

# With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Equestrian Coaches, the Real 'Influencers' Within the Equestrian Community, Share Their Perspectives on a Sustainable Future

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## Abstract

**Background and Aims:** The sustainability of equestrianism, as a sport and as a way of life, is currently in jeopardy. This is primarily due to the growing societal concerns regarding equine welfare in performance sport and the associated unethical human behavior. Expanding upon a growing body of research and action within the sector, this study looks to those who stand in the middle of the arena to shed light on the antecedents and consequences of poor horsemanship and to explore how the industry as a whole can work together to ensure a sustainable future. **Materials and Methods:** Sixteen British Horse Society Fellows and/or United Kingdom Coaching Certificate Level 4 coaches were recruited for this qualitative study. Participants took part in guided roundtable discussions, which were audio/video recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using thematic analysis. **Results:** Three high-order themes were identified. First, Individual Responsibilities in Equestrian Sport, with subthemes of human behavior change, advocating for the horse, and the coach as an ambassador for best practice. Second, Comprehensive Equestrian Coach Education, with subthemes of the role of mentorship, vicarious and continual learning, technical and coaching competencies, and formal coach education. Third, Collective Responsibilities in Equestrian Sport, with subthemes of horsemanship education, challenges and opportunities for sustainability, and cohesive practice for horse welfare. **Conclusion:** Coaches offer a vital source of counsel and are key influencers within the equestrian community and, therefore, should be considered instrumental in creating a sustainable future for equestrian sport from the inside out. To this end, equestrian coach education must ensure that, alongside technical and coaching competencies, the ability to demonstrate and teach the skills and values that provide psychological safety for humans involved in equestrianism is also taught and assessed.

## Keywords

Equestrian coaching; coach–athlete relationship; human–horse relationship; equine welfare; equestrian sustainability; social license to operate

## 1. Introduction

Human motivations, decision-making, and behavioral proclivities, both at an organizational and individual level, are central to the challenges currently faced by equestrian sport

[1,2]. With increasing exposure and a dominant narrative across social media and national news outlets of harmful practices that negatively impact equine welfare, the inherent challenges within equestrian sport must now contend with public opinion and a social license to operate, as well

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as, at times, the somewhat conflicted concerns of the wider equestrian community [3,4]. As a result, steps have been taken by a variety of professional sport organizations worldwide to rectify the public's disdain [4], with some countries clearly taking a more proactive stance than others [5]. Over-archingly, as the worldwide governing body for equestrian sport, Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) has commissioned an independent task force to create a policy that aims to mitigate these challenges. The strategy, appropriately entitled 'A Good Life for Horses,' outlines, among others, key objectives for its members, which are to proactively promote and maintain good welfare and to ensure that equine involvement in sport does not compromise welfare [6]. The latter objective, given the high-risk demands of many equestrian sports, is perhaps a rather naive or certainly optimistic ambition. As Furtado *et al.*'s research observed, significant challenges in equine welfare arise from "conflicts between competition demands and the basic needs of the horse" [7]. This brings into question whether the life of an equine athlete can ever truly constitute living their best life [5]. Nevertheless, the intention and actions taken here are a positive start and speak to a worldwide recognition that if considerable changes are not brought about soon, equestrian sport may be on borrowed time [8]. The contextual reality, however, is quite saddening: this sudden impetus from key professional sport governing bodies to improve equine welfare in equestrian sport has stemmed purely from a surge in negative societal perceptions that have brought poor practices into question and, therefore, prompted the desire to convey practices that reflect society's values [3,9]. It seems only when the future of the sport is threatened do those organizations begin to question long-held accepted practices and take some accountability for human behaviors that have historically gone unpunished, or worse, have been readily condoned and, oftentimes, both rewarded and celebrated in competition arenas [10,11].

In contrast, equine welfare organizations worldwide have consistently advocated for more stringent policing of the use of horses in sport, in work environments, and in the day-to-day welfare of all equids, both wild and domesticated. Indeed, in a recent white paper composed by several organizations and led by Eurogroup for Animals, the authors called for European animal welfare legislation to ensure consistent protection for equids across their varied living and/or working contexts, while also addressing their species-specific needs [12]. Interestingly, in 2020, Blattner [13] posed the question of whether 'work' (one could argue that being an equine athlete is a form of job) can be instrumentally good and/or intrinsically valuable to animals, and equally therefore, should they have a right to work as humans do and, in turn, be protected by those rights? The work itself is considered instrumentally good if it provides access to resources that the animal needs for a good life and if it offers the deserved recognition, respect, and appreciation of their unique contribution. Blattner [13] also argued that some emerging evidence (see [14–18]) suggests that, for some animals, work could be intrinsically valuable, providing them with "challenge, focus, tasks, and relationships of labor that nurture mutual respect, characterized by reciprocity, appreciation, satisfaction, and opportunities for self- and co-realization." Indeed, many of these aforementioned characteristics were also identified by Tufton and Jowett [19] as key elements of

quality human–horse relationships. This offers scope for further inquiry in equestrian sport, particularly as equine welfare doctrines are now advocating not only for the avoidance of negative welfare states but also for the promotion of positive welfare states [6,12,20].

One of the key challenges, however, when addressing welfare in equestrian sport is defining and establishing what factors contribute to good equine welfare [4,21]. To this end, Williams *et al.* [5] conducted a Delphi study to identify key stakeholders' perspectives and reported that young horse management, training management, health status management, competition management, and the human–horse relationship were considered essential factors. This highlights that, with the exception of the horse itself, the most critical common denominator across all of these essential equine welfare factors is the decision-makers, the human beings responsible for them. Indeed, several researchers have called for a stronger focus on human behavior change in future equestrian research to promote improved equine welfare [1,2,22,23]. While it could be tempting to assume that poor practice and the decisions that lead to detrimental welfare consequences for the horse are born entirely out of ignorance or lack of knowledge, it would be negligent to ignore factors such as the influence of significant others, internally driven pressures, and the cultural landscape within which participation in equestrian sport is embedded. It could be construed that these behaviorally influential factors have the power to supersede an individual's implicit knowledge and override their personal moral and ethical values [24]. After all, it is unlikely that most of the high-profile incidents of poor horsemanship in elite sport can be explained away as a lack of knowledge; the underlying motivations that led to those behaviors are more likely a result of human ego and overzealous ambition [9]. Therefore, it could be argued that personal motivations and sociocultural influences are key explanatory factors for some of the poor horsemanship practices plaguing the equestrian industry. What is of the utmost importance, however, in order to effect real change, is to truly understand the root causes (i.e., attitudes, intentions, motivations, external influences) and to investigate the conditions that may lead to unethical behavior in equestrian sport [23]. At present, a great deal of judgment is being passed on individual cases of unethical horsemanship without any understanding paid to the causal conditions that may have led to and facilitated these behaviors, and without consideration of the potential mental health consequences that may follow [25].

The sampling profile of the 'stakeholder' participants in Williams *et al.*'s study [5] was (quite rightly) designed to represent expertise across equestrian disciplines. However, a stakeholder is anyone "who can affect a decision or is affected by an action" [26], and when investigating human behavior with regard to equine welfare and a sustainable future for equestrian sport, there are other stakeholders' perspectives and experiences to consider. Equestrian coaches are key stakeholders, as beyond the knowledge they provide for the improvement of performance outcomes, they also bear a significant responsibility in shaping individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences, both human and equine [27–29]. Therefore, through their interactions with human–horse partnerships across participation contexts on a daily basis,

one could argue that equestrian coaches, to use an idiom from the current generation, are the true 'influencers' within the equestrian community [30–32]. Indeed, an influencer is simply defined as someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave [33]. However, despite the significance of their role and the uniqueness of this coaching context, there is minimal academic research on equestrian coaches and their coaching practice. Therefore, through the use of roundtable discussions, this research seeks to gauge equestrian coaches' perspectives on the future and sustainability of equestrian sport through the lens of the coach's role within human–horse relationships.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Buckinghamshire New University prior to the commencement of data collection, and this study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were fully informed of the aims of the study, asked to provide their consent, and advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time up until the point of data analysis. Participants were advised in advance that the roundtable discussions would be audio- and video-recorded; however, only the transcript would be used and retained for data analysis, and the video/audio files would be destroyed. Following completion of the roundtable discussion, participants were asked to preserve the confidentiality of all attendees' contributions to the discussion, and were also given a copy of the transcript and a period of two weeks to review and request any amendments. All participants' names were anonymized through the use of randomly allocated letters, as well as the names of any individuals discussed. The names of national equestrian coaching organizations have been included, as they were pertinent to the discussions that unfolded.

### 2.2. Design

This qualitative study aimed to explore coaches' perspectives on sustainability in equestrian sport through the lens of the coach's role within human–horse relationships. Participants were invited to engage in a guided roundtable discussion, and the data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis.

### 2.3. Participants

Participants were recruited for this study using a specified sample criterion, whereby prospective participants had to be a Fellow of the British Horse Society (BHS) and/or hold a Level 4 United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC). These are the highest level of coaching qualifications in equestrian sport in the UK. All individuals who met the aforementioned criteria and who were listed on the BHS and UKCC websites with publicly available contact details were sent information about the study via email. At the time of approach, the total number of active coaches who held the qualifications was 57 (BHS Fellow) and 40 (UKCC Level 4), of which 55 (BHS) and 31 (UKCC) were approached via email, as only these individuals' contact information was published on the respective websites. Fourteen participants (6 female, 8 male) took part across four roundtable discussions. In addition, two further female participants provided responses to the questions in writing. This was decided in the spirit of inclusivity, as these participants did not feel confident using the necessary

technology to join the roundtable discussion via an online platform [34]. However, the researchers felt the participants' wealth of experience and knowledge should not be excluded from this research due to these perceived challenges, so an amendment was made to the ethics approval application to accommodate this change. Similarly, those who volunteered but could not take part due to logistical reasons were offered this option; however, there were no further written responses. The date of obtaining their qualification for the participants as BHS Fellows ranged from 1970 to 2022, and for UKCC Level 4 ranged from 2017 to 2020. Interestingly, at the time of approach, the relatively equal split of male and female participants was reflective of the female-to-male ratio of active BHS Fellows (29 females and 28 males). However, the female-to-male ratio for UKCC Level 4 coaches was very different, with 34 females and only 6 males holding the qualification. Only one female participant held both of these specific qualifications. Collectively, participants represented coaching practice across a range of equestrian pursuits and, individually, most held member body affiliations with either British Eventing, British Dressage, or British Showjumping. Likewise, many provided coaching services under the umbrella of organizations such as the Association of British Riding Schools, The Pony Club, and the Riding for the Disabled, and/or operated independently as freelance coaches.

### 2.4. Materials

The four roundtable discussions took place via the Microsoft Teams meeting platform and were facilitated by the lead researcher. The decision was made to conduct the roundtable discussions online for logistical reasons; participants were located across the United Kingdom and some internationally, with varying schedules, so the most practical option was an online setting. While historically it has been argued that for qualitative methods such as this, conducting the roundtable discussions in person can result in more in-depth data, a review article suggested that since the recent Covid-19 pandemic, individuals have become more acclimatized to online interaction and the associated etiquette for group discussion [35]. Each roundtable included a maximum of four participants, which was a conscious decision to ensure depth of discussion across the outlined topics. In keeping with this, the enhanced functionality of online platforms can support the researcher in ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to share their perspectives in a more equitable way, as well as facilitating the optimization of the data collection process through the automated provision of audio/video recording and transcription [36]. The Microsoft Teams platform generated the transcript, which was then downloaded to Microsoft Word, where the lead researcher reviewed it, corrected any errors, and anonymized the data for analysis.

The findings reported in this paper are part of a wider study that sought to explore the role of the coach in developing and maintaining sustainable human–horse relationships in equestrian sport and activities. The questions posed during the roundtable discussion explored topics such as humans' motivations and goals for their equestrian partnerships, relational dynamics across the triad, and how formal and informal coach education informs coaching practices. However, the ensuing discussions frequently evolved beyond this to include the current wider challenges facing the equestrian industry. It was always anticipated that the findings

would be reported across two papers; however, the way the content was ultimately attributed to each paper is addressed in the Data Analysis section of this Methodology.

### 2.5. Procedure

Upon joining their respective roundtable discussion, participants were briefed again on the purpose of the study and thanked for voluntarily giving up their time. Participants were reminded that the roundtable discussion would be video/audio recorded, but only the transcription would be used for the data analysis, and that the video/audio files would be destroyed. They were also advised that they would have the opportunity to review the transcript and of their right to withdraw. Each roundtable discussion lasted approximately two hours, with all participants contributing significantly to the discussion. Once the discussion was concluded, the participants were thanked for their contribution, asked to preserve the confidentiality of the discussion, and advised that they would be informed when the study was published.

### 2.6. Data Analysis

Grounded in a constructivist ontology (i.e., beliefs reflect a shared reality, but individual interpretations of reality differ) and an interpretivist epistemology (i.e., understanding how individuals create meaning and knowledge through their experiences), the data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis process [37]. Following anonymization and collation of the four transcripts, the researchers maintained the original six stages of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis process [38], which included in-depth familiarization with the data, development of initial coding and observations across all transcripts, exploration of low-order themes both within and across the four roundtable discussions, refinement of low-order themes and confirmation across transcripts, grouping of low-order themes into newly created high-order themes, and compilation of the report. While Braun and Clarke [39] asserted that "A research team is not required or even desirable for quality" in reflexive thematic analysis, mindful of their own research 'lens,' the lead researcher made a conscious decision to bring in two additional researchers to support the analysis process. Both individuals have significant involvement in equestrian sport and are experienced sport psychology researchers, and each brought a unique perspective that greatly enhanced the methodological rigor of the analysis process [40]. Likewise, recognizing the importance of one's own personal reflexivity and interpretive agency in reflexive thematic analysis [41], each researcher reviewed the transcripts independently and generated their own initial coding and low-order themes before meeting to share their interpretations and critically compare their low-order themes. Following a number of discussions and further independent reviews, the final low-order and high-order themes were identified. The combined transcripts totaled over 65,000 words; therefore, given the complexities of roundtable discussions, the thematic analysis was conducted on the data as a whole, producing twenty-two low-order themes, which were then organized into six high-order themes. Two clear narratives were evident across the findings, reflecting two distinct yet related areas of focus in terms of sustainability. The first narrative pertained to the role the coach plays at a micro level in developing and maintaining sustainable quality relationships within the coach–athlete–horse triad. These findings are represented

by twelve low-order themes across three high-order themes and, as previously asserted, are reported in a separate paper. The second narrative explored how the coaches perceived their role at a macro level and the wider context of sustainability in equestrian sport, how their coach education informed their practice, and the role of coach education in sustaining equestrian sport. These findings are represented by ten low-order themes across three high-order themes and are reported in this paper.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This research sought to explore coaches' perspectives on sustainability in equestrian sport. Through qualitative analysis of roundtable discussions, three high-order themes were identified, reflecting the requisites they perceived as essential for sustainability: individual responsibilities in equestrian sport, comprehensive equestrian coach education, and collective responsibilities in equestrian sport. A summary of the high-order and low-order themes is detailed in **Table 1**.

### 3.1. Individual Responsibilities in Equestrian Sport

This high-order theme focuses on elements that all equestrians should consciously reflect on and prioritize in their engagement within equestrianism at an individual level. This is illustrated through the low-order themes of: human behavior change, advocating for the horse, and the coach as an ambassador for best practice.

One of the most poignant comments made during the roundtable discussions came from Coach C: "I love my sport, but I don't love the people in it." This was a sad reflection of the multitude of concerns raised regarding human behavior within the equestrian industry. However, an equally salient observation was made by Coach D when describing having to address concerns about a young rider's weight gain with their parent: "I said, well, that's what I'm getting at, it's not the weight. There's a reason for the weight," thus acknowledging the underlying psychological factors and/or lifestyle changes which may have led to the rider's weight gain. Indeed, taking steps to understand and resolve the root cause of behavior is a far more effective way of achieving positive behavior change, as opposed to only addressing the behavior itself [23]. Over the course of the discussions, several internal and external factors were identified that led to human behaviors that were often detrimental to both their own and, most pertinently, to their horses' experiences. Coach J identified that the ability to regulate emotions, maintain objectivity, and be flexible in one's approach were considered key factors in successful human–horse interaction:

*"So when the rider runs into problems, they're clear in their mindset about how to manage different situations and to remain controlled in their emotions and mindset so that they can explain things to the horse in a different way or use a different exercise as necessary."*

However, in reality, self and others' expectations and the conditions of a competitive environment can heighten unhelpful thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the human, which in turn can influence their decision-making and interaction with the horse [42], who as Coach C observed, then gets the blame: "They can't seem to get their head around the idea that if something goes wrong they need to look at themselves rather than look at the horse." Therefore, as Coach M asserted: "You

have to work on yourself first and that self-recognition," which highlights the need for coaches to encourage more objective self-awareness in their athletes [43]. Indeed, encouraging a more evaluative appraisal by athletes of their actual versus ideal self as a competitor can support addressing the steps required to gain perspective on the discrepancy between those two selves [44], and temper the human's emotions, ambitions, and expectations for the speed of progress in their performance. Interestingly, this sparked wider discussions of social comparison in equestrian sport and athletes' concerns around appearing 'competent' in competition, where the 'finished product' seems to be valued over 'work in progress,' leaving athletes reluctant to show a work in progress for fear of being perceived as incompetent. Coach N offered an eloquent analogy of this, comparing it to an artist who covers their easel while they are creating their art:

*"They're trying to show the finished product at the start of the process because they don't trust their talent and their technique, or they don't have a process. So, then they've fouled everything up, but that's nothing to do with their riding skills, and it's purely to do with their inherent artistic temperament. And that's something that they can change through really focusing on it and divorcing it from the riding skills."*

This combination of ego, vulnerability, and lack of trust in their own competence can have a negative impact on the horse's learning, development, and welfare, and participants consistently advocated against forcing the appearance of a 'finished product' in competition environments, when fundamentals are not yet in place. Despite this, the prevalence of this ego-driven, goal-oriented behavior at the cost of equine welfare remains a grave issue across equestrian performance disciplines, particularly where it goes unpunished [10,11]. This highlights the need for a cultural shift in what is valued and/or required at varying levels of competition to reflect a more compassionate and learned approach to horsemanship that champions the fundamentals and the 'work in progress' [45].

Indeed, participants consistently emphasized the importance of recognizing that engaging in equestrian sport serves the human's ambitions alone, and that horses have no autonomy over their participation. As Coach L observed, *"Our sport is a very unique sport because it involves another living sentient being who is not a volunteer, and we have to constantly remind ourselves that the horse did not ask to be ridden."* Therefore, participants advocated that any actions related to the pursuit of these training and competitive goals should be horse-centered, meaning humans should endeavor to have a more comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the horse's learning processes and perceptual differences, and, without compromise, prioritize horse welfare ahead of any personal ambition [46]. Several discussions focused on a specific area of concern: the importance of training the horse within the realms of their physical and mental capability. Coach B recognized the coach's role in ensuring this: *"I think as a coach one of the parts where we have to lead them is that*

*the aims and the goals are suitable to the horse that they sit on."* Equally, further discussion highlighted the need for consideration of rider capability, their stage of development, and indeed personality and temperament when matching human-horse partnerships [47].

One of the most prevalent messages with regard to advocating for the horse was how they emphasized the value of listening to the horse's feedback, not just from a welfare perspective but in recognizing and admiring their strengths and intuitions, and that this is how the human's next action should always be informed:

*"We need to listen to the horse. We need to learn to see the signs in the horse, the language that the horse speaks back to us, because unlike human beings, where we sometimes can hide our feelings behind a front, horses don't hide their feelings; they have no reason, they are not calculated enough. Feelings, they will tell you how they are, and then what they think, how they react, what has happened to them.... we need to access those and react to those and then make a plan."* (Coach B)

This supports the need for humans to recognize the horse as an equal partner, the necessary reciprocal nature of the interaction, and focus their attention on what the horse is communicating, which could ultimately benefit both welfare and performance [48]. As Coach K observed: *"What makes those partnerships and it's just horses are so intuitive to the end user, the individual they're with."* Therefore, if you are willing to listen and learn, the horse will show you who you are and how you need to be to earn their trust and positive engagement [49]. Similarly, Coach Q conveyed the importance of using that feedback, encouraging athletes to be inquisitive and to continually reflect: *"The 'why' is absolutely fundamental to the coaching, and I think that is how you inspire people."* Likewise, Coach R asserted how, as a coach, you must demonstrate the desire and action to be the best you can for your horses and motivate those you teach to do the same:

*"We need to be the guy that inspires that sort of enthusiasm to learn, that sort of curiosity to find out more about what we do, why we do it, to find out more about the horse, to find out more about why the horse gets motivated by certain sorts of skills that we have and why."*

This profound sense of responsibility for the horse was evident across all participants, not only to exhibit these desirable behaviors but to cultivate it in their athletes [50]. As Coach N asserted: *"My philosophy is empowering the rider for the good of the horse."* This empowerment is facilitated, participants believed, through open reciprocal communication between coach and athlete, developing psychophysiological confidence in human and horse, and as Coach B described, the flexibility as a coach to be what the partnership needs you to be for them at any one time:

*"You need to be able to change yourself and move yourself into different roles depending on the people that you're working with and the horses that you're working with, and how you then deal with those situations."*

**Table 1:** Thematic analysis of coaches' perspectives on sustainability in equestrian sport.

High-order themes	Low-order themes	Example quotes
Individual responsibilities in equestrian sport	Human behavior change	<i>"Always look for the fault in the mind of the rider, not in the body of the horse, and always look for the result and the solution in the mind of the rider and not in the body of the horse"</i> – Coach C
	Advocating for the horse	<i>"The biggest problem with equestrian sport, the difference between that and any other sport is if a beginner gets it wrong in another sport, the apparatus doesn't suffer because it's not living and sentient"</i> – Coach L
	The coach as an ambassador for best practice	<i>"I feel if you, as a coach, have done your job absolutely right and so on, then that person that you have developed should be able to manage themselves"</i> – Coach B
Comprehensive equestrian coach education	Role of mentorship	<i>"It's our role to act as mentors and provide guidance because we can have these conversations, particularly around welfare and performance"</i> – Coach M
	Vicarious and continual learning	<i>"As an industry, we don't encourage people to look outside our own industry enough"</i> – Coach N
	Technical & coaching competencies	<i>"It used to be only really on the technical years ago, but now the coaching skills do get quite a strong consideration, but not enough in many ways"</i> – Coach N
	Formal qualifications	<i>"They're learning how to coach, but they actually don't know what to coach"</i> – Coach Q
Collective responsibilities in equestrian sport	Horsemanship education	<i>"The scales of training are gone through in such a way that it ignores the mental state of the horse"</i> – Coach P
	Addressing challenges and opportunities for sustainability	<i>"There is a danger that if we assume that science and rationally proving things is going to win people over, we may be bitterly disappointed"</i> – Coach Q
	Cohesive practice for horse welfare	<i>"What drives people to change if they're seeing success without needing to change that mindset?"</i> – Coach F

This demonstrates an emotionally intelligent approach, which emulates the characteristics previously advocated by participants for athletes to adopt when working with horses, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy [19]. Moreover, further characteristics were identified as essential for an equestrian coach, such as having the gumption to challenge poor practice or poor behavior, and a sense of openness and compassion for exploring new ways of working with horses that prioritize welfare above all else. All of these values, characteristics, and attitudes fostered by the participants are a product of a lifetime of experience and education, which has shaped the coaches that they have become today. Interestingly, however, not all of their own personal experiences when receiving coaching had been so positive:

*"I had some early experiences actually in the equestrian world at what was then a very, very famous eventing training yard, probably the most famous eventing training yard, but it was a very brutal place to be and definitely something that's gone on to shape me as a coach. Similar to you two, I think, in not wanting to be that, not wanting people to have the experiences that I had, not wanting to be that person that I experienced."* (Coach Q)

Likewise, Coach J asserted: *"...and I also vowed from the early days I was never gonna allow anybody to ever feel how I felt in those early days,"* highlighting that negative experiences have also shaped their coaching philosophies and applied practice. While these examples ultimately reflect a positive response to adversity for these individuals, this demonstrates the prevalence of negative coaching behaviors and the psychological impact they have on equestrians, which may play a key role in the beliefs and motivations for unethical behav-

iors seen in equestrian sport. In contrast to the participant examples, the consequences of poor coaching practice may legitimize (in the eye of the beholder) future poor behaviors, with equestrians believing that if their coach, in a position of power and authority, deems a negative behavior acceptable, then it must be right or justified and therefore may continue such behavior in their own practice, despite its detriment to horse or human wellbeing [51]. Indeed, an authentic behavioral culture change is generated from within, not dictated from the outside; therefore, the coaches' advocacy for the prioritization of horse welfare must coincide with a more compassionate, mindful approach and a duty of care for the human athletes under their charge. As a result, this could have a positive knock-on effect for horse welfare as well, where, for example, athletes are given the opportunity to reflect on their motivations for unethical behavior in a safe space and explore alternative behaviors or responses [52]. As key influencers, this responsibility as coaches for the cultural legacy of equestrian practice is not insignificant and extends beyond general welfare knowledge and understanding to demonstrating and instilling the values of self-awareness, emotion regulation, and compassion for horse and human in training and performance. The question remains, however, as to whether these values, or indeed how to teach these values, truly feature in formal equestrian coach education, or whether these values are mistakenly assumed to be intrinsically present in all coaching candidates.

### 3.2. Comprehensive Equestrian Coach Education

This high-order theme comprises low-order themes that represent a breadth of factors discussed that inform and

influence the quality of coaching practice, namely the role of mentorship, vicarious and continual learning, technical and coaching competencies, and formal qualifications.

All participants spoke reflectively about key individuals who had influenced both their values and their pursuit of equestrian coaching as a career [53]. Most notably, they discussed mentors who had emboldened them to pursue formal coach education: *"It encouraged me to go down the BHS route, which I'm still very passionate about and even from that age, I knew that I wanted to eventually become a BHS Fellow"* (Coach L), and who had influenced the evolution of their horsemanship journeys, highlighting for example, the benefits of delayed specialization:

*"...he said you're going to go and develop your horsemanship skills. He said you're going to learn about three-day eventing. You're going to learn about dressage, you're going to learn about racing, you're going to learn about hunting, you're going to learn about show jumping. Then you decide."* (Coach C)

Several participants spoke of their own roles as mentors and the need to provide neophyte coaches with a psychologically safe space to objectively evaluate their coaching practice [54,55]. Other participants described experiences in which their mentors had provided honest feedback:

*"They've given me hard truths, and I've been a bit 'ugh,' but you know what, I really respected them and admired them for that, and they know me well enough, and I know them. They might not always tell me what I want to hear, but I really respect what they say, and they listen."* (Coach J)

Coach M also reflected that they felt they had missed out on and would have personally benefited from a trusted confidante to: *"Help them have those uncomfortable conversations about welfare, that for me would be what I would have liked."* Participants also told stories in which mentors had demonstrated key traits associated with high performance, such as openness to experience [56], embracing every opportunity to gain new knowledge from a variety of sources: *"He, in many ways was, I think, ahead of his time, but really did think outside the box in that sort of way about the learning"* (Coach B). Indeed, the value placed upon vicarious and continual learning was prevalent across all of the roundtable discussions [57]. For example, participants observed that equestrian coaches' openness and willingness to engage in training days were challenging within the industry, but they strongly advocated for the importance of collaboration and coming together in person to share experiences and knowledge without the pressure of assessment or continual professional development (CPD). Equally, they warned of the danger of segregation within the industry: *"The thing that I really miss is cohesion, and I think it's probably the hardest thing for the equestrian world to attain, because everybody has their factions, everybody has their silos"* (Coach F), and suggested that more opportunities to bring coaches from different specialisms together to share their philosophies and processes in equestrian practice would be invaluable for positive coach development [58].

Coach B observed the heightened complexity and responsibility for equestrian coaches: *"If we don't coach people to ride and look after the horse in the correct way, we are compromising the welfare of the horse, and that's why, to me, of all the sports in the*

*world, equestrian sports needs coach education."* However, one of the most significant challenges participants observed within the industry was the dangerous assumption that if you are a talented/accomplished rider, you will be a good coach. While this misguided assumption of 'competent athlete = competent coach' is not unique to the equestrian industry, concerns were raised that individuals who are unqualified and unregulated as coaches were still gaining coaching opportunities due to their successes as a rider and not as a coach. For example, Coach L commented:

*"Somebody gets a little bit of street cred for training probably one horse through to Prix St. George or to Foxhunter level or something like that, which isn't a high level, and then they suddenly become a coach, and everybody flocks to them and with disastrous results."*

Equally, it was also acknowledged that it can be challenging for 'gifted' riders to be able to explain or teach skills that come so naturally to them, as Coach C stated: *"This is one of the difficult things in coaching. You see, that's what we can't do, is teach 'feel'."* Concerns were also raised that even qualified coaches may adapt their coaching style to cover up their own inadequacies: *"That's the challenge, I think people look at the sort of 'set up and stand back' model and the 'feedback' model, and they utilize that for their lack of technical knowledge"* (Coach F). It therefore appears that more stringent policing and more comprehensive formal coach education are needed [59]. Indeed, all participants agreed that there is an inherent need for equestrian coaches to develop both technical and coaching competencies, and this led to passionate discussions on the current formal qualification provisions available in UK equestrian sport.

As long-term beneficiaries of the UK equestrian coach education system(s), many of the participants were quick to advocate the merits of both the BHS and the UKCC routes to qualification, and indeed, Coach D affirmed this through her experience as a coach educator:

*"The coaches I'm helping and worldwide...going into all these different countries, you know, they are very open to listen and to do what they can. But, my goodness, they're a long way behind us, you know, on the horse welfare and well-being is way behind us."*

However, key distinctions were made between the two qualification pathways in terms of their respective strengths, and it was suggested that while the BHS focuses primarily on technical competency and horse husbandry, the introduction of the UKCC has provided more understanding of the coaching process, with a greater focus on coaching people. As Coach D advocated: *"This would work much more so if we could merge those two, as they are missing out if they don't have both educations."* Indeed, several of the participants were dual-accredited as BHS Instructors and UKCC Level 4 coaches and reported that they had expanded their knowledge and applied practice by engaging in both educational routes. Furthermore, participants also shared their frustrations with the complexity of multiple qualifications and routes across different equestrian sports, and the limitations that this creates for their coaching practice:

*"I've had people from British Eventing speak to me, but I don't have their qualifications, so then in theory, I've got to step across and do theirs to then work with some of the riders that I'm already working*

with, but I'm just not doing it under their umbrella, and I just think, why is it so complex?" (Coach F)

The overarching consensus was that the equestrian coach qualification system would benefit from universalization and simplification:

*"Certain governing bodies will only accept qualifications because it's their qualification, and it's so just thinking why?? You know the equestrian world is actually, you know, we are a small broad church, we're not a big industry in terms of coaching as a whole, there's lots of different facets to that, and I would just love to see that journey for that young person coming through much easier cause right now it's really very complicated."* (Coach K)

Indeed, the early specialization of qualifications according to equestrian discipline also raised further concerns amongst participants regarding the constraints this may have on coach education and, in turn, coaches' all-round horsemanship knowledge and experience: *"We mustn't lose the fact that we're on horses that are designed to be outside, and we risk producing coaches who have never taught outside"* (Coach P). Similarly, Coach H observed the trickle-down psychological effect of this on their clients:

*"Coaches that don't have a huge amount, as the next generation are coming through, they've not ridden outside themselves. I often say to my students, you know, I was brought up cantering across fields, and I didn't have an arena, and you know, jumping little hay bales and things, and you learn your seat and your balance, and you learn to be brave and confident like that. And I always say, particularly to my Pony Club children, I say you know, you won't get brave, and you won't get confident in an arena, you have to go outside."*

Despite these challenges, many participants asserted that positive changes were happening at all levels of qualification within the equestrian industry that promote competencies which align with horse welfare values. For example, Coach D stated that for the BHSI qualification: *"We have insisted that no matter what level riders they are and even if they come in as top riders to take the exam, the first section is that they go in an open field with a group of at least four riders and they ride a horse and then they discuss the needs of the horse."* This underscores the positive impact of a comprehensive coach education on horsemanship practice and demonstrates a horse-centered, welfare-first approach to equestrian sport as the priority [6]. However, a broader focus on equestrian coaches' holistic responsibility for the psychological safety of the humans in their care may further support this cause [52].

### 3.3. Collective Responsibilities in Equestrian Sport

This high-order theme encapsulates the areas of discussion that explored some of the 'big-picture' topics that affect the equestrian industry as a whole. These topics have been identified through the low-order themes of horsemanship education, addressing challenges and opportunities for sustainability, and cohesive practice for horse welfare.

The growing deficit of all-around horsemanship education in the equestrian community as a whole was a grave concern for participants, and this prompted interesting discussions of why and how this has come to be. For example, participants explored contributing factors such as individuals'

perceptions of risk [60] and the impact of technological advances and influential others on individual behavior [61]. It was suggested that, alongside the false sense of security of staying in the 'safety' of the riding arena as previously discussed, participants argued that certain advances in saddle design, while marketed under the guise of 'increased security,' could be preventing individuals from developing an independent seat. The consequences of this were stressed by Coach L: *"If a rider cannot sit balanced, they need the rein and the leg for support, and who suffers? The horse."* Coach G furthered this by fervently asserting that: *"Two reasons why jockeys ride with really short stirrups - one is to get off the horse's back, and two is if they're going to fall off, they fall away from the horse. So it's the safest place to land,"* and contended that marketing a saddle with: *"bigger, thicker, fatter knee blocks,"* which they suggested fixes the rider into position to compensate for their lack of balance, is arguably putting riders at increased risk during a fall. Coach G also suggested that the endorsement of these products: *"using promotion with riders that people aspire to be,"* is a key influence on their purchase, and this reiterates individuals' desire to appear 'competent' [62] and the participants' concerns about individuals looking for the 'quick fix' to put them in a 'balanced' position rather than working on their horsemanship skills. While this is only an opinion, it points to a wider need for transparency and education in the use of equestrian products to support good practice.

Indeed, equestrians today, like everyone, are bombarded with a plethora of information competing for their attention, enhanced by algorithms, which are pandering to and reinforcing their desires. Participants noted that increased exposure to top-flight competition via streaming, enticing offers on the latest gadgets, and TikTok videos from self-proclaimed 'influencers' are shaping their expectations and ambitions for participation in equestrian sport. The integrity of online information, however, is unregulated, which is why equestrian sports organizations have embraced science in providing an evidence base for what constitutes good practice [6]. For some participants, this was a source of tension, primarily due to the perception that it often dismisses the validity of years of horsemanship experience sustained by horse practitioners, although it was also acknowledged that a great deal of scientific evidence has actually confirmed rather than challenged many long-held beliefs on horsemanship [63]. Coach N, however, cautioned against allowing experts in a very specific field to dominate the discourse: *"The horse will suffer eventually from so many people who have developed a minute part of what we all do into an 'ology,' and it's become their specialism; they can't do anything else."* Indeed, the welfare of the horse and strategies for best practice in equestrian sport require a much more holistic approach [59]. Despite some tensions, what these participants do have in common with scientists is their desire to learn more about the horse and continually improve applied practice in equestrian sport. Therefore, a platform that brings coaches and scientists together, and that is accessible for all, could provide a source of up-to-date educational information that is trustworthy and valid, endorsed by both equine welfare and coach education organizations. However, as Coach D stated, *"it's all down to storytelling,"* and what we have learned from the advances in social media is that information needs to be communicated with simplicity and clarity, in bite-sized chunks, brought

to life through lived experiences that audiences can connect with on a personal level [64,65].

Participants also acknowledged the varying eras of horsemanship and the evolution of good practice with horses, likening it to the societal changes in perception of how one raises a child. In both contexts, what constitutes good practice has and will continue to change over time with new knowledge. There are mitigating factors, however, which will influence whether and how that knowledge is used, at both an organizational and individual level, not least the unfiltered access to said knowledge [66]. Beyond this, the reliance is on the willingness of organizations to lead by example and, as Coach L asserted, where necessary, empower people to take action against poor practice: "All organizations in this country, everyone should be held to account, so if they see abuse happening, the organization must act." However, Coach L cautioned that this is not consistently the case, and that despite several recent high-profile investigations, there is too much power and influence held by elite riders: "... but they do not, not always anyway... no matter who it is, you must act." Equally, other participants were also quick to highlight that the social license to operate is not just an elite-level problem, and that incidents of poor practice need to be dealt with consistently across all levels of participation. The consequences, in terms of sustainability, if progress is not made on the ethical challenges to horses' participation in sport and the social perceptions thereof, will impact all equestrians and horse-related activities [42]. As Coach L went on to discuss: "In this country government fund sport from top down, not bottom up," therefore funding in UK sport is currently determined by international success and medals won: "If Equestrian isn't in the Olympic Games, FEI gets no funding, and therefore our government in the UK will say, well, you don't win medals so we'll cut your funding and it will have a serious knock-on effect, I think, for equestrianism in this country," likewise Coach M concurred: "Without the horse having a value as a loosely speaking commodity, we don't have the investment to filter down to the whole population of horses." In contrast, participants identified that Sweden operates a bottom-up funding structure, investing significantly in grassroots and less so in elite-level performance, and yet has still enjoyed considerable success internationally. Indeed, several participants observed the varying ways we could learn from policies and practices in different countries, for example, the licensing of horse ownership, the eligibility of humans and horses for competitive progression, and the regulation of coaching practice, some of which have already been operationalized in European countries [67].

Similarly, participants recognized that to increase sustainability, access to equestrian sport needs to be more inclusive, noting that cost is a key factor and looking to France as an example of some innovative ideas:

*"I love the French Pony Club, where most of them have a nucleus of ponies which they then lease out to an individual rider for the period of the year ahead. But the Pony Club keeps a nucleus of ponies, it makes it much more cost-effective for the person to ride... We need to get thousands, tens of thousands more people riding. To do that, we have to make it more accessible, which means it has to be cheaper. So we have to find ways of doing our stable management cheaper,*

*and we have to find ways of giving people access to horses, which is cheaper."* (Coach P)

Indeed, participants discussed the merits of social housing for horses, and while all participants recognized the socio-psychological benefits to horses of companionship in their living space, Coach H also highlighted the challenges of introducing a significant change such as this into a livery yard where: "For the person that's been brought up and understanding that is the right thing to do, to be keeping horses in single stalls and not in small groups... I think you probably, as an individual, have to be quite brave to bring about change in that respect." This is where coaches and practitioners need support from governing bodies and the scientific community to help them inform and improve receptivity to change and implement these changes effectively [68].

Participants also advocated that it should not go unrecognized that coaches experience significant personal conflicts and pressures themselves, particularly the burden of responsibility and the integral role they play for their human and equine athletes, and as such, should be provided with support to maintain good mental health [69]. Similarly, while participants conveyed a strong desire to protect our industry (Coach D) and maintain their own integrity as a coach by calling out poor horsemanship, Coach H discerned that one runs the risk of losing business: "You do end up unfortunately losing, losing work and losing clients because they don't always want to hear that and then they get defensive," highlighting an intense personal vulnerability for coaches in enacting their moral and ethical responsibilities on behalf of the horse. It appears that the need for greater consideration of psychological safety extends beyond the human and equine athletes to coaches, too [70].

At an organizational level, participants observed several areas that are impacting sustainability. For example, as Coach K argued, the current infrastructure of governing bodies is not very economical: "Four or five little fiefdoms going on and there's money coming down from government, actually all that's happening right now is we're wasting huge well, not huge sums, but for our sport, large sums of money with doubling up of lots of different roles," indicating that wasteful duplication of administrative positions means that funds are not: "Having a good enough impact on the end user for athletes or for horse welfare." Coach R also suggested that a more cohesive structure would support the ethical challenges faced by equestrian sport:

*"The British Equestrian Federation needs to have a stronger say in all equestrian sports... each sport wants to be individual and I understand why they want to do that, but if we want some sort of cohesion to fight the hordes who don't want us to do whatever we want to do, then there needs some cohesion, some cohesive body at the top to sort of make that happen."*

Likewise, concerns were raised regarding the inconsistency of messages from organizations regarding horse welfare [10]. Some participants advocated that greater effort is needed to counteract the dominant narrative of poor practice across social media with positive stories and examples of good practice. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that poor practice is far more prevalent than the organizations would care to admit [11], and more resolute and demonstrable action is needed. Coach K argued that the

response by equestrian organizations is: *"very defensive and lacking any real drive,"* and that the industry needs to demonstrate good practice through: *"the best knowledge and understanding that we have now and continue to evolve, we need to be confident because otherwise it's not the right people saying what we should be doing because the dialogue and the narrative is coming from somewhere else."* Indeed, the learned demonstration of best practice combined with a zero-tolerance approach to practices that challenge both human and horse welfare is needed for equestrian sport to remain sustainable [6].

What is considered to be best practice for training horses led to some interesting discussions. Coach P suggested that: *"the fundamental reason is that the horse is such an amazing creature that it will respond to so many different cues, and so we say that it works, therefore it must be the right way,"* recognizing that worldwide there are so many different approaches to horsemanship. In contrast, Coach B commented that, due to much more international exchange, there now appears to be greater homogeneity in equestrian training, referring more specifically to the Olympic equestrian disciplines:

*"Everyone is starting to do things very, very similar. When I first started out in the horse world, you could go to an international show and you could separate an American rider from an English rider from a Spanish rider, from an Italian rider to a German rider, without even having to look at the national flags. Now it's much, much more even in that sort of way."*

However, Coach B continued to explain that there is still 'No real blueprint' for the coaching of horse and rider, and worldwide, there are still significant variations in opinion on what is considered good practice. There are, of course, historical and sociocultural reasons for the existence of differing approaches, and indeed each facet of equestrianism has its own nuanced cultural values and intentions for the horse [71]. However, as Coach F stated, *"I see people who have always done it XYZ and they don't see a validity in doing it differently... there are people who are very much this is how we've done it, this is how we get success,"* which highlights the chilling reality that individuals' strong convictions about their practice are deeply motivated by the achievement of their personal goals within their chosen field and not the prioritization of the welfare of the horse [9–11]. The concerning factor here, in this naïve and self-serving perspective, astutely observed by Coach F, is that these individuals lose sight of the big picture: *"If we don't have some cohesion in thought process, then we can very easily be attacked by the people who are anti-horse sport. So, the cohesive and united we stand sort of attitude really, really needs nurturing and encouraging"* (Coach R). What is currently evident, however, is a reluctance to work together, regardless of equestrian discipline, to meet the challenges faced by the equestrian community as a collective whole and to unify the industry with regard to horse welfare and best practice [72]. Unfortunately, as Coach R noted, *"The human being is really not a very good person... it takes a real crisis before they unite in any way."* So here we are, in crisis, it is time to learn from our equine partners and recognize that we are stronger as a herd.

#### 4. Limitations

The roundtable discussion generated some excellent dialogue, and the conversation was always enthusiastic,

free-flowing, and participants were always respectful of each other's point of view. As a trained psychologist, the lead researcher acting as facilitator had significant prior experience supporting individuals in sharing their perspectives and ensuring participants feel heard. However, it must be acknowledged that at the data collection level, within a roundtable setting, anonymity is not preserved, and confidentiality is reliant on the agreement and integrity of those present. Therefore, it could be argued that had this data been collected via one-to-one interviews, participants may have felt more comfortable speaking freely about their experiences or discussing more sensitive topics without concern for peer-judgement [73]. Likewise, what an individual advocates about applied practice versus how they practice can be entirely different [48]. While no such aspersions are cast upon the participants in this study, one way to extend this research would be to use a multifaceted approach of long-term observational studies on coaching practice, combined with one-to-one interviews with coaches and their athletes. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that the participants in this study are a small sample of a small population of coaches (i.e., BHS Fellows/UKCC Level 4), and the data provided were not representative of the entire equestrian coaching population in the UK, let alone worldwide. Therefore, this research could also be replicated with coaches of differing levels of qualification, as well as those who coach equestrian sports and activities across a broader range of contexts and cultures.

Furthermore, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that within a peer-group setting, there is a risk of participants offering socially desirable responses to the questions posed [74]. Given the current climate within equestrian sport of a 'social license to operate' and the fear of vilification for admission of any current or historical cases of poor judgment or wrongdoing with regard to horse welfare, it is understandable that individuals may have been cautious about what they shared in this forum. However, this again does speak to the lack of psychological safety within the current climate of equestrianism and serves as an opportunity to reflect on how we can address this and learn from past mistakes in a more compassionate way [70].

#### 5. Conclusion

What was palpable across all the roundtable discussions was the knowledge and passion shared by this cohort of practitioners, which demonstrates that they are a vital source of support and counsel as key stakeholders and, in their role as coaches, are important influencers within the equestrian community. In fact, equestrian coaches, as a collective population, are in a unique position to generate positive global change for equestrianism through their individual, micro-level, daily interactions with humans and horses. At present, however, any action being undertaken by equestrian governing bodies to improve horse welfare is being driven from the outside in, from the external pressures of the wider public's opinion on equestrian sport. What is evident from this research is the opportunity to effect positive change from the inside out, through the way coach education informs coaches' values and behavior in their applied practice. Therefore, a priority must be that all routes to qualification in equestrian coach education ensure that, alongside the technical and coaching competencies, the ability to demonstrate and teach the skills and values which provide

psychological safety for humans involved in equestrianism is also trained and assessed.

Indeed, it is impossible to ignore that human behavior, be it at an individual or systemic level, is at the center of the majority of challenges we are facing in the industry; however, as has been advocated in the discussions, more effort needs to be made to understand the root causes of undesirable human behavior within equestrian sport. We need to create a psychologically safe space for honest and continued reflection on the ethics of our horsemanship practice, recognizing that in polarized ways this may bring discomfort for many individuals [70,75]. As Jones McVey [71] wisely observed, we all like to think we are ethical; however, our version of what is ethical is nuanced and differs from person to person and may be influenced by both culture and context. Therefore, while an individual should always be accountable for their own behavior, governing bodies must bring greater clarity and enforce the ethical parameters for participation in equestrian sport. Equally, as a community, we need to be willing to reflect on how equestrian cultures, organizational structures and policies, and the conditions of the performance environment may be reinforcing unethical behavior and poor practice, but we must do so in a compassionate way, recognizing that humans, as well as equines, are sentient beings.

### Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, Methodology, Data analysis, Writing—original draft preparation (LT). Data analysis, Draft submission review (NK), Data analysis (RW-S). All authors have read and agreed to the submitted version of this manuscript.

### Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Ethical approval was granted by Buckinghamshire New University (UEPSEP202302), and the study has followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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#### How to Cite

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