

Show Jumping?

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Last weekend I witnessed my first show jumping event. It was spectacular. It was fantastic in the true sense of the word. It was also a high level competition.

The strange thing about my afternoon was that I did not see one happy horse. Not one. I did see plenty of unhappy horses though and plenty of confused horses as well.

How could this be the case? All these very experienced people and their beautiful well bred and well trained horses and not one of them was happy? Very strange indeed.

Do I have your attention now? Good.

Firstly, lets talk about the horses. What horse willingly jumps a series of obstacles for the fun of it? Have you seen horses have a crack at the jumps set up in the arena all by themselves? You know the Jonathon Livingston Horse who dares to break all the horse rules and goes out to see how high he can jump without hitting any of the top rails. Ouch! That must hurt when the lower legs hit a heavy top rail and knock it off.

My understanding of horses is that they are flight animals. But most of the time they are relaxed and are usually happy in a herd, eating grass, swishing the flies away with their tails and having quiet conversations with each other. If they are threatened or startled then all their attention and energy is directed towards survival. But generally they are pretty relaxed critters. And that is when they are happiest. When they are relaxed.

Then along comes human. Not only do we climb onto their backs but we put a piece of metal in their mouths for control. Then we take them from their paddocks and ask them to jump logs. The logs get bigger and scarier but we expect our trusty steeds to fly over them. Again and again and again. It might be fun for the rider but if horses could talk we would have some startling truths about show jumping if anyone cared to listen.

One horse I saw, ridden by a young woman, refused the second part of a double jump (after knocking the rail off the first part, ouch!). The rail was replaced, the bell rang and the clock was restarted. The second time this valiant horse actually made it over the double jump and as a reward he was beaten with the rider's crop. Thankyou very much! Did that horse deserve that treatment, or more relevant, did that horse understand just what the rider was trying to convey to him? 'I want you to go over that red and white double jump'. Now that you have done it on our second attempt I will whip you so that it stings. (Probably because I am angry with myself for not being good enough at understanding just what horses like and want). Thank you very much lady. And on top of all that she held the reins so tightly that the poor horses mouth was sore and tender. Unhappy horse. But wait, there's more.

Each time a horse takes off, much power is used to propel up to 700kgs or so into the air. This power comes from the strong hindquarters. The powerhouse of a horse! The flight phase is fairly short and very quickly gravity plays the upper hand and horse, gear and rider come back to earth. Imagine our 700kg horse and rider package landing on the toes of the two front hooves. The loading is phenomenal! The big 'BUT' here is that the front hooves are not designed to do

toe first landings. Both the main tendons in the front feet are snapped tight as the hooves hit the ground. Adding insult to injury, the heels follow the toes and crash into the ground, creating a double 'snap', a 'bang-bang', of the extensor and deep digital flexor tendon. Sort of like both ends of a seesaw being bounced on simultaneously instead of sequentially. These tendons cannot take too much of this and get damaged, then the navicular bone becomes worn, inflamed or broken. And you know the rest.

And the ears things. This fine looking horse had a very strange thing on its head and ears. Now my limited understanding of horses tells me that ears are vital to horses wellbeing and functioning. Have you noticed how a horse's ears mirror what he or she is thinking? The ears move all over the place like radar receivers. The ears are great body language indicators. I think they also use their ears for listening. Then, for whatever reason, we decide to stick some silly thing on their heads that not only restrict the ears movements but also their hearing. Why?

Remember the picture of our equines in a paddock munching on grass, with room to move and a bit of shelter from the sun and rain. Well all I saw at this high level competition was unhappy horses in tiny enclosures. And they were all rugged to the nines. Over dressed I reckon. Yes I know some of the rugs bore the sponsors names and logos, but!

OK, if that were the best that can be done for the horses at such an event, I would seriously consider, for the horse sake, not going. But then there would be no winners would there? Apart from the horse that is.

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