for entertainment anymore. Zoos worked at it. They created enrichment for the animals in their captivity and through education helped people to understand what the species needs. The last bit they did was conservation. Circuses, by contrast, did little to react to the change in public perception."

In her opinion equestrianism needs to go further than the zoological sector, developing a third way that proves horses' lives are enriched by human interaction. She says she would welcome camera angles at the Olympic events that could show the space between a horse's nasal plane and the leather nose band, to demonstrate welfare standards.

She goes on: "Rather than just shutting horse riding down, we should be supporting horses in sport by making it all about welfare. When I watched the Olympics, it was still clear that we're doing horse sports with welfare, instead of welfare horse sports. That's where I stand: if we can demonstrate enrichment of the horses' emotional state, then we can earn public trust."

For anti-racing campaigner Dene Stansall, there can never be a convincing ethical argument in favor of riding: "Not from the perspective of the horse anyway," he says. For the first half of his life Stansall was a passionate racegoer. The grandson of an Aintree bookmaker, he saw Red Rum race in 1976. While a student in the early 1980s and in need of a car, he borrowed £250 from his future wife to place a bet. He won and bought a red Triumph Spitfire. Everything changed when he saw a racehorse with a broken leg shot in front of him. "There was no lamenting. He was loaded on a tractor and carted off. Something clicked and I pretty quickly jumped from one side of the fence to the other."

Stansall originally founded Action to Abolish the Grand National, and for the past 20 years he has campaigned for Animal Aid to stop horse racing. Thanks to him, where once the winner of the Grand National would make the front page, you're now more likely to read about how many horses died at the event.

The issue of how to keep a horse's body comfortable in a setting where there is limited space means that even those who see themselves as custodians, rather than riders, frequently transgress. In their wild state, horses would be roaming over huge areas of land and interacting with different bands of horses. In the UK there isn't the space for this to happen. The lush pasture many are kept on now is also too rich for them compared to the scrappy heathland they would naturally occupy, compounding the need for exercise. There are few, if any, remaining wild horses in the world. Feral horses endure, such as those on Sable Island in Nova Scotia, where a population of 500 has survived many hundreds of years without human intervention. It is a hard life though. The average lifespan of a domesticated horse is 25 to 30 years, the average in the wild is closer to 15.

How humans could disengage from using horses is something that concerns Stansall: "Horses at the moment are in a dystopia, but what is their fate if we ultimately don't use them for any human activity? Do they merely become companions – and who would provide for them?"

Horses are extremely expensive for the average person to keep. Stansall budgets at least £3,000 a year for each of his: "That's without major vet bills," he says. The Mare and Foal Sanctuary in Devon, which has 600 equines, is inundated with horses from welfare situations. Since it was founded in 1988, The Mare and Foal Sanctuary has rescued more than 1,000 horses, ponies and foals.

"We have to take into account that they are big, expensive animals to look after," says Anna Haines, the charity's equine behavioral lead. "Our job is to try and educate the public about making the right decisions for when their horses get older, and also ensuring they're able to get the veterinary care they need, because that becomes more costly as they get older as well." Many horse owners will make those sacrifices to care for their horse throughout their whole lifetime. Yet many more horses still are abandoned or sent to slaughter once they reach the limit of their usefulness in sport. The question we need to address as a society is not just how we can do better by equines, but whether we are after all a nation of horse lovers – or a nation of horse riders?

If you are unsure, Wheeler and Nicholson at Jacobs Ridge have a simple challenge: "Get to know your horse without getting on its back."