

Equine Research round-up: What recent studies tell us

As the equestrian sector continues to evolve, research plays a vital role in shaping best practice and improving horse welfare. The year 2025 has seen a wealth of studies offering fresh insights into how management decisions, training approaches, and early-life experiences influence equine health, behaviour, and performance. From understanding the cultural factors behind welfare choices to exploring biomechanics in the riding arena and the long-term impact of foal management, these findings provide practical guidance for owners, trainers, and professionals. By engaging with this evidence, we can make informed changes that optimise care and support horses' physical and mental wellbeing for the future.

Attitudes toward horse welfare in performance settings (Cheung *et al.*, 2025)

Horse welfare is a hot topic, especially in competitive settings. Many riders believe they look after their horses well – even when routines include little turnout, strict training schedules, or limited social contact. This doesn't mean riders don't care; it often comes from habits and traditions in the sport.

In this study researchers interviewed riders to understand how they justify these choices. Two main patterns emerged:

- **Cognitive dissonance:** Riders see themselves as responsible and devoted caregivers. When a routine does not fully meet the horse's needs, this creates an uncomfortable conflict. To ease that discomfort, riders may downplay a welfare issue or reinterpret it in a way that makes it feel acceptable or necessary.
- **Enculturation:** Common practices – like long stabling, very structured training routines or limited social contact – become 'normal' because they're everywhere in the equestrian world. When something feels normal, it's hard to question it.

Key takeaway: These findings show that improving horse welfare is not only a matter of sharing facts. Beliefs, habits, and social influences all shape how riders care for their horses. People often rely on what they have been taught, what others around them do, and what has always "worked" in their discipline.

For trainers, students, and yard managers, this means that welfare education should give space for open discussion and honest reflection. Instead of only teaching information, it should also encourage equestrians to think critically about common routines and the cultural norms behind them.

Health and behaviour issues in UK and Irish Horses (Watson *et al.*, 2025)

Across the UK and Ireland, horse owners and yard managers deal with a wide range of everyday welfare challenges. Many of these issues are familiar to anyone working with horses: stiffness after exercise, tricky behaviour on the ground, arguments between field mates, or stereotypical behaviours like crib biting. What is less obvious is how widespread these problems truly are.

A survey of over 1,500 horse owners and yard managers revealed what issues horses face day-to-day:

- **Most common problem:** Lameness
- **Other frequent issues:** Handling difficulties, aggression between horses and oral stereotypies such as crib biting.

Certain patterns emerged: older horses were more often lame, and sport horse breeds showed more stereotypic behaviours – but these links are statistically weak. According to the researchers, this is because health and behaviour issues are rarely caused by a single factor. Instead, they arise from a mix of age, breed, environment, workload, social contact, feeding routines, and the owner's understanding of behaviour and pain.

Key takeaway: Improving horse welfare is about more than identifying “high-risk” horses. It depends just as much on the day-to-day decisions made by the people caring for them. For riders, yard staff, students, and professionals, the study's insights show where the equestrian sector can make practical progress. Many owners struggle to recognise the early signs of lameness or subtle behavioural indicators of discomfort. Others rely on traditional routines without fully realising how turnout, feeding, workload, or social housing affect both physical and mental health.

When caregivers understand how everyday choices shape health and behaviour, they are better equipped to prevent problems and support horses more effectively.

How teaching style influences horse and rider biomechanics (Byström *et al.*, 2025)

Every instructor knows that the way a lesson is delivered shapes how a rider sits, feels, and communicates with the horse. Small choices, such as when you ask for a transition, how long you warm up, or what you focus on first, can change not only the rider's technique, but also the horse's comfort and movement quality.

To understand how teaching styles influence this process, researchers examined 40 riding lessons and analysed them with both video and biomechanical tools. Sensors measured rein tension, rider movement, and the horse's gait during walk–trot transitions.

- Instructors who spent more time **preparing riders** – focusing on posture, rhythm and balance – had smoother transitions and lower rein tension. Their riders were given time to organise their bodies, feel the rhythm of the gait, and regulate their aids before the horse was asked to change pace.
- Instructors who asked for transitions early or gave very direct cues saw higher rein tension and less consistent movement patterns. These riders often had less time to find their balance or feel the horse's tempo, which made the transitions more abrupt.

Key takeaway: This research shows that even subtle differences in lesson structure can shape biomechanics in measurable ways. A lesson that builds gradually allows both partners to prepare mentally and physically, supporting clearer communication and reducing unnecessary pressure on the reins. A more rushed approach can unintentionally create tension, despite the instructor's intentions. For riding instructors, these findings underline the value of structured warm-ups and progressive preparation. Emphasising balance and rhythm before technical execution improves performance and supports the horse's welfare by encouraging softer, more coordinated aids.

Objective tools such as rein-tension meters and motion sensors also offer opportunities for instructors and students to see the impact of their technique. When

riders understand how their posture and timing affect rein pressure and the horse's movement, they can adjust more thoughtfully and consistently.

Early-life management and race performance in Thoroughbreds (Mouncey *et al.*, 2025)

This research study looked at how foals are managed during gestation and early life affects their growth and future athletic success. The researchers tracked 129 Thoroughbred foals from birth to leaving the stud farm. They recorded: daily turnout time and area, management routines, health issues, dam's health and pregnancy records and subsequent race performance data (up to age 4).

Key findings

- **Most foals raced:** 76% of horses ran at least once, with an average of 7 starts and earnings of £6,898
- **Turnout matters:** More daily turnout hours in the first 6 months increased the odds of racing and larger turnout areas were linked to higher total prizemoney
- **Weaning age matters:** Later weaning was associated with more runs and a higher chance of racing.

Based on this research it can be noted that early-life experiences – especially regarding turnout and weaning – may influence musculoskeletal development and overall growth, which can impact racing success.

Key takeaway: Giving foals more space and time outdoors early in life, and delaying weaning slightly, could support better long-term performance.

References

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