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Is there a need for improving the understanding of horse behavior?

Deficiencies In Horse Behavior Knowledge May Lead To More Horse-Related Accidents

According to the Danish Animal Welfare Society, Danish riding schools currently provide a limited education on understanding horse behaviour. Each year, on average, over 9000 Danish riders are admitted to the emergency room after interactions with a horse, with half of those injuries occurring while the rider was unmounted, or working near the horse; approximately two of the total yearly accidents result in death. It is thought that these events may be a result of riders misinterpreting horse behaviour. Greater knowledge and awareness of horse body language could lead to fewer such incidents.

Through the creation of an online website, the Danish Animal Welfare Society was able to both offer educational videos and test the knowledge of riders on horse behaviour. Of the 4,539 test results gathered, riders scored on average 72.5% on questions regarding horse behaviour. Of those tested, the youngest and oldest age ranges (5-14 years and 60-90 years) garnered the lowest scores, with people in their 30's scoring the highest.

While results from the testing showed that Danish riders scored relatively high on overall knowledge of horse behaviour, a good percentage of those same tested riders lacked a deeper understanding of the subtle nuances in horse body language. When asked to specifically qualify what led riders to describe particular behavioural states, they had observed in pictures and short video clips, many were unable to elaborate on the exact body language clues that led them to their decisions.

Riders may also over-estimate their knowledge when it comes to understanding horse behavior, with those identifying as experts in reading horse behaviour receiving similar scores as those who claim to have an average-to-high level of experience. Faced with this result, Payana Hendriksen of the Danish Animal Welfare Society explained that although some riders consider themselves experts, the scope of that knowledge may be lacking. "Maybe you might have holes in your knowledge. You have not managed to develop your knowledge on horse behaviour."

The results of the study may help the next generation improve their understanding of horse behaviour, which could result in fewer accidents each year. Hendriksen states "Horse riding is very traditional, the longer you've been there - you've been riding for so many years - it might be difficult to accept that you can learn more than what you've learned already. We're going to focus on the kids, and trying to incorporate horse behaviour in riding schools, that's our mission."

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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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