

“A LIFE WELL LIVED” – BRITISH RACING’S HORSE WELFARE STRATEGY

In February 2020, the sport’s independently-Chaired Horse Welfare Board published its five-year strategic plan for the welfare of horses bred for racing.

The strategy focuses on the ambition that every horse bred to race should lead “a life well-lived”. The strategy includes traceability for horses bred for the sport, a strong focus on safety and wellbeing, a more confident and proactive approach to communications and the industry’s biggest ever data project.

REGULATING WELFARE IN BRITISH RACING

The British Horseracing Authority (BHA) is the Government-recognised, independent body responsible for the regulation of horseracing.

The welfare of our participants is the number one priority for the BHA and it demands the highest standards of welfare from all licensed jockeys, trainers and racecourses and the **6,000 stable staff whose role it is to care for the 14,000 horses in training at any one time.**

The BHA is responsible for setting and enforcing the welfare standards that all participants must adhere to. These standards are embedded in the sport’s rules, raceday regulation, education, licensing and disciplinary procedures, and are enforced by teams of vets, racecourse inspectors, stable inspecting officers and raceday officials.

UK Government – via the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – recently endorsed the BHA’s regulatory role in relation to the safety of jockeys and horses, given that overall racehorse welfare is improving and fatalities at racecourses are falling:

“The British Horseracing Authority (BHA) is responsible for the safety of jockeys and horses at races in this country. The BHA works with animal welfare organisations like the RSPCA and World Horse Welfare to keep racecourses as safe as possible for horses.”

Defra, 2018

MAKING HORSERACING SAFER

As with all elite sports and all activities involving horses, there is an element of risk. It is the responsibility of the BHA and everyone involved in the sport to ensure that we do everything possible to minimise that risk and to ensure that no injury or fatality occurs which could reasonably have been prevented.

As a consequence of British racing’s investment in safety, welfare and health, the number of horses that have suffered fatal injuries on racecourses has **decreased by 1/3 in the last 20 years. The fatal injury rate over the last five years sits at 0.19% of runners** – the lowest five-year rate on record.

Faller rates during jump races have decreased to an all-time low of just 2.43%, a decrease of 33% in the last 20 years as a result of initiatives to make racecourses and jump racing safer.

Sport horses are at risk whatever activity they are engaged in, whether in competition or when turned out in the field – a recent study by Liverpool University found that **62% of traumatic injuries in sport horses occurred in the field, compared to 13% while in ridden exercise.**

Despite British racing’s excellent safety record, it always strives to improve, constantly investing in welfare research and education. The approach the BHA takes is one of constant assessment and improvement, identifying causes of risk and working with racecourses to address them, and investing in new approaches, science and innovations.

Since the year 2000, British racing has invested £35 million in veterinary research and education which benefits all breeds of horses, not just thoroughbreds.

TRAINERS, JOCKEYS AND RACECOURSES

No trainer or jockeys are licensed by the BHA unless they are proven to be suitable persons to look after or ride racehorses, operating training premises which meet strict welfare guidelines.

Licences are renewed by application every year so trainers and jockeys must maintain these standards throughout their career.

The BHA’s inspecting officers regularly inspect training yards, and check the condition of the horses that live there. Around 600 stable inspections are carried out every year.

As with trainers, no racecourse is licensed unless its premises, facilities, and the way it is operated meet strict equine welfare criteria, which far exceed those demanded by animal welfare legislation. No racing can take place at any British course unless all equine welfare standards, measures and criteria are deemed to have been met by the BHA.

These standards are enforced by the BHA's team of racecourse inspectors who visit courses frequently on and before racedays to ensure that courses are safe and fit for racing.

The requirements include high standards of facilities and course management, including the provision of experienced veterinary surgeons and state-of-the-art veterinary facilities on course – such as horse ambulances – to ensure the very best treatment of any injury.

The BHA also works with racecourses to ensure the continual improvement of welfare standards, and constantly monitor injury rates to identify where improvements can be made. Improvements range from minor alterations to racecourse facilities, through to significant reviews and changes to racecourse layout.

WELFARE ON RACEDAY

All of the BHA officials who operate on raceday have a responsibility for ensuring the health and welfare of our participants, including stewards, equine welfare integrity officers and BHA vets.

The team of BHA Veterinary Officers is on the racecourse to oversee equine welfare. Their role includes:

- Ensuring that the sport's strict welfare rules and standards are adhered to
- Overseeing teams of veterinary surgeons employed by the racecourse
- Carrying out pre-race checks on horses to ensure they are healthy and fit to race, and perform post-race checks on horses after they have run carrying out any testing, as appropriate.

One Veterinary Officer and three Veterinary Surgeons are required on a racecourse as a minimum requirement for the 10,000 race meetings that take place in Britain each year. For festivals, there will be at least five Veterinary Officers and eight Veterinary Surgeons present.

In the event of an incident on a racecourse:

- Any horse affected will receive immediate attention from the racecourse veterinary team
- If further assessment is required horses can be transported in specially designed horse ambulances to the first class veterinary facilities at each racecourse
- If necessary, horses can be transported from the course to receive further treatment at the nearest equine hospital

THE WHIP

In British racing the use of a foam padded, air cushioned whip is permitted, with strict controls on its use. It is the view of the BHA that, with the appropriate design and these strict controls in place, it does not compromise the welfare of horses during a race.

The current foam padded design of the whip was developed with input from the RSPCA. There is only one current accredited supplier of whips for use in British racing.

Why do we use the whip?

Whips are carried first and foremost as an essential aid to horsemanship and safety. This is consistent across all equine activities which involve exertion on the part of the horse.

The use of the whip in British racing is restricted to safety, correction and encouragement. By "encouragement" we mean using the whip as an aid to activate and focus the horse, so the horse realises its potential by giving its best. Use of the whip to coerce is not permitted.

The rules and limits on use

Following a detailed 2011 Review of the use of the whip in horseracing, the rules regarding the use of the whip in British racing were revised. The basic rules are as follows:

- The whip can be used a maximum of seven times in a Flat race or eight times in a Jump race. Any more than this will prompt the stewards to review the ride
- As well as the number of times the whip is used, the stewards will look at the force with which it is used, whether the horse has been given time to respond, the purpose for which the whip was used, whether the horse was in contention or clearly winning at the time it was used, and whether the whip has been used in the correct place (i.e. on the horse's hindquarter rather than flanks)

Any rider found to have contravened the rules will face a period of suspension, and any rider picking up five offences in a six month period will be referred to the BHA for a more substantial penalty.

Since implementing the revised whip rules, the frequency of whip offences has halved, despite the threshold for permitted use also being halved. Breaches of the whip rules now occur in around 0.4% of rides.

Because of the low thresholds for use and the foam padded design of the whip, even a serious breach of the whip rules would be unlikely to impact negatively on a horse's welfare. Horses are checked by vets after every race – on average, only one horse a year – from over 90,000 runners – is found to have been marked or “wealed” by use of the whip.

Defra recently endorsed the BHA's whip rules, stating that:

“The BHA policy on the whip was drawn up in consultation with animal welfare groups, such as the RSPCA and World Horse Welfare. The latest rules include a threshold on the number of times the whip is used before racing stewards can consider an enquiry. If the rules are broken, the jockey may be banned from racing for a certain number of days depending on the seriousness of the offence. Defra is satisfied that the rules in place are sufficient to restrict and limit the use of the whip in horse racing.”

- Defra, 2019

THE CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL

The Cheltenham Festival is the pinnacle of the Jump racing season. It is in the top 10 attended British sporting events and has an annual economic impact in the region of £100m.

The BHA, in late 2018, published a detailed review of safety at Cheltenham and the Festival.

As a result of this review, the racing industry has worked harder than ever before to ensure our horses and jockeys are well-prepared for the Festival. To summarise changes in recent years:

- Introduction of detailed medical checks stretching back 45 days for every runner
- Further physical inspections carried out by vets on every runner on the day
- Changes to the rules of entry to reduce field sizes and encourage trainers to use more experienced jockeys
- Changes to the race conditions of specific races, e.g. the National Hunt Chase reduced from 4 miles to 3m 6f and jumping 23 obstacles rather than 25, plus detailed minimum standards for horses and riders to be qualified to race
- Extensive engagement with trainers and jockeys, including daily briefing and mandatory course walks for jockeys who've not ridden at Cheltenham this season.

In addition the racecourse itself has implemented further measures following feedback from riders, including moving the location of one of the fences.

As with all activities involving horses there is a level of risk associated with horseracing which will always be inherent. We can't guarantee injury-free racing but we are concentrating hard on stopping avoidable and unnecessary injuries.

Festival facts

- There will be 17 vets in operation every day at the Cheltenham Festival – 10 racecourse vets overseen by seven BHA vets
- These vets provide immediate first aid and veterinary treatment for racehorses, working closely with the equine ambulance teams to ensure that any horse which suffers an injury is treated promptly.
- The teams of vets are assisted by six specially-designed equine ambulances which ensure that horses who might pick up an injury can be moved safely to the first-class veterinary facilities that are available on site, or if necessary can be transported away from the racecourse to the nearby Three Counties equine hospital.
- In addition to pre-race checks, horses are also checked over by BHA vets post-race and any issues which are identified can be assessed and treated on-site. Cheltenham, also employs state-of-the-art misting fans to cool horses post-race and reduce the risk of heat stress.

WHOLE-LIFE CARE

We take steps to look after horses at all stages of their lives, from the mandatory microchipping and registration of a foal within 30 days of its birth, through to the sport's own charity – Retraining of Racehorses (ROR) – which rehomes and retrains horses who leave the sport. Tens of thousands of former race horses go on to second careers after racing

Thoroughbred foals must be registered and micro-chipped within 30 days of birth, meaning that race horses can be tracked and identified throughout their life.

The Horse Welfare Board's welfare strategy focuses on introducing further measures to improve the traceability of horses after they leave the sport, with a view to ensuring lifetime traceability for all thoroughbred horses.