



Research Article

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Framing Welfare: How Enthusiasts Read Partnership and Positive Practice in Olympic Equestrian Images



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Abstract

Equestrian sport faces mounting scrutiny as its social licence to operate increasingly hinges on visible commitments to equine welfare. This study examined how horse enthusiasts interpret “positive” images of the Paris 2024 Olympic equestrian event, and which visual characteristics strengthen (or erode) perceived legitimacy. An accredited photographer captured 4,774 images across dressage, show jumping, eventing, training, and behind the scenes. Following a structured selection, anonymisation, and expert review protocol, 30 images were embedded in an online survey. A sample of 514 ranked images, indicated favourites, and answered five open-ended questions. Qualitative reflexive thematic analysis of open responses identified cross disciplinary convergence around three core markers of “positive”: (1) horse first partnership: visible praise, empathy, and authentic moments of care; (2) signs of positive affect: relaxed facial expression, ear posture, and low tension; and (3) rider fairness: harmonious balance, soft hands, and non interference. Discipline specific filters shaped tolerance for exertion and risk: dressage judgments centred on biomechanics (self carriage, poll position) and concerns about restrictive tack; show jumping evaluations blended athleticism with equipment scrutiny (nosebands, bits, martingales) and post round reward; eventing appraisals weighed dynamism and bravery against fatigue, safety, and ethical risk. Participants were highly attentive to the optics of imagery for non equestrian audiences and rejected “bad apple” explanations, emphasising systemic norms (judging, equipment, training culture). Overall, enthusiasts view Olympic images as ethical statements. Images that communicate relaxation, reciprocity, and genuine partnership may bolster trust and sustain social licence, whereas recurring cues of tension, coercion, or restrictive tack risk reputational harm and call for governance, education, and media practice reform.

Keywords: Equine welfare; positive equine imagery; human-horse interaction; equitation

Introduction

Equestrian sport is experiencing unprecedented scrutiny as its social licence to operate (SLO), the public’s informal approval of horse involvement in sport, faces mounting pressure [1,2]. The horse industry is particularly vulnerable to negative public opinion, with welfare concerns rapidly shaping public sentiment and placing all equestrian disciplines under intense observation. High-profile welfare controversies have heightened this sensitivity, reinforcing the public’s expectation that horse sport must demonstrate transparency, ethical practice, and meaningful commitment to equine well-being [3].

The modern pentathlon provides one of the most influential recent examples. Global outrage followed the 2021 Tokyo Olympics after video footage showed a German coach appearing

to strike a horse, prompting the International Olympic Committee to announce that riding would be removed from the sport from 2028. In dressage, the suspension of British Olympian Charlotte Dujardin in 2024 for conduct “contrary to the principles of horse welfare,” confirmed through a Federation Equestrian International (FEI) investigation, further highlighted the reputational risks equestrian sports face when welfare standards are breached or appear to be breached [4].

Beyond these headline cases, calls for positive equestrian stories and images have grown, as both horse owners and stakeholders seek representations that reflect compassionate training, ethical decisionmaking, and the authentic horse-human partnership [5]. This desire for welfare-aligned imagery

is set against a backdrop of ongoing concerns, for example, blue tongue in dressage [6], tight nosebands [7], and rotational falls in eventing [8], which have shaped welfare debates and heightened pressure on equestrian sports. Together, these issues illuminate the complex climate in which equestrian sport now operates. The Olympic Games, as one of the world’s most visible sporting platforms, play a significant role in shaping global perception. Understanding how horse owners interpret positive equestrian images within this context is therefore vital. Their views may reveal not only what types of representations bolster trust and support but also how equestrianism can strengthen its social licence to operate amid evolving societal expectations. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify the characteristics that lead horse enthusiasts to perceive Olympic equestrian photographs as positive, and to understand how these perceptions relate to broader welfare expectations. The objectives were to analyse how participants read partnership, empathy, and horse-centred practice through photographic cues; to explore how welfare-centred interpretations vary across disciplines and photographic styles; and to consider how welfare-driven interpretations of imagery may inform equestrian sport’s cultural legitimacy, communication strategies, and guide future media representation.

Materials and Methods

Survey Recruitment and Distribution

Following institutional ethical approval and adhering to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, individual horse owners aged 18 years or older were targeted. An a priori sample size calculation with a confidence level of 95% and a 5% error margin determined that a minimum sample of 340 was required.

Recruitment took place via Facebook, LinkedIn, and various online equine-related sites. Using Microsoft Forms, a 32-question online survey was shared. Following an introduction of the aim of the study at the start of the survey, respondents were asked to provide active informed consent to participate. All respondents were assigned unique numerical identifiers to ensure anonymity.

Survey Design

An experienced professional accredited international equestrian and horse sport editorial and commercial photographer attended the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris and was present on all days of the Equestrian Sport at the Versailles venue. A total of 4774 images were taken and downloaded during the event. Throughout the Paris 2024 Olympics, the photographer captured images of horses and their teams, from public areas where photography was permitted by the FEI. Images were collected from horses and riders in 5 settings: field of play for dressage, cross-country, and show jumping, exercising and training, and pre/post competition areas. These images were selected by the research team using the protocol shown in Table 1. The survey was distributed via global equestrian-related social media channels and sharing platforms. Participants were asked to choose their favourite picture and then to put the pictures in their order of preference (positive to negative scale), grade how they felt about each image, and briefly explain their score (these results will be presented in a separate paper). Five open-ended questions allowed the participant to provide further detail on their thoughts and feelings, views on ethics and welfare, and to make any recommendations. Demographic data was collected but did not form part of the initial analysis and will be presented at a later date.

Table 1. Photo Selection Protocol.

Stage	Action	Description	Photos Available	Photos for Next Stage
1	Preliminary review	Remove unclear and non-uniform images (black and white, blurred, unfocused, obscured, horse not mainly in frame). Organise into setting and sub-setting folders (see Table 2).	4774	2838
2	Random selection	Select 6 photos for each of the five settings. File name recoded to setting and sequence number. Online random number generator used (https://numbergenerator.org/). For disciplines and training, 4 photos selected from the field-of-play sub-setting and 2 from the start or finish of the round. For behind the scenes 2 photos were selected from the sub-theme’s inspection, grooming or human-horse interaction. This was repeated 3 times to provide 3 sets of 30 images. Any photos that met the criteria for stage 1 were discarded.	2748	90
3	Secondary review	Second reviewer evaluated selected images. Competitors or countries that occurred more than once in a group were removed. 33 photos were rejected. Replacement photos selected by random scrolling through sub-setting. Images cropped to focus on horse and rider or handler.	2715	90
4	Anonymisation	Rider/handler and country identifiers blurred. Images resized to a maximum of 4mb to meet Microsoft Forms requirements.	2715	90
5	Final review	Selected images evaluated by a panel of three experts (an FEI Official, an experienced equine welfare researcher and an equine media expert) to ensure images were considered mostly ‘positive’. 5 (?) images rejected and replaced before panel gave final approval.	2710	90
6	Questionnaire	One set of 30 images were randomly selected using the online random number generator and added to Microsoft Forms alongside the agreed questions and submitted for ethical review.	90	30

Table 2: The number of photographs in each setting and sub-setting at stage one.

Theme and Sub-Theme	No. of Photographs
Dressage - Ridden	
Competing (Field of Play)	889
Start or Finish (warm up/cool down areas)	404
Jumping - Ridden	
Competing (Field of Play)	379
Start or Finish (warm up/cool down areas)	53
Eventing - Ridden	
Competing (Field of Play)	191
Start or Finish (warm up/cool down areas)	62
Training and Familiarisation - Ridden	
Training Areas	529
Behind the Scenes	
Grooming	46
Horse Inspection	232
Human-Horse Interaction	53
Total	2,838

Table 3: Demographic Data.

Category	Percentage of Respondents
Age	
18-24	16.70%
25-34	30.40%
35-44	12.20%
45-54	16.10%
55-64	14.10%
65-74	9.00%
75 and older	1.00%
Prefer not to say	0.60%
Gender	
Female	89.80%
Male	6.50%
Non-binary	2.40%
Prefer not to say	1.40%
Location	
USA and Canada	35.30%
Europe	29.40%
United Kingdom and Ireland	25.70%
Australia and New Zealand	5.70%
Other	3.90%

Table 4: Thematic analysis of horse enthusiasts' perceptions of positive dressage images, Paris 2024 Olympic Dressage.

Higher Order Theme	Theme description	Lower order themes	Participants Quotes
Horse-first partnership and appreciation	Positive images were most strongly associated with visible expressions of care, gratitude, and partnership between horse and rider, particularly moments of praise after performance. These images were perceived as ethically meaningful and emotionally resonant.	Affection, praise, hugging, patting, gratitude, partnership, horse-first	"Images praising the horse resonate." "I love seeing professional riders showing affection to their horses." "The love for the horse beyond beautiful show perfection."
The 'happy athlete': low tension and positive affect	Participants prioritised images where horses appeared relaxed, content, and willing, using facial expression, ear position, and overall softness as indicators of welfare and ethical riding.	Relaxed, happy expression, calm eye, low tension, enjoyment	"Most favourite images have horses that look happy and focused." "Where there appears to be less tension, it presents a better picture."
Biomechanical correctness as an ethical marker	Positive perceptions were closely linked to classical biomechanical ideals, including self-carriage, uphill balance, hindquarter engagement, and a frame not behind the vertical. Incorrect or exaggerated movement reduced perceived positivity.	Uphill frame, engagement, self-carriage, behind the vertical, hollow back	"Horse is uphill, balanced and relaxed." "Lacks hind end engagement and activity." "Poll not the highest point... completely hollow through the back."
Concern about pressure, tack, and visible control	Use of equipment (double bridle, spurs, tight nosebands) and signs of strong contact were frequently interpreted as indicators of pressure, discomfort and cohesion.	Double bridle, spurs, tight contact, foam, noseband, control	"I don't love the complexity of the double bridle." "Excessive foam... hard hands... overly tight gear."
Image optics and public perception of dressage	Participants considered how images would be interpreted beyond the horse community, noting that emotional and relaxed images were more suitable for promoting dressage to the general public than highly technical performance shots.	Public perception, optics, composition, angle, accessibility	"Depends on what the image is being used for." "For the general public a more rewarding image would be 3 or 6."
Scepticism toward modern competitive dressage	A subset of respondents expressed broader ethical concerns about elite dressage, describing movements as unnatural, overly constrained, or prioritising spectacle over welfare. This influenced how positively images were interpreted.	Unnatural movement, over-collection, welfare concern, anti-dressage	"So many are behind the vertical." "It's not natural... it's only for the look." "Modern dressage standards have become warped."

Table 5: Thematic analysis of horse enthusiasts' perceptions of positive jumping images, Paris 2024 Olympic Show Jumping.

Higher Order Theme	Theme description	Lower Order Theme	Participants Quotes
Gratitude, reward, and bond as the marker of "positive"	The most positively received images show horsemanship and partnership, especially moments where riders praise, pat, hug, reassure, or thank the horse. These are considered as ethical, relatable, and emotionally meaningful.	Patting/loose rein; cuddles; rider reassurance; "thank you"; post-round relief; "story" moments.	"Love seeing the horse and rider encouragement." "The athlete thanking their horse." "Demonstrated thank you and appreciation of their horse for a job well done." "shows the gratitude of the rider..."
Reading equine emotion from face, ears, and body language	"Positive" is constructed through interpretations of the horse's comfort and willingness. Horses seen as calm/keen/relaxed are ranked higher; stress/fear/fatigue cues push images down even if the moment is technically normal in sport.	Ears pricked; soft/concerned eye; "white of the eye"; tense mouth; raised head; relaxed frame; "happy expression."	"horse looks happy in his job (ears up, confident eye...)" "horse seems stressed/not in tune with rider." "The horse in 5 looks tense and unhappy." "Ordered by horses showing stress, especially in the eyes."
Tack and equipment	Judgements of positivity are strongly shaped by visible tack. Softer/simpler setups are praised; tight nosebands, harsh bits, martingales, spurs/whips are considered as discomforting and can override an otherwise "good" photo.	"Huge bits"; pelham/gag; flash tightness; drop noseband; martingale restriction; spurs digging; "mouth bound shut."	"I don't like seeing the huge bits... The snaffle makes me happiest." "Tight nosebands are cruel..." "The horse appears to be restricted by a tight running martingale." "Unnecessarily forced shut mouths."

<p>Harmony and correct riding</p>	<p>Viewers link positive images to balance, soft hands, stable lower leg, allowing the horse to jump, and a picture of ease. Poor equitation (loose lower leg, leaning, spur contact midair; heavy hands) makes images look less positive, even when the horse appears capable.</p>	<p>Rider balance; lower leg stability; release over fence; "soft contact"; horse bascule/shape; "effortless together."</p>	<p>"Need to show a nice shape over the fence with a relaxed looking overall picture." "Looking for balance, straightness and harmony." "I do not like pics with faulty leg positions..." "Balanced rider... trust and education..."</p>
<p>Photographic storytelling (scale, prestige, context)</p>	<p>Participants evaluate whether images actually communicate Olympic show jumping: big fences, atmosphere, prestige, clear timing/angles. Some found the set "boring/unremarkable," too tightly cropped, or not obviously Olympic.</p>	<p>Jump size/oxer width visible; angle/timing; cropping; editing; background/arena cues; "could be anywhere"; "doesn't show prestige."</p>	<p>"Could be a stronger selection... show just how big those jumps are." "You can tell it's the Olympics in only pic 3." "None of these photos really show off the power and athleticism..."</p>
<p>Conflict moments as "negative snapshots"</p>	<p>A consistent pattern is treating certain frames as momentary conflict rather than the whole round, yet still ranking them low because they visually read as tension, resistance, or disconnection (raised head, wide eye, fighting contact).</p>	<p>"Bad moment in time"; horse resisting; head high; fearful expression.</p>	<p>"Understandably a bad moment in time... However, not a great moment." "The horse seems stressed... not in tune with rider." "The horse looks extremely tense..."</p>

Table 6: Thematic analysis of horse enthusiasts' perceptions of positive cross-country images, Paris 2024 Olympic Eventing.

Higher Order Theme	Theme Description	Lower order theme	Examples of Participants Quotes
<p>Partnership and shared emotion</p>	<p>"Positive" images are those that visibly communicate a caring, unified horse-rider relationship, connection and mutual achievement</p>	<p>Rider praising/checking horse; celebration; "togetherness"</p>	<p>"I picked ones best showed the connection of horse and rider to me." "I love seeing the joy the horse and rider share."</p>
<p>Reading horses' body language</p>	<p>Participants justify selections by interpreting visible cues (ears/eyes/face) as evidence of willingness, comfort, and enjoyment. Criticising fatigue/strain).</p>	<p>Ears forward/pricked; soft eye; relaxed expression; fatigue ("tired"); tension cues.</p>	<p>"Horses Ears forward, enjoying." "I ranked them based on how happy/comfortable the horse seems." "The horse looks tired, I rated lower."</p>
<p>Aesthetics of athleticism and 'good riding'</p>	<p>Images are rated positively when they show dynamic action and technical quality (balance, scope, correct position), presenting eventing as exciting elite sport.</p>	<p>Action shots; water splash; jump form; rider balance; "thrill/adrenaline".</p>	<p>"Action, balance, connection." "Love the action photos." "Water jump always exciting and shows the thrill."</p>

Tack and equipment as a welfare filter	Visible tack functions as a moral/comfort screen; perceived harsh/restrictive equipment (tight nosebands/flash, leverage bits, gags) can downgrade otherwise “good” photos.	Tight flash/noseband; strong bits/gag; “hardware”; concern about breathing/contact/fairness.	“Flash so tight it digs into the horse’s skin...” “All of them have a lot of hardware... but 5 looks like it has the least.”
Risk and ethics of cross-country	Some participants constrain “positivity” because the discipline itself (drops/solid fences) is framed as dangerous or unethical; exciting images can still feel “scary/unnecessary”.	Drops; solid fences; “danger”; injury risk; “shouldn’t be in Olympics”.	“The layman might view... as dangerous situations.” “#6 makes me nervous about the landing...” “Do not see any cross country at Olympic level as ethical.”
Photo/storytelling quality and public readability	Selections are also justified via media logic: composition, clarity, and whether the image communicates scale/context/Olympic significance—especially for non-horse audiences.	Wider shots; context of fences/crowd; clarity of tack; editing; “tell a story”; “images too small”.	“Tell me a story.” “Cross country is about big fences and wider shots to tell the full story.”

Table 7: Comparative thematic analysis of horse enthusiasts’ interpretation of “positive” Olympic equestrian images.

Higher order theme	Training Areas	Dressage	Show Jumping	Eventing (Cross-Country)
Horse–rider partnership and emotional connection	Valued when training appears cooperative and horse-centred; reward moments welcomed but scrutinised for genuineness.	Seen through softness, harmony, and invisibility of aids; emotional connection often subtle rather than overt.	Highly valued through visible praise, pats, hugs, and post-round gratitude; often ranked highest.	Valued through shared effort and relief at completion; celebration acceptable if horse appears willing and sound.
Signs of positive affective state (ears, eyes, posture)	Central criterion: relaxation and mental ease expected at all times. Tension strongly penalised.	Key interpretive tool: 323 calm eye, relaxed mouth, and steadiness expected despite collection.	Important but occasionally balanced against excitement and effort; conflict frames downgraded.	Interpreted alongside exertion; fatigue sometimes accepted but overt stress lowers rankings.
Tack and equipment as welfare indicators	Most scrutinised: minimal/simple tack expected. Restrictive equipment often invalidates image positivity.	Closely examined; tight nosebands, double bridles, and hyperflexion draw criticism.	Strong filter; harsh bits, martingales, tight flashes frequently downgrade otherwise good shots.	Present but slightly secondary to safety/effort; strong bits and nosebands still criticised.
Rider balance, fairness, and non-interference	Poor rider posture or heavy hands read as unethical training practice.	Rider correctness central; balance and stillness interpreted as respect for the horse.	Strong focus on lower leg, release, and soft contact; poor equitation damages image.	Evaluated in relation to terrain and speed; balance praised when aiding horse over effort.
Athleticism, action, and sport representation	Least important; calmness valued over spectacle.	Athleticism appreciated when it appears effortless and unforced.	Important; clean bascule and dynamic action valued if welfare signals remain positive.	Highly important: bravery, scope, and movement celebrated when horse appears willing.
Risk, exertion, and ethical acceptability of the discipline	Training expected to be low-pressure; discomfort viewed as unjustifiable.	Ethical concerns centre on coercion	Risk acknowledged but less central than in eventing; concern rises with visible conflict.	Central theme: solid fences, drops, water jumps Fatigue raised ethical questions even in positive images.
Photographic storytelling and public readability	Images should clearly show posture and freedom of movement; angles hiding tension criticised.	Images should communicate elegance and control; overly dramatic shots less valued.	Images should show both skill and partnership; conflict moments poorly received.	Images should communicate scale, terrain, and Olympic context: Water and crowds valued.

Data Analysis

Open-ended question responses were analysed using qualitative reflexive thematic analysis, following the method of Graneheim and Lundman [9]. The analysis focused on condensing and interpreting meanings. First, all responses were collated and read in full. Two researchers (S.O. and V.L.) independently reviewed the content to identify key sentences and phrases that conveyed similar meanings, which were subsequently coded. The researchers then met to compare their coding, discuss discrepancies, and reach consensus on the final codes. These codes were organized into lower-order and higher-order themes to reflect their content and were further filtered and grouped into categories to summarize participants' discussions and conclusions.

Results

The survey produced 514 submitted responses. This survey sample represented a broad demographic distribution, with the largest proportion of respondents aged 25–34 years (30.4%), followed by those aged 18–24 (16.7%), 45–54 (16.1%), 55–64 (14.1%), and 35–44 (12.2%). Smaller proportions were aged 65–74 (9.0%), 75 years or older (1.0%), or preferred not to disclose their age (0.6%). The sample was predominantly female (89.8%), with male (6.5%) and non-binary (2.4%) respondents representing much smaller groups, and 1.4% choosing not to report gender. Geographically, participants were primarily located in the USA and Canada (35.3%), Europe (29.4%), and the United Kingdom and Ireland (25.7%), with smaller representation from Australia and New Zealand (5.7%) and other regions (3.9%). This demographic profile reflects a largely female, internationally distributed cohort of respondents engaged in the study.

Discussion

The thematic analyses demonstrate that participants did not engage with Olympic equestrian imagery as neutral spectators of sport, but as evaluators of welfare, ethics, and legitimacy. Across disciplines, interpretations of “positive” imagery were shaped by perceived horse comfort, human attentiveness, and the broader moral framing of elite equestrian practice. While discipline-specific expectations influenced tolerance for effort, risk, and athletic ability, a consistent pattern emerged: images were read as ethical statements about how horses are treated, trained, and valued within Olympic sport. These findings suggest broader considerations of the visual representation of equine welfare, which could impact equestrian sport's social licence to operate [1]; evaluation of engaging image elements has been found to have the potential to promote positive perceptions for the conservation of animals and their environments [10]. These findings have potential implications for governance, judging, media practices, and the future positioning of equestrian sport.

Discipline

In dressage, concern focused on biomechanics, head-neck position, and the role of judging. Participants expressed discomfort with images showing horses behind the vertical, tight through the neck, or displaying exaggerated movement accompanied by visible tension. Unlike other disciplines, dressage images were frequently interpreted as evidence of systemic issues, particularly where incorrect movement was perceived to be rewarded. In show jumping, participants demonstrated greater tolerance for exertion and momentary tension, provided that the horse appeared willing and was followed by visible reward or release of pressure. Athleticism and dynamic action were valued, but only when balanced by clear signs of care and appreciation. These were similar to the views on eventing images; however, in eventing, especially cross-country, risk and fatigue were more readily accepted as inherent to the discipline. However, participants remained sensitive to signs of distress, unsafe landings, or excessive risk-taking, and questioned the ethical limits of bravery and spectacle. Jones McVey (2021) [11] suggests that the virtue of bravery may have negative implications for equine welfare. Previous studies have suggested that equine caregivers are poor at recognising fear and anxiety in horses, [12] which the participants in this survey appear to be more attuned to, although the study of a still image does allow more time for interpretation. Equine experience and emotional intelligence are linked with the ability to interpret equine affective states [13, 14]. Together, these findings suggest that welfare judgements are context-dependent, but consistently grounded in perceived fairness, proportionality, and responsiveness to the horse.

Horse-human interaction

Across all analyses, horse-human interaction emerged as the central moral anchor of equestrian sport. Participants repeatedly described interaction as framing partnership, trust, harmony and mutual responsiveness as the defining characteristics that differentiate equestrian sport from other athletic disciplines. Images depicting reward, rest, or quiet moments, particularly involving grooms, were consistently interpreted as more authentic and reassuring than action shots alone. These interactions were read as indicators of empathy and care, while their absence contributed to perceptions of horses as ‘tools’ or ‘instruments’ for human ambition. Importantly, interaction was evaluated not by its visibility alone, but by its perceived sincerity. Some respondents questioned whether moments of praise were performative or staged for cameras, suggesting that imagery alone cannot fully resolve ethical concerns if broader practices remain unchanged.

Limitations of still photography

Participants showed strong awareness of the limitations of still photography, frequently noting that images represent only a moment in time. However, this acknowledgement did not reduce the ethical weight attributed to images. Instead, it intensified concern about how frequently certain visual patterns

recur. Repeated imagery of tight frames, tack and equipment, or tense expressions was interpreted as indicative of normalised practice rather than isolated incidents. For many participants, the argument that images were taken “out of context” was insufficient when similar visual cues appeared repeatedly across disciplines and riders. This positions photography as an ethically consequential practice within equestrian sport. Image selection, framing, and dissemination were viewed as active contributors to public perception and internal culture, rather than neutral acts of documentation. When compared with equine behaviour experts, participants in an online photographic study of equine behavioural responses were able to match the positive and negative valence of an image 78.5% of the time, but were less effective at matching the exact affective state [15], although industry experience can influence the ‘normalcy’ of an image, and its subsequent interpretation [16]. Photo-elicitation studies can reveal emotions, insights and perceptions that text-based studies may not generate [17,18].

Welfare Reflections Beyond Individual Cases

A notable finding across datasets was participants’ rejection of the “bad apple” narrative. Rather than viewing welfare issues as isolated cases, respondents highlighted systemic pressures, including judging standards, commercialisation, breeding for extreme movement, equipment norms, and competitive incentives, as central drivers of concern. These themes mirror the current welfare priorities raised by the FEI Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission [19], particularly around systemic rather than individual responsibility for welfare standards.

Dressage emerged as the discipline most emblematic of these issues, with participants frequently citing the normalisation of restrictive tack, overly tight nosebands, and horses being ridden behind the vertical. These concerns directly reflect the focus of recent FEI rule changes and welfare-oriented recommendations aimed at reducing such practices and improving transparency and accountability around equipment use and horse presentation. The effect of noseband tightness on physiological stress, vascular perfusion [20,21] and stride kinematics [22] has encouraged national federations and the FEI to research and update equipment rules and monitoring [23], although there is still room for further education and research implementation to evidence reform and appropriate enforcement [24].

Together, these findings illustrate a reframing of welfare concerns as structural and cultural, rather than attributable to a few problematic individuals [5, 25]. Participants’ perspectives align with broader debates about equestrian sport’s social licence to operate, emphasising that the legitimacy of elite competition depends on addressing embedded norms and practices that may compromise equine wellbeing. This systemic lens underscores the urgency and relevance of current reform efforts within the sport.

A consistent call emerged to ‘centre’ the horse, visually, ethically, and institutionally. Participants did not reject

athleticism or competition per se, but questioned systems where performance appeared to override attentiveness to the horse’s experience. Images that successfully balanced athletic challenge with visible relaxation, fairness, and appreciation were described as compelling, reassuring, and worth defending. In contrast, images showing constrained or distressed horses were not only criticised individually but interpreted as warnings about the sport’s trajectory. Consensus is difficult to ascertain among elite riders, whether a strong horse-rider relationship is critical or detrimental to success, which may have welfare implications [26] and could affect how horse-experienced and non-equestrian audiences interpret what they can see. Bias exists in subjective judging, which may be ameliorated by objective judging systems [27], although the use of tools such as VAR (Video Assistant Referee) will require objective assessment for suitability within equine sport, alongside emerging technologies and education that can assist with the recognition of affective state [28-33]. Facilitation of an ethical framework within equine sport could guide the implementation of welfare-informed practice [34], identifying feasible tools and practices to support sports horse welfare [35] and well-being at competition [36].

Limitations of this study

This study has several limitations. First, participants’ interpretations were based solely on still images, which capture only a single moment and may not reflect broader training practices, performance quality, or true welfare status; consequently, assessments of tension, relaxation, or discomfort remain inferential. Second, the sample consisted mainly of horse-experienced respondents, limiting generalisability to nonequestrian audiences. Third, images were viewed outside their original media and competitive context, without video or accompanying commentary, potentially heightening attention to visible cues such as tack, posture, and facial expression. Finally, as a qualitative study using reflexive thematic analysis, the findings do not aim to quantify prevalence or establish causality, but instead represent patterned meanings shaped by the researchers’ interpretive lens.

Conclusion

This study shows positive images of Olympic equestrian sport were viewed through a welfare-centred lens, prioritising horse comfort, agency, and partnership over performance aesthetics or athleticism. Such interpretations highlight limited tolerance for abnormal tension or coercion within elite sport. The findings indicate that the long-term legitimacy of equestrian sport depends not only on regulatory compliance, but on how horses are visually represented, judged, and understood by both equestrians and the wider public. Imagery that conveys relaxation, empathy and genuine partnership may help sustain social licence, whereas imagery depicting discomfort risks eroding trust and intensifying ethical scrutiny.

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