



Exploring Women in Showjumping

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Equestrian sport is unique as it is the only Olympic sport in which female and male athletes compete against each other from an initial level through to elite level.

This uniqueness provides an opportunity for comparison of sex and the role of gender expectations within sport.

Within equestrian sport there is little to no biological or physical advantage offered to a male over a female for long term success¹. The strength and athleticism of the horse is proportionally more important than the explosive strength of the athlete riding, with other values such as balance and 'feel' being more significant. Therefore, although having muscular endurance can benefit an athlete's ability to help their horse perform well, the explosive strength that male athletes may have over female equivalents is not of great significance in equestrian performance.

Despite this, there is a disproportionate number of male athletes at the elite level; in the equestrian discipline of showjumping the world's top 20 for 2021 were all men, with the top ranked female at 29th². There has also never been a female individual Olympic gold medallist in showjumping. This discrepancy occurs despite there being significantly more females at an amateur level. This blog will look at two factors, peak age and sponsorship, as potential reasons for this discrepancy between genders in equestrian sport.

Peak of career

Within equestrian sport the peak of athlete's careers often occurs much later than other sports, with the average age of the world's top 5 being 39 years old.³ This can affect female equestrian athletes' careers as the UK's national average age to have a first child now falls at 29.1 years old. As equestrian sport is very physical and high-risk, mothers need to take time out from the sport. Where in other sports this break often occurs after most of their career as an athlete is over, within showjumping the start of motherhood falls when an athlete may have established themselves on the world scene and are trying to climb the world rankings and grow their string of horses.⁴

Despite the initial time out to start a family which affects female showjumpers it seems many come back into the sport very quickly. However, within the equestrian world many understand that they initially come back at a reduced frequency- as professional showjumpers can be competing up to 46 weekends in a year in order to maintain their world ranking- something perhaps not possible with young children. Gender roles can have an impact here: the psychological and societal expectation of the mother to pause

her career to raise the children is much greater than the equivalent pressure on their male counterpart, with many female athlete's roles changing when they have children. Within showjumping heterosexual couples- where both mother and father are competing- most often it will be the mother who scales back her competitive career to do more of the managing of the business whilst looking after the children, providing a glass ceiling to her success and professional progression within the sport. Aside from biological reasons, such as breastfeeding, for a mother to spend time with their young child and the seeming practicality of her scaling back her competition career, one must assess whether gender roles and societies expectations are affecting these athletes psychologically into this decision⁵.

Alongside this it is important to consider the psychological changes a women may incur post pregnancy and how this potentially affects her competitive nature and mindset. Many women become more 'risk-averse' when they become a mother due to a change in consequences and sense of responsibility.⁶ As equestrian athletes are dealing with animals weighing over 600kg this could prevent the competitive decisions -which are typically riskier- from being made, a quality that is required to win classes.⁷

Sponsorship

In 2021 women's sports sponsorships accounted for just 0.4% of all sports sponsorships. Women make up 40% of all participants in sports yet only receive 4% of media coverage.⁸ As media coverage is imperative to gaining sponsorships this creates a barrier on female athlete's careers. Due to the expensive nature of equestrian sport one of the few ways to make it to the top level is to acquire sponsorship and owners. Significantly more sponsorship is likely to go to male athletes due to a psychological perception of increased competency and commitment to the sport long-term making them a more lucrative partner.⁹ This psychological outlook can prevent the progression of female athletes within this sport and make competing at a very high level and being able to sustain it as a professional on the world class stage more difficult for female riders.

It is prudent to look at how these two factors, peak career age and sponsorship, interlink to potentially create a glass ceiling to a woman's career and limit the chance to top the world rankings. There have been successful female athletes who have returned to the top of the sport, however retention of sponsors during maternity leave is key and if owners think an athlete may scale back their career for a few years they may give the ride on the horse to another athlete. These are two examples in a sport where despite the lack of physiological advantages male athletes still have an advantage due to traditional gender expectations. Although there isn't formal segregation or exclusion within this sport there appears to still be a role of gender within success at the top level within this sport.

*¹ Dashper, KL (2012)

*² FEI world rankings 2021

*³ significantly higher than the men's 50m freestyle top 5 record holders average age being 24, Nick Skelton was 58 when he won Olympic gold in 2012, showjumping, the eldest competitor in the 2012 Olympics With the eldest swimmer to win an Olympic medal being 32 years old.

*⁴ The average female Olympian age is 27, average female equestrian age is 35. <https://www.northweststar.com.au/story/7386288/olympians-are-ageing-and-winning/>

*⁵ Banaji & Hardin, 1996; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002; Rudman & Goodwin, 2004; Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 2001 (*implicit gender stereotypes*, which automatically as- sociate men and women with stereotypic traits, abilities, and roles, even when they disavow these traditional beliefs)

*⁶ [Goerlitz and Tamm \(2015\)](#) 'parents more risk averse'

*⁷ Athletes often have a choice of 'turns' to a fence with the quicker routes being riskier for both injury and having a pole down but the faster time required to win.

*⁸ <https://moneysmartathlete.com/2021/03/31/gender-inequality-in-sports-sponsorships/>

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Companies can access the statistics and world rankings showing the higher ranked men, combined with the potential of a woman going on maternity leave they are seen as more lucrative partners.