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Evaluation of whip use and prevalence in elite and non-elite show jumpers

Is there a correlation between whip use and results in show jumping?

Recent research into whip use in flat racing has shown no positive association between the use of the whip and race placing, and studies have not seen faster times or better results when the whip was used more often. An outcome of these studies has resulted in updated rules of whip use for some countries. UK researchers have been searching for a possible similar link in the sport of show jumping.

As is common with other equestrian sports and disciplines, whips are carried and used in competition by show jumpers at both the non-elite and elite levels. Results of a study from the UK showed non-elite show jumping riders more likely than elite show jumping riders to carry a whip, with a negative correlation shown between how much a whip was used during a show jumping round and the likelihood of achieving a clear round, i.e. when the whip was used, the horse was less likely to achieve a show jumping round with no faults. Catherine Watkins of Hartsbury College in Gloucester presented the results of the study at the 2013 International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) conference.

The researchers observed 229 non-elite and 229 elite show jumpers at affiliated UK show jumping competitions. They recorded whip carriage, whip use, and rein release i.e. did the rider put the reins into one hand when applying the whip, during whip use. Non-elite riders were found more likely (69%) to carry a whip than elite riders (62%), with faults becoming 1.3 times more likely to occur for those riders who carried a whip. The likelihood of achieving a clear round decreased for riders who used the whip, with riders who carried but did not use a whip faring better; and elite riders who carried the whip but did not use it fared the best.

In addition to calculating the likelihood of achieving faults or clear rounds, the researchers compared active use of the whip with current British Show Jumping rules. “For those that aren’t familiar with the British Show Jumping rules, they state that: misuse or excessive use will not be tolerated; the whip should not be used more than three times after entering the arena; the whip cannot be used prior to commencement of the course; and the whip is only used if the rider removes a hand from the reins.” In spite of these rules, Ms Watkins and her research partner observed seeing “a fair amount of misuse or excessive use of the whip in the arena” “The study found a total of 38 cases where the whip was used either as a punishment tool, or was not presented at the fence.” Of all the show jumping riders observed, none were reprimanded for misuse of the whip or rule infraction.

Of the 458 rounds observed, “Overall 65.5% of riders carried a whip...and 20.7% of those who carried a whip used a whip. Non-elite riders were more than twice as likely to use the whip.” It was speculated that knowledge and experience level reduced the likelihood of the whip being used. Though an alternative possibility is

that elite riders are on higher quality, more athletic horses that simply don't have as much "need" for the whip.

This information may be of value to both show jumping organizations reviewing position statements on whip use and equestrians competing in shows. "Those who used the whip were statistically less likely to achieve a clear round...elite riders were statistically more likely to achieve faults if the whip was used." states Watkins.

With an increase in public awareness of welfare in equestrian sport, discussion of the rules governing whip use is gaining momentum. As evidence is emerging from other equestrian disciplines there is clearly a need for continuing review of whip use. This study may contribute to encouraging review of whip use rules.

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The International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to facilitate research into the training of horses to enhance horse welfare and improve the horse-rider relationship. www.equitationsscience.com

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