

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS OUR HORSES

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SLO - Social License to operate - is on everyone's lips. But what does it mean and how does it effect the Icelandic horse world?

"Social license to operate" is a public acceptance of the industry to undertake a certain activity, in our case equestrian sport, or more precisely, Icelandic horse sport.

In recent years, voices have repeatedly been raised questioning this and in recent weeks and months there have been an increasing number of cases, mainly spread via social media, which should give everyone pause for thought.

The last two FEIF conferences focused on SLO and Horse Welfare and FEIF is investing a lot of time in bringing together scientific findings and empirical values and continuously adapting the regulations to the new findings.

Horse welfare has long been a top priority for FEIF and the FEIF member countries and will remain so in the future.

Why are SLO and the discussions that take place so important?

To be allowed to practice something, you have always needed acceptance in society.

But nowadays, more questions are being asked, knowledge and information are spreading quickly via different media channels. This does not just affect our equestrian sport, but many other areas, such as the oil industry, intensive livestock farming and much more.

This social acceptance can change over time. What was accepted many years ago, might not be acceptable today anymore. Traditions are also being questioned (e.g. bullfighting). Looking from now into the future, we must ask ourselves: what do we find acceptable and what does science tell us? If we remain alert, open to debate, and actively participate in the ongoing discussions, we can show the world that we are serious about changing things for the benefit of horses.

In this very broad topic of the SLO, there are of course specific questions, such as how we as Icelandic horse riders are affected by all the things that are happening in the dressage and show jumping scene.

It is everyone's responsibility to uphold the highest standards of horse welfare and horsemanship, no matter what discipline we are involved in. Even one bad can affect the reputation of the entire horse world. A horse is still a horse and only if we participate in the discussion together, we can make a difference.

So far, the sport of the Icelandic horse has not been publicly attacked, but it happened at show jumping competitions in the Netherlands, for example, where animal rights activists went onto the showgrounds and boycotted the competitions.

Perhaps we benefit from the fact that we have been taking horse welfare seriously for many years and have also revised our regulations in line with the new findings. FEIF has repeatedly supported scientific studies, including, for example, the hoof study (see Waldern et al., 2013), which led to a scientifically proven change in the regulations after a higher risk of injury was demonstrated with longer hooves.

Equipment issues are also continuously discussed at all levels and adapted accordingly. It has been the intention of FEIF and the FEIF member countries for many years to act proactively here, to engage in discussions and to incorporate the findings into the training and further education of judges, trainers and riders.

Specific examples

In 2023, the equipment regulations were fundamentally changed, and a list of permitted equipment now applies, which can be found at www.feif.org/equipment. This prevents the use of new bits that have been invented to circumvent the previously "prohibited bits".

The so-called "blood rule" has been in force for several years now, i.e. as soon as an actively bleeding injury is detected during an inspection, a disqualification is issued.

Breaks were introduced in the final rounds in order to give the horses a rest period between the tasks.

A proposal to reduce the number of permitted starts per competition day and horse, depending on the age of the horse, was approved by the annual sports meeting at the last meeting and will be included in the regulations as soon as the delegates' meeting confirms it next year.

The guidelines for sport judges have been completely revised for 2015 to use a system of "firewalls" for various key elements such as horsemanship skills and the connection between rider and horse, rhythm and balance, suppleness and suppleness, form and movement as well as correctness and accuracy in execution. In addition, the rider's technique, balance and coordination are included in the assessment of the rider's performance. The riding style should be characterized by lightness and sensitivity, not by power and excessive pressure.

Therefore, an impressive looking horse can no longer receive high marks if the key elements are not correct. All key elements must be taken into account when determining the score. Therefore, a good performance in one segment cannot compensate for serious deficits in another area.

The guidelines for sport and breeding judges are revised and improved every year based on most recent findings.

Strict rules also apply to all equipment, including the permitted length of hooves, the thickness of horseshoes and the weight of protective equipment.

At the World Championships 2005 we started looking into the mouths of the horses during the equipment check and since then we have implemented the check at all competitions at all levels. To ensure the checks are uniformly carried out we have standardized forms to fill in for every check of the horses after they have competed. The form includes all injuries/deviations in the mouth and on the whole body of the horse.. The Noseband Taper Gauge recommended by ISES (International Society for Equitation Sciences) is used to check the tightness of the noseband.

The question of rider weight and the resilience of the Icelandic horse

The answer to the question of a horse's resilience is as individual as the horse itself and depends on many different factors.

As emphasized also by the scientific papers that were published in the European journal *Animal*, authored by staff of the Equine Science Department at Hólar University College in cooperation with the Swedish Agricultural University Uppsala (SLU), in addition to body weight and size of the horse, these factors include age, level of training and muscular condition, gaits, the ridden speed and conformation of the horse. Not least the balance and riding style of the rider play a decisive role. But also factors apart from the horse itself, such as type of use, duration and intensity of the riding activity, the riding ability of the rider or even seemingly unimportant factors such as weather, season and soil conditions, have an influence on the weight bearing capacity of the horse.

The rider's weight is a very complicated issue. It is very important that the horses do not carry weights that are too heavy, but to find exact rules to fit all shapes and sizes of horses and riders is not easy. It is tempting to say a rider should not weigh more than x% of the horse's weight, but this does not take into account, for example, whether the horse is overweight. An overweight Icelandic horse is less able to carry a heavier rider than a correctly conditioned and lighter horse. The conformation, fitness and training levels of the horses all play a role in this matter.. Stefansdóttir et al. (2017) performed research at Hólar University, Iceland, about the effect of the weight of the rider.

There is still ongoing research about this and evidence-based results will be used for the development of our future rules, recommendations and guidelines.

The FEIF breeding goals for Icelandic horses continue putting a clear emphasis on a strong, broad, and well-muscled back with strong and broad loins and with robust legs with well-developed joints and bones. These are points which, according to current knowledge, have a great influence on the resilience and carrying capacity of a horse.

Inappropriate training methods, rough riding - how do you react?

Unsuitable practice and inappropriate behaviours can be found in all walks of life. .

We do not know what goes on behind closed doors, so we cannot say that it does not happen. At sporting competitions and breed shows, stewards/judges are empowered to watch out for undesirable practices - including those that take place behind the scenes - and report them.

For many years, artificial or psychological methods and the use of extreme weights and mechanical devices to influence movement and shape are forbidden in the FEIF rules and regulations. However, in order to reach every rider, even those who do not participate in competitions, the continuous education of riders at all levels, trainers and judges is of paramount importance. One goal is to make bad practices, improper methods, and inappropriate riding less and less acceptable.

One advantage of a relatively small and strictly regulated horse community is that concerns can be brought directly to the attention of the judges, the sport or breeding director or the judging committees. Ringmasters and all judges involved have the authority to issue warnings for rough riding, award low(er) scores accordingly and can disqualify riders for rough riding if they observe such behaviour. It is not so easy to regulate this at the leisure riding level, but again the aim is to encourage regular and appropriate training, discussion, and a strong sense of belonging to a positive, well-educated and responsible community.

And what is next?

FEIF Rules and Regulations are constantly evolving, and - as far as possible - informed by scientific research. It is important for FEIF that the focus on good riding practice and horse welfare is not only on high-level sport competitions and international breeding shows (where we have quite a lot of influence and control) but also embraces leisure riders, their training and understanding of the horse's needs, in all parts of the FEIF world.

For FEIF, the FEI Code of Conduct applies at all levels of Icelandic horse riding, which states that all involved must accept that the welfare of the horse is paramount, and that the welfare of the horse must never be subordinated to competition or commercial influences. This applies not only to riding at competitions or during training, but also to horse keeping, the health of the horse, transportation and the use of training aids.

We must tackle the challenges together, each of us - everyone involved with Icelandic horses in any way - must lead by example, be proactive and make the welfare of the horses a top priority.

There is a lot to do.

Let's tackle it, together, for the good of our (Icelandic) horses!

FEIF VISION

-  FEIF unites people in their passion for the Icelandic horse

FEIF MISSION

-  To promote the Icelandic horse, a positive riding culture, and international co-operation

- ⊕ To ensure horse welfare and harmonious riding in everything we do
- ⊕ To set the highest standards for breeding pure Icelandic horses
- ⊕ To be guided by research and evidence-based learning
- ⊕ To maintain a culture of respect, inclusiveness and diversity
- ⊕ To be flexible and forward-thinking in an ever-changing world

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