

“An Industry Built on Women Yet Represented by Men” –

A look into male dominance within the high levels of equestrian sport

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The hot summer sun beats through the windows casting a glare on the flat-screen TV. Hidden from the sun in your living room you lay sprawled on the couch flicking through the channels. You finally land on one, the Olympics, specifically the Show jumping. You watch the lean animals gracefully leap over the fun coloured poles. You watch for a while letting it play in the background as you scroll through your phone until you notice the Irish flag in the top left corner. You engage now, interested in your nation's team and success. Your face drops as the poles knock, the three men on their million-euro horses dropping down the leader board. It leads you to think of all the people you know who have interest in horses. Well, who can you think of?

Maybe it's your daughter who has begged you for a pony since she watched Spirit. Maybe, it's even you yourself who took horse riding lessons as a child but stopped because you thought it a childish hobby. You think more deeply about it. What do most of these people have in common? They are women.

Yet now you watch the TV and see a country with a thriving equestrian industry, its foundations built of the work and money of women, represented by men. When I was 14 I volunteered at a riding school during the summer. I'd come home, my skin red and peeling and my clothes covered in an inch-thick layer of dust. "Pony Camps" ran for kids almost every week after June and they were always pure chaos. At the end of every camp there would always be a little makeshift show jumping competition. The children would spend the morning standing on shaky buckets creating shabby plaits in the pony's manes, so enamoured by the whole ordeal. One thing I noticed was how from my summers of gruelling and sweaty work at the yard was how much the little girls loved show jumping.

Last summer, I watched all the equestrian sports in the 2024 Olympics. Ireland had its portion of female representation, with our only dressage rider being a woman and two of the competitors in the eventing being women. Yet our show jumping team was fully male. If you look into the sport's history it is painfully male. When we look into the past we see our female predecessors in the sport being only allowed to ride side saddles to "protect their dignity". In an interview with my instructor, Vicky Curtin, I asked her what may be the cause of male dominance within the high levels of the sport.

"I think that sponsors think men have less commitments so are quicker to support them at a higher level, but I also think that this attitude is changing and starting to even out."

Women need to be pushed more into participating in the high levels of equestrian sports to inspire more young girls into continuing the sport as a hobby and not quitting when they reach secondary school. I understand that to its core, horse riding is a sport dictated by money and how much the individual has, especially as someone who has stepped back from the sport in recent years due to those reasons. I also asked Vicky if she sees this issue often and what she recommends we encourage to solve it.

“There is very little to do to prevent it as horse riding is an elite sport and can be quite costly if you want to progress in it.

I do think making it as much a social experience as well as a sport could make it more attractive and maybe keep teens riding longer. “

I strongly agree with this point, as when the friends I had made through the sport slowly began to move away or lose interest I swiftly found myself doing the same.

In conclusion, next time you're watching some form of equestrian sporting event, being The Grand National or the Dressage World Championships, remember that all those male riders you see who have gained their spot there through their gender and perhaps their money.

Remember that the person who first taught them to hold the reins was probably a woman. The person who groomed the horse they're riding was probably a woman. And remember, most importantly, all the women in your life who have worked really, really hard to be able to make a place for themselves within the predominantly male world of horse riding, because they deserve the same amount of your admiration as the men who gain the glory. Even though they are not represented in any great numbers at a high level it is women who keep the industry of equine sports running.