Abstract - Wilkins

Paris 2024 ... A 'Games Changer' for Sport Horse Welfare?

Horses have competed in the Olympics since 1912, but their future participation is by no means guaranteed. Under the leadership of the International Equestrian Federation (FEI), equestrian sports are under pressure to demonstrate to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that equestrianism meets the principles of Olympism. To achieve this, horse sports must successfully argue their universality, integrity and fairness, gender equality, popularity, environmental sustainability and youth development. While each of these qualities deserves to be debated in great detail, it is reasonable to say that fairness – particularly the question of whether participation in the sport is inherently harmful to the welfare of horses – has become an Olympic problem of the highest priority. This was largely the result of several incidents and accidents that marred the Tokyo 2021 Games, when for the first time and because of the combination of Covid-19 lockdowns and 21st century technologies, the equestrian events were live streamed in their entirety and all around the world. The additional visibility, which was welcomed by fans proved to be a double-edged sword; there were many times when both organisers and equestrians might have wished their sport had received less coverage. We learned that one eventing horse was euthanased as a result of a hard landing, and we watched on as a horse was punched by the team coach for refusing to jump, and another was allowed to finish the show jumping round despite profuse nasal bleeding, his crimson nostrils and blood-spluttered chest contrasting sharply against his light grey coat. These incidents, added to other displays of questionable riding skill or preparation, triggered very strong reactions from the media and spectators, with a section of the population asking for a ban of all equestrian events from future Olympic Games. In an unprecedented pre-emptive intervention aimed at protecting the country’s reputation, the French National Assembly (the lower house of the French Parliament) commissioned and published a 72-page report highlighting what they called, “shortcomings in the current regulations”. The list of issues and depth of analysis is comprehensive and includes 46 recommendations for revising specific rules. Will Paris 2024 be the ‘Games’ changer for equine welfare or will horse sports lose their Olympic licence to operate and be absent from the Brisbane 2032 Games? The stakes are high and, in this presentation, I will analyse the challenges ahead and discuss the opportunities to leverage the tension of this historic moment to maximise progress on horse welfare outcomes beyond the boundaries of the Olympic disciplines.

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