

Foster the Gender Equality in the context of horse-riding. An Olympic Value which reveals a path from domination to emancipation

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Abstract

Ever since 1952, men and women compete in the same equestrian competitions during the Olympic Games. This advance in gender equality was made possible by the values that are pledged in the Olympic spirit, that are mix-ity, parity and crossbreeding of social roles. In this article, we will attempt to identify and analyses why when it comes to a leisure practice, women are dominant, whereas in Olympic equestrian competitions, we find mostly men. Then, our work will focus on women's means to adapt in equestrian competitions, and horsewomen's para-doxal aptitudes that could make them win competitions, when it comes to horse-riding and taking care of horses. In closing, we will talk about a possible new Olympic value: crossbreeding, that is a new form of balance between men, women, and horses in horse riding.

Keywords

Active minorities, equestrian subcultures, parity, diversity, crossbreeding.

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Today, there is only one entirely “mixed” Olympic sport. It is the only one that allows competitions between men and women in all its events. Behind the uniqueness of this sport is hidden a diversity of gender and sex that produces what is commonly called a form of mixing that serves the performance of a novel couple, one that features a horse endowed with extra-human skills and a human person in search of cultural recognition. In the context of the Olympic Games, three “subcultures” of equestrianism are represented: dressage, show jumping, and the full contest in which men and women compete together. So, the concept of equality has been combined with that of diversity since the appearance of women in Olympic horseback riding in 1952. Indeed, after the authorization of the female practice of equestrianism in competition, the three Olympic sub-cultures appeared progressively in parity, thus calling for confrontation and cooperation between men and women within the same events. For some years now, the Olympic Agenda 2020 has been working to address the issue of gender equality and to develop various recommendations on this subject. Thus, the International Olympic Committee wishes to promote gender equality by proposing an explicit objective: to achieve 50% female participation in the Olympic and Paralympic Games 2020 and to stimulate women’s participation and presence in sport by creating more opportunities for participation in the Olympic Games (Spacij, Knoppers, Jeanes, 2020). Is the equality set by the International Olympic Committee a goal in the making in equestrian disciplines? Starting with this question, the following article will take these recommendations as a starting point to question this concept of equality by considering it in the differences that may exist between “say-ing” and « doing », between intention and action. This will lead us to combine this notion of equality, which goes beyond objective criteria, with the notions of crossbreeding, balance and complementarity that will be defined and articulated throughout this article. In addition, we will present the different facets of the notion of diversity and mixity, which we will mix with that of parity. It will thus be a question in this article to perceive, in action, beyond theoretical ambitions, if equestrianism is a mixed and/or parity sport, and to understand the internal dynamics, which are played out within the three equestrian Olympic subcultures. To this end, we will support our remarks by elaborating a hypothetical theoretical construct to testify the inversion of the gendered majority within the three equestrian subcultures presented on a continuum from equestrian leisure to high-level competition, particularly in the context of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

In this model, we will assume that young girls, highly integrated in leisure riding, notably “thanks to” or “because” of the feminine gendered social connotation of equestrian activities (Tourre-Malen, 2006), are at the origin of the new equestrian values and their dynamics. For young boys, adaptation in a very feminine and socially recognized environment seems more delicate and subject to different hazards. Thus, it is assumed that young boys who succeed in integrating and persevering in this environment develop a motivation for accomplishment and are quickly identified as original people in the midst of a culture made up of young girls. It is in an orientation towards competition that the entourage of young boys will perceive them as a talented and exceptional minority. It is in this dynamic that they could access more “quickly” to high-level competition and find themselves in the majority (Proops, McComb, 2010), gradually excluding women from high-level riding. This model of an “inverted minority” thus represents the starting point of a reflection that will take into account the various factors including the impact of the values of a sport discipline, the impact of the values of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It is on the basis of these different impacts that we will take the time to identify the weight of the history of equitation on the success of the different genders and the altering social view of equitation. Thus, beyond a sociological perspective, the conscious and unconscious parts of a human person will be taken into account in the processes of valorization or devaluation of one sex rather than another (Le Mancq, 2007), the horse no longer being an object of performance but a mediator of the different facets of a rider’s personality.

Leisure riding and high-level riding: A scale by gender?

We start by the idea that, today, horse riding is a sport with a “gendered” connotation, which means that it carries within it one or more feminine images (Adelman, Knijnik, 2013). The notion of sport, in the general sense, is multiple and includes different practices, each of which is subject to gendered marking. The latter can therefore be classified as male, female or suitable for both sexes (Marsch, 1987). Indeed, horse riding seems to be today the preferred field of young girls who represent 8/10th of the license holders of the French Equestrian Federation, named first female sports federation in France. Socially valued during the practice

of this sport, women, from a young age, take pleasure in dealing with the animal, adopting what would seem to be a mothering attitude towards the horse (Keaveney, 2008), which thus becomes the epicenter of a sporting practice. If these women are so much connected with equestrian activity, it is above all for this living third party which gives another perspective to the practice of sport in the sense that the rider is not alone and composes a duo with another living entity, the horse. More than a working tool, it plays the role of a transitional space that allows the creation of a fundamental relational link that has to be constantly maintained. Thus, caring for a non-human fellow athlete is a relational skill that can become the stronger or weaker link in a rider's success.

This is when, what Carol Gilligan calls "Care" comes into play in the world of sports. Based on her study on the criteria of moral decisions according to gender, she demonstrates the appetite of the female sex for the relationship and for its values. When making moral decisions, women place a high value on relationships, affects and feelings, while men would be more logical, factual and refer to the law more often (Levinson, 1978). Thus, for women who like to be in the relationship and like to take care of others, their frequent practice of horseback riding no longer seems so surprising. The faculty and their appetite to "take care of" the horse derives in fact from a feminine psychic process that is accompanied by a cultural injunction valuing equestrian activity with relational purposes, those that allow a rider to feel what makes her understand that life is worth living. It is during this time of understanding that a link between the feminization of equitation and a privileged relationship with the equine emerges. At this point in our reflection, we put forward the hypothesis that a feminine equestrian practice is characterized by two styles:

- A first style where a woman has a phobia of taking care of the horse to the point of feeling pleasure only when performing which makes the horse an object to be performed.

- A second style where women attracted by the "companion" horse are widely represented in leisure riding and relatively absent from high performance competitions.

Thus, as the approach to the high level gets closer, the importance given to men becomes higher, uncertain disciplines such as show jumping (CSO) and all-around competition (CCE). Men become a majority, as shown by the distribution of French women and

men in these two disciplines at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. In short, one axis of our reflection is found in the understanding of this inversion of the majority and in the recognition of what we call active minorities (Moscovici, 1984), where leisure riding with young girls favors those who are inclined to value attitudes of care towards a horse and favors competitive riding with young boys and girls who are as if anaesthetized or even alexithymia in front of a horse perceived as an object of consumption (Chevalier, Le Mancq, 2013).

A female majority at the service of the new values (care, affectivity, mutual aid) of discipline

Although riding is now practiced by a large percentage of women, it was once an exclusively male sport with a military tradition (Hedenborg, Hedenborg White, 2012). Thus since the beginning of the 20th century, when women gradually took their place in equestrian sports, their arrival has shaken the values of these equestrian disciplines which can no longer be exclusively military and of competitive value. The feminization of equitation brings a new look at an equestrian activity whose logic seemed immutable. When women gradually take their place among riders, it is because they become, in parallel with a society that claims a new place and consideration for women, authorized to wear the trousers that will soon be associated in the equestrian world with the opening of riding astride in 1930 (Bornemark, Andersen, Ekström von Essen, 2019). This was followed by the authorization of a mix of equestrian practices, particularly in Olympic competition between 1952 and 1964, (Dressage 1952, show jumping 1956 and CCE 1964) which marked the new turning point of equestrian sports. Naturally, the feminization of horse riding then seemed to go hand in hand with demilitarization. The more the sport becomes feminized, the more the so-called “military” values such as rigor, obedience and the will to win are disinvested. Women, because they used to ride as Amazons, have to readapt to a new posture and position on the horse that gives them the possibility to have a new autonomy and more control over their mount.

Thus, women are taking up horse riding and gradually introducing new values to replace the old ones, colored with military colors. They promote more maternal values such as affectivity, mutual aid, provoking moments of joy, caring, to form a new sport

in their image. Outside of competition, men are losing interest in horseback riding and its monopoly, the horse is changing from a livestock animal to a pet, all of which are factors that allow the female population to take over the practice of leisure to shape it once again. Only this new dynamic is hardly felt in certain high-level disciplines. In particular, it would appear that the majority of women invest in leisure riding and are still on the fringes of certain high-level sub-cultures (Clement-Guillot, Chalabaev, Fontayne, 2012). Indeed, if dressage is still mainly represented by women at the Olympic Games or in other national and international competitions, it is not the same for the CSO and the CCE which are still today over-invested by men. The composition of the teams for the 2016 Olympic Games in RIO is quite telling, on a team of 4, Olympic champion in show jumping, was a rider, Penelope Leprévost. For the CCE team, also an Olympic champion, there were no female riders.

It was interesting to see the configuration of the teams that completed the podium at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. In the show jumping competition (CSO), the United States team that finished on the second place of the podium was composed of two women and two men, while the German team, third, and was just like France, composed of three men and one woman. The individual Olympic podium was made up of three riders. In the full competition of riding (CCE), the second team to reach the podium is composed of three German women riders and one man rider, the Australians come third with four man riders. The individual podium in CCE is also as in show jumping composed of three man riders. As far as dressage is concerned, it is a discipline that was opened to female riders earlier, also because this sub-culture is a victim of social representation in favor of its practice by the female sex. Indeed, dressage is a discipline that may appear “less violent” than the other two, over which it would be possible to have more control than for the CSO and CCE. Those two involves jumping. The glide phase of the jump is associated with the random, the unknown. Jumping by definition implies a moment when the horse and rider are no longer in contact with the ground and are therefore subject to more uncertainty as to the course of their journey, hence the notion of dangerousness. Thus, as dressage is not a discipline involving jumping phases, it immediately appears to be a safer sport, more aimed at women, who are often considered to be less suitable for the practice of dangerous sports than men (Münz, Eckardt, Wille, 2014). Thus,

we could make the connection with equestrian sports and deduce that certain equestrian sub-cultures are less invested at a high level by women also because this practice seems less “socially normal” for them.

Moreover, the potential danger encountered in these disciplines is not directed solely at the riders but also seems to be as much of a danger to the horse. In this way, riders become aware of the exposure and risk they undertake in these types of competitions. Only, if the horse is a pet, it may seem congruent that some female riders prefer to move towards disciplines that are less endangering to their equine such as dressage. Indeed, as evoked, the horse becomes the animal support of expression of the feminine Care (Hartmann, Christensen, McGreevy, 2017) and is thus particularly invested by the riders who develop a true attachment for the equine. This relationship may seem to express itself differently by men.

It is on the basis of these observations that it is conceivable that military values, such as rigor and attractiveness for exposure to competition, are still present in top-level equestrian practice (Kingston, 1977). Indeed, the competition is tough, due to the fact that horse riding is much practiced; therefore, it is imperative to make a privileged place for oneself if one wants to compete at a high level. In short, our first model already suspected that men would be more willing to stand out, with the goal of reaching the top. It is assumed that their minority starting numbers probably helps these men. Indeed, during their practice of leisure riding, men may appear to be compelled to take advantage of values that could be similar to the old military values such as aggression, self-confidence, and the will to distinguish themselves and newly renamed as the values of equestrian competition. Indeed, it seems imperative for them to be anchored in this dynamic if they want to be socially accepted in this sport with a feminine connotation. Women, for their part, do not have to use such values in order to be accepted in a leisure activity, as they are already in the majority and socially accepted.

Thus, this new place of women in leisure riding implies for men to reconsider their relationship to the practice that is no longer socially evident to them (Dashper, 2015). They are then forced to develop more combative values in the sense that they must, from the outset, “be accepted” as a minority. Young women, for their part, seem to be over-investing in this leisure sport and creating

new imprints and values that anchor them in a relationship with horse riding that still seems far from that present in high-level competitions, particularly the Olympic Games. In view of this gender evolution, is horse riding a “feminizable” sport?

Riding as a “feminizable” sport

Horse riding, because of its multiple subcultures, which develop well beyond the three considered as Olympic disciplines, is a sport with multiple characteristics that make it a so-called “feminizable” sport (Forsyth, Roberts, 2019). On the one hand, the gestures of horse riding may appear to be particularly attractive to women. It mixes lightness and tonicity, without being too violent. It is important that the riders show precision to be able to make their horse understand the gesture and the figure to be carried out. The moving rider making the request, waiting for a reply from his partner, must control each step of the horse. In this respect, riding, its practice and its gestures can appear as an intimate communication between the rider and his horse with the aim of carrying out in duet framed movements. Moreover, social representations often associate women with elegance. Riding would then allow them to put their elegance at the service of a sport where the continuous effort leads to performance. Indeed, in equitation and in dressage in particular, which as mentioned is one of the few Olympic disciplines with a majority of women; grace is the order of the day. For the rider, it is a question of having a straight back, of “standing” on his horse. A posture that could for example be similar to that required for classical dancers or gymnasts. Thus, beyond communication, dressage reps can sometimes be compared to a dance between the horse and the rider, who become one in each stride. Isabell Werth, six-time German Olympic Champion, considers in 2019 that dressage is a really close partnership, much more than in jumping. And women are more open than men to this kind of relationship (Garcia, 2010).

Thus, dressage could be a discipline allowing women to claim an emotional relationship assumed with an equine animal. Far beyond the performance of a course, they show, by entering the dressage arena, how precisely they are able to communicate with their horse. In short, it is assumed that the relationship they seek at the beginning of their equestrian activities, wants to express itself through the discipline that allows them to combine a controlled release of emotions and a harmonious expressiveness with the

sensations of a horse. It is from this example of dres-sage that we re-question the notion of parity that seems in practice biased by the division into sub-cultures of equestrian activities. One would thus want to think of horse riding as a sport that brings together different sub-cultures, some with male and others with female connotations. In short, the mix, although being in the service of parity, does not allow it (or very little) in the equestrian practices. Then, how can we propose an equal ratio between women and men in each of the equestrian disciplines? Who are the women who compete against intensive practice in so-called male subcultures? Have they developed values and behaviors mirroring those of men to make a place for themselves? It is from these questions that we will take our hypothetical model and focus it on women top-level riders in CSO and CCE and confront it with new dimensions such as psychological androgyny.

Competitive women in show jumping and CCE: Between adaptation and innovation

Adaptation to a male-dominated system: conformism is a path to inclusion

Since the advent of the Olympic Games in 1896, horse riding has been a popular sport and is still represented today. Until 1956 for show jumping and until 1964 for the CCE, it was mainly run by men who saw in this sport an opportunity to demonstrate their masculinity. However, even after being allowed to compete in equestrian sport, women still struggle to make a name for themselves on the international scene. The emergence of women in horse riding and then in equestrian competitions is linked to the loss of the military objective. Following the World Wars, the horse changed from a livestock animal to a pet. Thus, the parallel between the function of the horse and the evolution of the rider should be analyzed. The military is gradually giving way to recreational and competitive riders, men and women gradually mixed.

The French Equestrian Federation was created in 1921¹, and came to frame the practice, proposing to register riders through equestrian licenses. In 1930, women were granted the right to ride astride, thanks in part to French law allowing women to wear trousers when cycling and riding (Bard, 2010). Wearing trousers then changes the practice of riders who go from riding as an amazon to riding astride. This is the action that allows them more

¹ FFE site access on <https://www.ffe.com/La-FFE/Presentation-de-la-FFE/Histoire-de-la-FFE>

autonomy, control and mastery of the horse. In this way, they can begin to think about horse riding in a different way than through leisure, and can enter into a new approach to the relationship between man and horse. Female riders have to adapt to a new way of riding and become familiar with a different type of riding that men have always done. Within a sporting practice, women are divided. Many are those who invest in a new leisure riding that recognizes the horse as a living organism to be listened to, while others refuse to be satisfied with it and blend in with the male mass by accepting to comply with the demands of competition.

From inclusion to emancipation performance: women competitors as active minorities

It is thus from a new practice of riding, straddle riding, that women take their place on an equal footing with male riders. Among these, a small part sees this new ride as an open door to competition and intensive practice. They are therefore leaving a female peer group, to confront a practice that originated with men, in which they become minorities. The point here is to consider that these women are then seen as active minorities (Moscovici, 2000) who gradually take their place among a majority of men and thus develop behaviors formerly considered deviant with the aim of gradually asserting new social norms, which will come to fruition between 1952 and 1964. From a majority in leisure riding, to a minority within the sub-cultures of CSO and CCE competitions, female riders are confronted with a necessity, that of existing by holding the reins of a double role: that of combining the virtues of a male riding and the virtues of a female accompaniment. Faced with this complex guidance, women are then confronted with new limits implied both by their minority position but also by the practice of competition and in particular an advantageous social comparison.

To do this, in the first instance, they are obliged to conform to certain male values, or at least competitive ones, in order to be integrated and treated well in the group of competitors. They then adapt to a move away from the notion of CARE, which is almost a “condition” of the high level. Indeed, in the practice of high-level equestrian competitions, the relationship between rider and horse is no longer the same as that experienced in the times of leisure riding. Grooming time, in particular, if it is a popular leisure activity, is carried out by a third party, the groom, and no

long-er by the rider himself, who puts performance at the center of his practice. Therefore, the rider/horse relationship must be of major importance during competition and training; however, the relationship outside the horse is no longer essential. Thus, women motivated by more mothering tendencies than men probably set aside certain behaviors and attitudes in favor of adapting to a male environment.

So, who are these women who deviate in their behavior from our initial model? Who faces the so-called “feminine” logic of the relationship with the animal? Are women competitors the future of parity in all equestrian sub-cultures? It is around these questions that we propose to identify the principles that lead psychological androgyny to become the fundamental basis that allows genuine parity to enter into sports cultures with high competitive values.

Psychological androgyny in the service of women's success

Could psychological androgyny be the factor of success for these young women that goes against the so-called “gender-sensitive” values? If the questioning of Care and so-called feminine values is taking place, it can be assumed that they are paralleled by the adaptation and integration of certain so-called masculine behaviors. It seems interesting here to highlight excellence, a cardinal Olympic value, under the combined yoke of masculinity and femininity. It is thus assumed that women with an attraction to the pursuit of excellence demonstrate a kind of psychological adjustment to which their sexual identity would not predispose them. In sum, society may find it difficult to consider, given the high rate of men at the top level in CSO and CCE competitions, success in these female disciplines. This is how these women take over a value, in this case, attributed mostly to male riders.

This is where we evoke the concept of psychological androgyny, not in the literal sense of the term androgyny, but in the social representation of these riders and in what they give to see in order to adapt to more hostile environments.

Moreover, in order to gradually impose their own values, these women are making psychological adjustments to ensure their integration. This behavioral modification undoubtedly leads to an accommodation in the relation to the equine they are ready to see differently to blend in with the competition. The horse is thus gradually seen as something more than a simple performance ob-

ject; it becomes the support of an authentic relationship. It is thanks to this form of androgyny that these women will gradually become incubators of new values, not only within leisure riding but also within high-level practice. One could suppose that they breathe in this sense, a kind of “mixed care” which would manifest itself in a new relationship with the equine in equestrian competition. Could care be rethought with the help of the many other relationships to the horse that are experienced outside of riding? Could high-performance riding and Olympic success depend on a re-thought rider/horse relationship? Would this new relationship, in turn, be synonymous with a new kind of equestrian parity regardless of subcultures? In short, could Olympic success be increased with the help of this “mixed care”, that is to say, a relationship that would become more exclusive between Man and Horse and that would not only be achieved through riding, thus restoring a balance and parity between men and women in the equestrian practice in competition? The “mixed care” could thus become a kind of third way instilled by women competitors who would come to re-inject this dimension of care, valued in leisure, within the competition. It is this third road that would later promote the emergence of what could be called “living autonomously together”, this way of being with them apart where competition is practiced autonomously in a mixed environment and where the opposition of genres gives way to a harmonious conjugation of them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the place of women in equestrian sports cultures gives us food for thought on the dynamics and evolution of gender in the Olympic competitive environment. The majority of women in leisure, becoming a majority of men at a high level raises many questions. It is in view of this inversion of the majority between a male and a female hegemony that we allow ourselves to rethink the notion of parity as adapted to the practices of equestrian subcultures. Indeed, the notion of crossbreeding seems in the end, more favorable to the description of equestrian situations that redraw the relations between Men and Horses. It is surely the redeployment of these relationships that gives new life to the Olympic spirit in equestrian activities. The opportunity then came to think of crossbreeding as a new emerging Olympic value, in which it is possible to imagine a fundamental meeting point between values and relationships that open up a new field of possibilities in listening to the unfinished symphonies of Olympism (Martinkova, 2018).

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