Abstract - McGreevy

Equitation Science and its contributions to horse welfare

Horses unquestionably hold a special place in the hearts and minds of many Australians. Historically, they have acted as ambassadors for other, perhaps less charismatic, members of the animal kingdom. Images of horses being whipped on the streets of Victorian England are recognised as a major impetus to the birth of the animal protection movement as we know it today. These were exhausted work and carriage horses, thrashed to deliver more effort where none was possible. Observing their plight inspired the creation of the world's first animal cruelty legislation and enforcement regime. Paradoxically, despite this pivotal role, horses have yet to benefit fully from the strides that the animal protection movement has since made for other species. Today, horses are still whipped in public, but only in the name of sport.

Horses have missed out when it comes to advances in behavioural science too. Established traditional equestrian techniques bypassed the findings of modern learning theorists, including the principles of operant conditioning that have transformed dog training over the past 30 years. Accordingly, many observers now question the welfare of ridden horses since most are trained using negative reinforcement and pressurebased cues. Failure to define best practice in the use of aversive stimuli in equitation has contributed to the erosion of horse sports' social-license-to-operate.

In the two decades since the RSPCA Australia Seminar last focussed on horses, we have seen the emergence of equitation science; a multidisciplinary discipline that combines learning theory, ethology and physics to examine the salience and efficacy of horse-training techniques. It is removing emotiveness from the horse-riding welfare debate because it permits consideration and, in some cases, assessment of equine discomfort, pain and learned helplessness.

We have also seen the formation of the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES), a global group with strong Australian connections. ISES promotes the application of objective research and advanced practice which will ultimately improve the welfare of horses in their associations with humans. This Society has produced several science-based position statements that address key topics, including the consequences of restrictive nosebands and the use/misuse of leadership and dominance concepts in horse training. This presentation will examine how equitation science has advanced horse welfare and the obstacles it has confronted along the way.

Revision #2
Created 2025-02-12 00:18:14 UTC by Admin
Updated 2025-02-13 23:33:15 UTC by Admin