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Sportblog

Using a whip in a horserace is not cruel but racing must explain why

The British Horseracing Authority's chief vet highlights why the sport needs to win its case on the burning issue of the moment



Racing's leaders have to convince the general public that using the whip is not cruel. Photograph: Julian Herbert/Getty Images

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Blogpost

Is it cruel to hit an animal with a whip? If you stopped a passerby in the street and asked them this question their instinctive reply would probably be that it is. It's a natural human response to feel that you shouldn't hit an animal, on the basis that to do so would probably cause unnecessary pain. That is exactly what the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) – the regulator for racing in Great Britain – found when we asked polling organisation SMG/YouGov to put this question to the public.

The BHA this week published a landmark review into the use of the whip in our sport. One of the review's key findings is

that under a very specific set of circumstances – including the use of an energy-absorbing whip and strict controls on how it can be used – the whip does not cause pain to racehorses and is not cruel. In fact, the whip plays a key role in good horsemanship, and is important to the safety of both the horse and its rider.

Understandably, this is an emotionally charged issue. The public do not like the idea of horses being hit with a whip in the name of sport. The central principle behind the BHA's approach, however, has been that decisions on how we safeguard animal welfare in all aspects of life – including but not limited to sport – should be based on more than just an instinctive response. Rather, a responsible regulator should tackle the complexities of the issue head on and make tough decisions backed with sound empirical evidence.

So with this in mind, the BHA, as part of the review, commissioned in-depth public opinion research (going well beyond the sort of vox pop described above, which is at best simplistic and at worst, biased) in order to better understand people's views on this issue.

The results make very interesting reading. For example, when asked for their instinctive view, 57% of those questioned felt the use of the whip should be completely banned in racing. However, when provided with information about the strict controls that are placed on how (and how often) jockeys can use of the whip, and its role in safely steering and rebalancing an extremely heavy, fast-moving animal, this number came down to 33%. What we believe this indicates is that while some people (in this study 33%), feel that using a whip on a horse can never be justified, for the majority there is a clear

acceptance that the whip can and should be used, providing the right controls are in place.

The BHA also looked very closely at the animal welfare science behind the effects of the whip on horses in the specific context (and this is important) of adrenaline-fueled race conditions. What we found was that under such conditions, when a horse is in a state of high physiological and mental excitement, the use of an energy-absorbing whip does not cause pain if used within strict limits. In sports science this is often termed 'sportsman's analgesia', and it means that while the whip stimulates a horse during a race, it won't cause pain or suffering if used properly.

Such research has important implications for racing, and one of the recommendations of our review is that training for jockeys takes into account the latest scientific evidence. However, there is also a wider debate taking place here between two different approaches to the role of animals in society.

An animal welfare approach is based on the idea that wherever we use animals – whether in sport, for food, or in ground-breaking medical research – we should make sure strict rules are in place and that animals are well looked after at all times. This is the approach currently taken by racing, and that approach is backed by respected animal welfare organisations such as the RSPCA, SSPCA and World Horse Welfare.

In contrast, an animal rights approach is based on the view that animals should not be used in any way by humans. Those who take this approach feel that sports like racing should be banned and the use of animals in all medical experiments prohibited – even if millions of human lives could be saved through such

research.

The BHA's review is a positive step forward for those who support a welfare approach to the role of animals in our lives. As a responsible regulator we have taken the view that the current rules and penalties around the use of the whip are simply not good enough and can be both improved and made clearer.

The changes we have outlined will significantly enhance welfare standards within the sport. We have announced measures that reduce the number of times a jockey can use his or her whip during a race and significantly ramps up the penalties for jockeys who breach the rules. Prize money will be withheld from jockeys who break the rules (if the offence results in a suspension of three days or more) and repeat offenders will face increased penalties and potential loss of their licence to race. The new system will be unambiguous and will provide sufficient disincentive to ensure that jockeys stick to the rules.

There will always be those who feel uncomfortable with the idea of the whip being used in racing. It's up to the sport to be confident in its approach and to explain clearly why, with the right regulation in place, the whip has an important role to play in upholding the highest animal welfare standards.

Tim Morris is director of Equine Science and Welfare at the British Horseracing Authority

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