



BRIEFING:

The use of the whip in horse racing

CAMPAIGN AIM

A BAN ON THE USE OF THE WHIP IN HORSE RACING

SUMMARY

Racing's regulatory body, the British Horseracing Authority (BHA), sanctions the use of the whip by jockeys for two purposes:

- 1) to keep rider and mount safe, and
- 2) for 'encouragement'.

Animal Aid is calling for the second purpose, 'encouragement', to be removed from the rules. The whip could then be used only for safety.

'Encouragement'

The BHA defines 'encouragement' as ensuring that the horse is 'focused and concentrated' so that 'it can perform at its best'.

In other words, the horse is whipped in the belief that it can make a horse win a race. Of course, the other jockeys may be trying to do the same thing, but only one horse can win (apart from an occasional dead-heat). If all horse races were whip-free, one horse would still win.

Does 'encouragement' work?

In 2020, a peer-reviewed paper was published with the title: 'Is Whip Use Important to Thoroughbred Racing Integrity? What Stewards' Reports Reveal about Fairness to Punters, Jockeys and Horses'.

The research compared 'whipping-free' races where whips are held but not used, to the mainstream 'whipping-permitted' races on the flat in Great Britain which were run between 2017 and 2019 inclusive.

The report concluded:

'... there was no evidence that the use of whips contributed to steering, reduced the likelihood of interference, improved the safety of horse or jockey or made horses run faster overall.... As such, whipping-free races could be adopted more broadly by the industry internationally without compromising racing integrity or horse/jockey safety.'

A 2011 University of Sydney report, *An Investigation of Racing Performance and Whip Use by Jockeys in Thoroughbred Races*, also concluded that whipping does not improve performance. *'On average, they achieved highest speeds when there was no whip use, and the increased whip use was most frequent in fatigued horses.'*

That increased whip use was not associated with significant maintenance of velocity as a predictor of superior race placing at the finish of the race.'

Is the whip cruel?

British racing's defence of the whip was outlined in the BHA's 2011 review of its use. However, an independent 'Critical Analysis' of the BHA review found that it *'does not present any evidence to support the statement that the whip does not cause pain'*. In fact, *'despite it being a claimed priority for the industry, there appears to have been no scientific research funded to investigate the welfare impacts of whip use'*.ⁱ

Whips used in racing have a padded area at the end but they also have a long, hard handle that comes into physical contact with the horse – not only on the quarters but also down the shoulder and neck. Independent research from Australia examined 15 races frame-by-frame to study in detail what happens when a horse is whipped. The results were alarming. 75% of whip strikes made contact with the side of the stomach (flanks); 83% left visible indentations and, most shocking of all, while the modern whip has a padded end section, in 64% of all whip strikes that were studied, the hard, unpadded shaft made contact with the horse. It is reasonable to assume that a similar analysis would produce equivalent results in Britain.ⁱⁱ

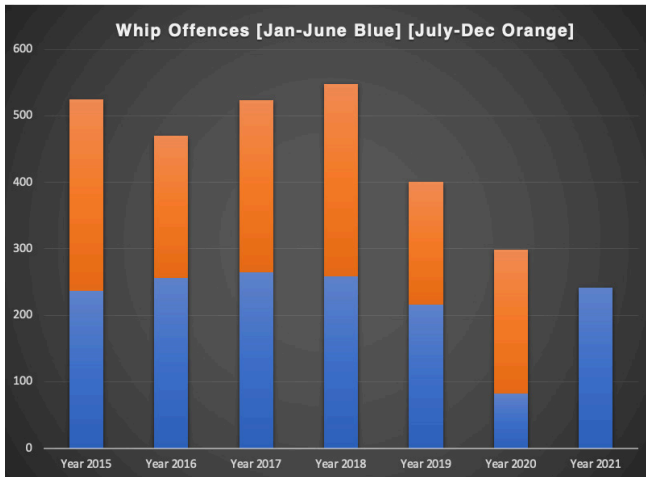
Whip advocates claim that horses do not feel the whip because of the adrenalin provoked by the race and because they have thicker skin. However, a paper published in 2020 showed that sensitivity in both horse and human skin is similar, and therefore that the whip can be said to cause pain to horses as it would to humans. The paper, funded by RSPCA Australia, was co-authored by veterinary pathologist Dr Lydia Tong and her team and the Sydney School of Veterinary Science's Professor Paul McGreevy. The study concluded that:

'... although horse skin is thicker overall than human skin, the part of the skin that is thicker does not insulate them from pain that is generated during a whip strike, and that humans and horses have the equivalent basic anatomic structures to detect pain in the skin.'

Some horses are whipped so hard that they are wealed (a raised mark on the horse's skin).

Breaches of the regulations

The rules state that jockeys can hit horses seven times in a flat race and eight times in a jump race. (The rules had been made tougher in 2011 but, following a rebellion by jockeys, the industry softened its approach.) However, these limits are often exceeded, and multiple breaches by jockeys are commonplace.



This bar chart details the level of whip breaches from 2015. (NB In 2020 racing meetings were suspended March-June due to Covid-19. Therefore there were fewer breaches).

Decisions on whether to apply sanctions for whip misuse are a matter for 'stewards' discretion'. Because of this, it is unclear how many breaches go unpunished. Sanctions, when applied, typically amount to a two-day ban from riding. Breaking the whip rules in racing does not affect placement or (in most cases) prize money. However, even if the rules were never broken, the whip would still be cruel, and its use for 'encouragement' would still be unjustified.

Animal Aid's 2015 report, *Abuse and Lose*, analysed all breaches of the whip regulations in Britain during July of that year. It showed that whipping invariably happens in the final stages of hotly contested races:

- 75% of the breaches of the whip rules were by the first and second jockeys at the finish of a race.
- And in 75% of breaches, there was a distance of half a length or less between horses – down to the smallest of margins.

The jockey is trying to squeeze every last drop of effort from what is often an exhausted animal, and thereby aims to improve the chances of winning – even though the horse's added exertion can lead to injuries, falls, bleeding lungs and heart attacks.

Safety

Some argue that whips help jockeys to steer a straight line, thereby preventing accidents. Evidence suggests the reverse can be true. According to the BHA itself, a decrease in permitted whip strikes has resulted in a reduction in cases of 'interference' – a classic indicator of horses drifting from their true line.ⁱⁱⁱ

As long as racing continues, whip use should be permitted only in response to a genuine issue of safety – and in those rare cases, its use should be sparing. It is because 'encouragement beatings' are currently allowed that jockeys feel justified in deploying the whip so routinely.

Is it practical to ban the whip?

In 1982, Norway effectively banned the whip in horse racing. The rules stipulate: 'Use of the whip will only be tolerated when a dangerous situation occurs, situations which can be of danger to the jockey's own mount or to competitors, or if the horse is obviously hanging badly, or is trying to duck out.'

In addition, 'hands and heels' races – where less experienced jockeys ride, carrying a whip but not using it – already take place at certain meetings in Britain. Clearly, a ban is perfectly practical and could be introduced in Great Britain.

Public opinion

In a 2018 YouGov poll, 68% of respondents said they opposed the use of the whip in racing. When only including those who expressed a view, this figure rose to 83%.^{iv}

Conclusion

A ban on the use of the whip for 'encouragement' would prevent a great deal of unjustifiable animal cruelty. Using the whip for encouragement means that animals are being beaten, before a paying public, for financial gain on the part of the jockey and his 'connections'. Race horses are the only animals who can be beaten in public in the course of a 'sporting' event. Other animals are protected from such treatment.

Animal Aid opposes horse racing because of its exploitation of its primary asset – the race horse. Of course, we know that an end to horse racing is some way off, but we believe that a ban on the whip for all but safety purposes is feasible now. It has been demonstrated to work in Norway and in 'hands and heels' races; it would be popular with the public; it would prevent some falls; and, most importantly of all, it would prevent a shocking amount of cruelty and brutality to horses.

References

- ⁱ Jones, B et al, A Critical Analysis of the British Horseracing Authority's Review of the Use of the Whip in Horseracing'
- ⁱⁱ McGreevy, Paul.D., et al, 'Whip Use by Jockeys in a Sample of Australian Thoroughbred Races—An Observational Study'
- ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.britishhorseracing.com/press_releases/data-shows-further-decrease-in-breaches-of-whip-rules/
- ^{iv} <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/poll-reveals-strong-public-opposition-use-whip-racing/>