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1                   **Freedoms and frameworks: How we think about the welfare of competition**  
2                   **horses.**

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5  
6                   **Introduction**

7                   Competitive sport is important to society [e.g.1-3]. Equine sport specifically is important in  
8                   terms of spectator enjoyment, benefits to human mental and physical health [e.g.4; 5] and  
9                   economic impact [e.g.6; 7]. However, equine sport exposes animals to possible physical and  
10                  psychological harms. Large numbers of animals are involved, in sports including horseracing;  
11                  showjumping; eventing; dressage; polo; endurance; reining; showing, and carriage driving.

12  
13                  Unease about health and welfare issues in equine athletes - including injury, ill-treatment or  
14                  neglect, ‘doping’, ‘enabling treatments’, and animals’ fate after retirement - is growing,  
15                  amongst the public and the media [e.g.8-12], and amongst veterinarians [e.g.13; 14], whose  
16                  primary obligation must be to the welfare of the animals under their care[15].

17  
18                  However, despite such generalised concern, despite on-going veterinary research into the  
19                  epidemiology of welfare-reducing equine injuries and diseases, and despite the fact that many  
20                  of the international governing bodies of equine sports now have their own welfare division or  
21                  program, a coherent framework for thinking about welfare issues across the international  
22                  spectrum of equine sport is lacking. This editorial considers the applicability of one of the most  
23                  commonly-used welfare frameworks, the ‘Five Freedoms’ model, to equine athletes, and  
24                  suggests that our thinking about equine welfare in the context of competitive sport needs to go  
25                  beyond what is offered by that framework, to encompass considerations of positive welfare,  
26                  and underlying ethical issues.

## 27 **The Five Freedoms framework**

28 In a 2014 paper in Equine Veterinary Education, Hockenull and Whay [16] reviewed current  
29 approaches to assessing equine welfare. Those authors focused particularly on the use of the  
30 'Five Freedoms' framework. The Five Freedoms framework was originally developed for use  
31 in farm animals and originated in Brambell Report [17]. It was subsequently developed by the  
32 Farm Animal Welfare Council [18], has been adapted as the basis for the Animal Welfare Act  
33 (2006), the RSPCA's advice for horse owners [16] and is referenced in the National Equine  
34 Welfare Council's Code of Practice [19].

35 The (now familiar) five freedoms are:

- 36 - Freedom from hunger and thirst
- 37 - Freedom from discomfort
- 38 - Freedom from pain, injury and disease
- 39 - Freedom to express normal behaviour
- 40 - Freedom from fear and distress

41

### 42 *Is it possible to fulfil the Five Freedoms for equine athletes?*

43 The Five Freedoms as they were explained by Webster [20] were meant to be ideals, which in  
44 combination defined an ideal welfare state. The 'Five Provisions' which accompanied the Five  
45 Freedoms were meant to define the 'husbandry and resources required to promote, if never  
46 achieve, this ideal welfare state' [21].

47 The Five Freedoms as applied to equine athletes seem to fall into three groups:

48 (1) Freedoms (for example freedom from thirst and hunger) which are basic in relation to  
49 equine athletes in the developed world, and should be easily fulfilled.

50 (2) Freedoms which could be fulfilled, but are frequently not fulfilled under common  
51 management systems for equine athletes. As examples, stabling horses individually has  
52 a negative effect on the freedom to express normal behaviours such as social interaction  
53 and mutual grooming. Travelling horses long distances internationally to compete can  
54 cause (dis)stress. Normal reproductive behaviours during the breeding of equine  
55 athletes are commonly prohibited by systems which employ artificial techniques,  
56 involve physical restraint of mares during covering, house mares and stallions  
57 separately[22; 23] or suppress oestrus in an attempt to improve performance.

58 (3) Freedoms which appear to be unachievable. It is impossible, for example, for any  
59 athlete (animal or human) to lead a life entirely free of pain and injury, or discomfort.

60

61 The Five Freedoms framework provides us with a useful tool for identifying and addressing  
62 management practices which could be improved. For example, there has been an encouraging  
63 trend amongst some trainers towards turning competition horses out for field exercise, and/or  
64 housing horses in groups rather than individually, which has improved horses' ability to  
65 express normal behaviours. However, even when a management issue can be identified as  
66 impinging upon one or more of the Five Freedoms, it is not always possible to correct it – for  
67 example, the (di)stress caused by long distance transportation could only be removed  
68 completely by not transporting the animal, which is impractical if one is to allow international  
69 horse sport to continue at all (see below). One of the perceived weaknesses of The Five  
70 Freedoms framework is that, because of its idealistic construction, it is absolute, and does not  
71 tell us what to do in a situation such as this, when an ideal is unachievable. Mellor, however,  
72 argues that this is a misinterpretation, and that 'Freedom from' should be interpreted as

73 meaning ‘As free *as possible* from’ rather than ‘*completely free* from during the course of a  
74 lifetime’ [24]. Accepting this approach enables us to provide the best welfare possible in  
75 circumstances where the ideal is unobtainable (for example, to minimise the psychological and  
76 physiological stress of transport by shortening journey times, controlling environmental  
77 temperature, providing hay and water; facilitating lowering of the head, and travelling with  
78 familiar companions).

79

80 The concept of the difference between ‘unnecessary’ and ‘unavoidable’ harms [25] is relevant  
81 here. Abolishing unnecessary harms is likely to result in animals being ‘as free as possible  
82 from’ a welfare insult, since we are left only with unavoidable harms (i.e. those which it is  
83 impossible to facilitate freedom from). Unnecessary harms, for example, might be injuries  
84 caused by falls at a type of fence which had been proven to be associated with a high rate of  
85 fall and injury. Unavoidable harms, in contrast, might be injuries which occurred even when  
86 all of the fences on a racecourse or cross country course had been built using the latest evidence  
87 about fence safety, design and the correlation between fence type and injury rate.

88

89 ***Is ‘As free as possible from’ sufficient for good equine welfare?***

90 Using the Five Freedoms framework to aim at making horses ‘As free as possible from...’  
91 seems, then, to be a useful method of minimising negative welfare effects experienced by  
92 equine athletes. The absence of negative welfare, however, does not necessarily guarantee  
93 positive welfare [24]. One of the criticisms of the Five Freedoms framework is that it focuses  
94 on the negative, and fails to take account of positive aspects of welfare [26; 27]. In the context  
95 of equine athletes, positive aspects of welfare might include, for example, frequent and prompt

96 veterinary attention to injury and disease, appropriate nutrition and housing, skilled care [16]  
97 and even ‘bonding’ interactions between horses and humans [24]. Lack of consideration of  
98 positive welfare factors means that, even when it is interpreted as ‘As free as possible from’,  
99 the Five Freedoms framework is not sufficient to promote the welfare of equine athletes. Some  
100 consideration of ‘what good welfare looks like’, including incorporation of the developing field  
101 of behavioural science, is necessary.

102

103 *Is the concept of ‘A life worth living’ useful in the context of the welfare of equine athletes?*

104 Recognition of this limitation of the Five Freedoms framework led to the development of the  
105 concept of the concept of animals having ‘A life worth living’ [24; 26; 28]. This concept  
106 suggests that we should aim to maximise positive welfare experiences and minimise negative  
107 welfare experiences over an animal’s lifetime, so that, overall, the quality of an animal’s life is  
108 ‘good’ or at least ‘worth living from the animal’s point of view’ [28]. In the context of equine  
109 athletes this could involve, for example, regulating to alleviate welfare insults caused by  
110 particular types of equipment or training techniques [29; 30], and maximising opportunities for  
111 social interaction.

112

113 The concept of ‘a life worth living the animal’s point of view’, however, seems unconvincing,  
114 even if one accepts that some negative welfare experiences (such as temporary thirst) are  
115 unavoidable in life (and indeed are necessary physiological mechanisms designed to protect  
116 the animal’s well-being [24]). Although behavioural science has become an integral part of  
117 animal welfare thinking in recent years, there is a limit to what it can tell us about an animal’s  
118 view of the value of its own life. Horses, like other animals, can express preferences, and

119 exhibit aversive (sometimes learnt aversive) behaviour. There is undoubtedly an element of  
120 anticipation in some behaviours – for example, horses may kick the stable door when they hear  
121 someone walk onto the yard first thing in the morning in anticipation of being ‘rewarded’ with  
122 feed. Similarly, horses whose legs have been (illegally) previously treated with sensitising  
123 agents so that pain is experienced when they hit a fence might subsequently try to avoid hitting  
124 the fence in order to avoid the pain. Such examples demonstrate some degree of self-awareness  
125 and preference at a particular point in time. They do not, however, provide any evidence that  
126 horses have a view about the overall value of their life as a whole, or that they are capable of  
127 holding such overarching views, or of making a mental trade-off between pain now and  
128 pleasure in the future.

129

130 The concept of ‘A life worth living from the animal’s point of view’ is therefore meaningless  
131 – what we actually mean is ‘an animal life which humans judge to be worth the animal living’.  
132 Nonetheless, the aim of maximising positive welfare experiences and minimising negative  
133 welfare experiences over an animal’s lifetime is useful in terms of informing how we should  
134 treat equine athletes when faced with a welfare insult which we cannot abolish completely.

135

### 136 **Limits of ethical acceptability**

137 One problem with adopting the ‘As free as possible from’ interpretation of the Five Freedoms  
138 framework is that it provides no guidance on when ‘as free as possible from’ is not good  
139 enough. Because it is a welfare, not an ethical, framework, it does not address the question of  
140 whether the system which it is being used to analyse/improve is fundamentally acceptable to  
141 society. In the context of competition horses, the Five Freedoms framework has nothing to say

142 about whether society should permit the use of horses in sport at all, or whether the unavoidable  
143 nature of some harms makes human use of equine athletes ethically unacceptable. The answer  
144 to such questions lies in discussion around the ethical justifications for human uses of animals  
145 (outside the scope of this Editorial), and the development of ethical frameworks for analysing  
146 what should constrain the use of animals in competitive sport [31; 32].

147

## 148 **Conclusion**

149 The Five Freedoms is useful as an accessible and easily adopted framework for analysing  
150 equine management systems, and encouraging improvements in equine welfare. Particularly if  
151 one adopts the ‘As free as possible from’ interpretation, it is relevant to the consideration of  
152 competition horse welfare. Nonetheless, it is insufficient as a framework for thinking about the  
153 welfare of equine athletes, due to its focus on negative (as opposed to positive) aspects of  
154 welfare, and because of underlying and unaddressed ethical questions about the use of horses  
155 in sport. There is a need for a coherent framework for thinking about the welfare of competition  
156 horses which not only delineates negative welfare in applicable terms, but also develops a view  
157 of what good welfare looks like, and incorporates ethical considerations about possible  
158 constraints on the use of horses for competitive sport.

## 159 **Author’s declaration of interests**

160 No conflicts of interest have been declared.

161

162



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