

A Blinkered Approach? Attitudes Towards Children and Young People in British Horseracing and Equestrian Sport [1]

(published online in *Idrottsforum*, May 2008)

Introduction

This paper will consider the ways in which children take part in two distinct branches of horse sport, equestrianism and horseracing, focusing on their historical separateness and their more recent rapprochement through the development of pony racing. Using material from a recent study of children and horseracing, it will demonstrate that most racecourses still see youngsters as passive consumers rather than active participants while preliminary research into the specifically child-centred equestrian organisation, the British Pony Club, suggests a participant culture and an institution prepared to countenance change.

Equestrian sport in its broadest sense encompasses a diverse range of activities, from the cross-country chase of the hunting field to the eventing, steeplechase or point-to-point course; from team sports such as polo to mounted games competitions between Pony Clubs; from the disciplines of dressage to carriage driving and from show ponies to show jumping. Over four million Britons – toddlers, pensioners and all ages in between – take part in horse riding and driving and the horse population, currently over one million, has increased by 20% since 1999. 25% of households are said to have some interest in the horse industry and as an economic sector its value has been estimated at £3.4 billion.[2] Yet equestrianism as an object of academic study has been ignored by sports historians in Britain. A survey of all major English language sports history journals over the past twenty five years revealed not a single article on equestrian sport: a recent book on post-war British sport devotes less than one page to equine activities other than racing, another on sport and leisure fails to even mention them in its index. [3]

Horseracing has received more attention from British academics. It is one of the oldest national sports and a multi-million pound industry in its own right, supporting over 78,000 full-time equivalent jobs when breeding and betting are included. Its intimate connection with gambling and, like British sports history, its domination at the elite level by men has ensured it a higher academic profile than recreational riding where the overwhelming majority of participants are female. [4] But although there are 59 racecourses in Britain and six million people pass through their turnstiles every year, horseracing is scarcely more visible to the general public than equestrianism. It has its own specialist media outlets and its most important annual events, with the exception of the Aintree Grand National which regularly attracts around 10 million television viewers, barely register on the calendar of British sports. Most television coverage takes place on dedicated digital racing channels; BBC radio no longer broadcasts race results and comprehensive daily information about racing in the press is restricted to the turf's own newspaper, the *Racing Post*. [5]

It is also unusual in another sense. Few British racecourse administrators and marketing executives seem to have appreciated the difficulty of attracting a future audience to a sport in which children cannot participate. At a time when the range of leisure pursuits available to young people is greater than it has ever been, horseracing is at a disadvantage. A recent survey of equestrian activity showed that 17% of participants were 15 or under, and over one-third were aged 16-24 but racing has never been able to provide youngsters with a 'hands-on' opportunity to try it out: it has no equivalent of mini-rugby or junior school football to stimulate a potentially life-long interest. [6] All a child at the races could do was watch. An ongoing image problem, largely associated with gambling and corruption in the sport but also as a result of its dual seedy/snobbish reputation, has not helped in recommending it to children or, perhaps more importantly, their parents. Older generations in particular have linked horseracing with petty violence and crime, epitomised by Graham

Greene's *Brighton Rock* and thrillers from the pen of ex-jockey Dick Francis. Bookies have long been caricatured as 'greedy, shadowy and sinful' or as 'an East End boy made good.' On the other hand racing has been intimately connected with royalty since the seventeenth century which may have helped to perpetuate an 'aristocratic' view of the sport, although anthropologist Kate Fox suggests that it does not deserve this 'toffee-nosed' image. [7]

A complete contrast is provided by the Pony Club. Its primary aim is 'to encourage young people to ride and to learn to enjoy all kinds of sport connected with ponies and riding.' Membership entitles young riders to receive instruction in all aspects of horsemanship, to attend working rallies – 'the backbone of the Pony Club' – and residential camps, and to sit graded tests in riding skills. They can also take part in equestrian events and competitions such as dressage, polo, showjumping and, within the past four years, pony racing. [8] Founded in 1929, it has over 34,000 UK members and more than 110,000 throughout eighteen countries; as such it is the largest association of riders in the world. UK membership costs £50 (c.75 euros) a year and is not restricted to those who own a pony as long as they ride and receive instruction at a Pony Club linked riding centre, of which there are currently 417 throughout Britain. When they reach the age of 21, Pony Club members can continue as Associates for a further four years.

The importance of the Pony Club to British equestrian sport, past and present, cannot be overestimated. A survey of successful show jumpers and eventers born in the period 1930 to 1959 showed that 70% had been Pony Club members. For women alone, that figure rose to 81% but for British Olympians in equestrian sport, it reached 98%. A recent article in the *Daily Telegraph* also suggests that the majority of leading international riders still spend their formative years in the Pony Club. [9] However, in spite of its worthy and commendable aim 'to promote the highest ideals of sportsmanship, citizenship and loyalty', it has a similar image problem to racing in one respect: it is seen as snobbish and elitist. Partly because it is widely thought that all members must own a pony and partly, perhaps, as a result of its long-established links with the now banned sport of foxhunting with hounds – 60% of Pony Club branches are named after hunts – its membership is perceived to be wealthy or upper middle class and it has a reputation for stuffiness. This is not how it sees itself. The Pony Club Yearbook stresses that the organisation 'caters for and brings together young people from many different backgrounds and walks of life'. [10] Yet the media continues to focus on its elitist aspects. An article in the *Financial Times* on 'Sloane Rangers' – defined in the New Penguin English Dictionary as 'young upper-class persons of conventional outlook and dress' – mentioned Barbour jackets, boarding schools and the Pony Club in the same sentence; the *Sunday Telegraph* described Buckinghamshire, an area only forty minutes drive from London, with 'some of the most expensive towns in the UK', as 'the land of pony clubs, 4x4s and private school uniforms' In 'media speak' Pony Club still equals 'posh'. [11]

Historical Perspective

In the nineteenth century racecourses were usually seen as unsuitable places for children because of their associations with drinking, gambling and a generally lax moral code. Nevertheless, school attendance books for the mid-1850s show a drop in pupil numbers when local race meetings took place and alternative entertainment was sometimes organised by Sunday schools in the hope of keeping children away from the racetracks. The advent of the enclosed racecourse, which charged for admission, helped to reduce the problem by the 1880s but children continued to be involved in betting, often on behalf of their parents. Schoolboys in the 1920s were said to bet on a fairly regular basis and the fact that a law was passed in Scotland in 1928 to prevent children from placing bets for adults suggests that this practice was still common. [12]

At the same time that attempts were being made to curb the involvement of the young, especially working-class boys, in an objectionable habit, efforts to establish a riding

club for more privileged children had just begun. 1928 saw the formation of several sub-branches of the Institute of the Horse, some of which organised children's gymkhanas; the following year the Pony Club began life as a junior branch of the Institute. From the outset it had close links with hunting, being divided into administrative districts that corresponded with local hunts. The father of well-known showjumping commentator and equestrian, Dorian Williams, was not only Chairman of the Pony Club Committee from 1932 but Master of the prestigious Grafton Hunt. [13] It is an interesting paradox that it was thought desirable to keep children away from racecourses at a time when there was no objection to them taking part in blood sports such as foxhunting. Upper-class Victorian and Edwardian children were allowed to follow hounds, sometimes accompanied by a groom or one of their parents. William Fawcett, one-time hunting and racing editor of *The Field* described himself as one of the 'infants who went out hunting with the Cleveland (Hunt) on their shaggy ponies' and a writer in the *Badminton Magazine* noted that 'in an average field you sometimes see a child of tender years, heartily appreciating the fun on his or her pony.' [14]

However, hunting and, by association, the Pony Club were not only for the rural elite. Williams suggests that one of the original ideas of the Pony Club was to encourage the children of farmers to come hunting: hunts were dependent on the goodwill of the farming community as they rode, sometimes without due care and attention, over farmers' land on up to four days a week. This view is reinforced by Huggins. He singles out point-to-point meetings, which did not charge admission fees, as a growth area of horse sport in the 1930s, particularly for farmers, artisans and tradesmen 'whose children had joined the pony club.' [15] In the meantime racecourses with unenclosed areas or cheap 'silver rings' also continued to attract families during the middle part of the twentieth century but children had to be accompanied by an adult and were not allowed into the most exclusive and expensive grandstands. Until the 1970s attitudes to children at race meetings could probably be described at best as neutral. Little was done to encourage them beyond reduced or free entry, children's facilities were limited and the seediness of many British courses at this time probably acted as a deterrent for a lot of women and young people.

What really changed opinions about families at racecourses was the belated arrival of Sunday racing in Britain. It was legalised in 1992, and took off in 1995 when Sunday betting was finally sanctioned; a total of 144 Sunday meetings were scheduled for 2007 at over 80% of UK courses and many of these were marketed as family days with slogans like 'Family Sunday is Funday'. [16] Other child-friendly days tend to be concentrated in the school holidays. Free entry policy has now been extended to 16 or 17 year olds and many racecourses cater for the entire age range with baby-changing facilities and creches for the youngest and bungee jumping, assault courses and coaching sessions by local football or cricket teams for teenagers.

Some children at racecourses, however, have been there to work. Accepting Harry Hendrick's definition of childhood (up to 14 years) and adolescence (from 14 to 18), several jockeys were children when they rode their first winners and many apprentice riders were adolescents. [17] Famous and successful men who began their careers as boys included Lester Piggott, eleven-time British champion flat race jockey and Fred Winter, four-time leading jump jockey in the 1950s and 1960s. Piggott won his first race at 13 and had been champion apprentice twice by the age of 15. Winter also made his first appearance on a racecourse at 13 but had allegedly been riding out for his trainer father from the age of 5. A different entry into horseracing was taken by Gordon (later Sir Gordon) Richards, the outstanding jockey of the mid-twentieth century, who started as a 15-year-old stable lad. [18] With the raising of the school-leaving age to 16, the youngest adolescents are no longer employed at racing stables but current data indicates that 8% of stable employees are aged 18 or under, a figure that rises to nearly 30% for under 25s.[19]

As far as spectators are concerned, twenty-first century racing would appear to have come full circle, with the carnival atmosphere, sideshows and street entertainers reminiscent of the early Victorian era. A survey of racecourse websites, literature and press releases indicates a vast array of attractions on offer at family racedays, much of it aimed specifically at children. [20] Amongst the more unusual are Formula One racing simulators, ice rinks, children's farms, ferret racing and crazy golf. Yet these forms of entertainment do nothing to develop a child's interest in the racing itself – and horseracing, unlike many sports, can be easily understood by a five-year-old – the horses run as fast as they can from there to here and the first one at the post is the winner. Why, then, do racecourse marketing executives spend so much money and effort on children's amusements and so little on getting youngsters more actively involved with the sport? A parent interviewed by Kate Fox perhaps sums up the issue, 'Racing is ideal for kids ... it's all over in a few minutes so you can go and have some chips.' [21]

Racecourse Questionnaire

To try to understand the attitudes of racecourse administrators towards children and young people, questionnaires were sent to 58 British racecourses and the following comments are based on their responses. (Personnel at the remaining course, Goodwood, were interviewed separately about its recently formed children's racing club). Of the 50% that replied, fourteen were jumps only courses, seven were flat race courses and eight staged both codes of racing. A first series of questions asked if the racecourse held a family day/days; what child-centred facilities were available on those days; and whether any of these were provided on 'normal', i.e. not designated family, racedays. A separate line of questioning aimed to discover if any attempt was made to educate children about racing rather than simply entertaining them, and whether there were any initiatives to involve local schools with the racecourse via class visits or projects. Finally racecourses were asked if they had any plans to introduce a race club for children as pioneered at Ascot and Goodwood.

In general it was the smaller rural racetracks that took the trouble to reply, the exception being Cheltenham, the most famous British jumps course after Aintree and certainly the most prestigious. The other major courses, staging Group One (top flight) races, failed to reply – these included Aintree, Ayr, Doncaster, Epsom, Haydock, Newbury, Newmarket, Sandown and York. The timing of the questionnaire, in midsummer, may account for the balance of responses: flat racecourses, which were under-represented, were in the middle of their racing season while most jumps courses were 'on holiday'.

Only three of the twenty-nine racecourses did not organise at least one family day; those that held race meetings during the school holidays had several. The range of free entertainments provided for children on these specially designated days was extensive. Nearly all courses had bouncy castles or other inflatables, fairground rides and face painting. Competitions were organised by one-third of respondents; fifteen courses offered puppet or magic shows, clowns or other circus performances; half had playgrounds or creches; a few had more adventurous activities such as quad bikes, go karts or pony/donkey rides. Several gave free gifts such as ice cream, Easter eggs or 'kiddie packs'.

When asked about children's facilities on 'normal' racedays, one-third of courses said they had nothing for children but pointed out that their race meetings were usually held on midweek afternoons when children were unable to attend. Of the remainder, half had permanent playgrounds/play areas or creches for under fives and those that raced in summer or during school holidays provided some entertainment, usually fairground rides or a bouncy castle. Children's facilities at several courses amounted to no more than the provision of children's menus and high chairs at catering outlets or an ice cream van on the course.

The second part of the questionnaire dealt with the issue of educating children about racing, rather than merely entertaining them, and developing links with local schools. Replies

indicated that 50% did nothing to inform youngsters about the sport, several citing lack of staff as a reason. Ten mentioned the involvement of the British Horseracing Board (now the British Horseracing Authority) Training and Education programme, whose remit covers a wide variety of projects including school visits to racecourses. Four had connections with local Pony Clubs. One replied that they ‘definitely’ tried to educate children - ‘we have a very good girl who enjoys doing things like measuring a furlong and then running it’ – but that initiatives to attract local schools had ‘met with limited success.’ In view of the previous statement, perhaps this is not surprising! The same official had listed the only children’s facilities at his course as ‘a dedicated room with crisps and pop’. (fizzy soft drink).

Other revealing comments were made by respondents. One course allowed its grounds to be used for non-racing activities by local children, another was in the process of organising a children’s disco on nights when racing was not taking place. At Chester, a walled town founded by the Romans, the racecourse staged a Roman-themed day, at which ‘an authentic Roman fort is built in the middle of the course. Romans descend on the racecourse giving the children a chance to experience how Romans once lived.’ None of these courses made any effort to promote the racing; instead they marketed their geographical space and their increasingly modern facilities. [22] Several pointed out that families were not their target audience, others were trying to gear their marketing towards young adults via colleges and cinema advertising, and one stated that its promotional material was aimed at adults ‘as it is they who make the decision to bring children to the races.’ However, Bangor Racecourse, a small jumps track near the England/Wales border, stated that family day was now the best attended of all its meetings and ten other courses noted a ‘definite’ increase in child spectators at designated ‘fundays.’

The only response that mentioned the role of children as a future audience came from Cheltenham, a course that, paradoxically, does not have a family day. Instead the Commercial Manager advocated an active education programme both for school children and Pony Club members including behind the scenes tours. He admitted to being a ‘driving force’ behind pony racing and added that ‘we especially want to encourage youngsters who are tomorrow’s racegoers.’ The only other positive views of this type came from two of the courses that pioneered supervised play areas for children in the 1970s. Both Ascot and Goodwood have tackled the issue of educating children by starting race clubs for under 16s that aim to inform as well as entertain. Ascot launched its Colts and Fillies club in a blaze of publicity, signing up leading jockey Frankie Dettori as its president. Membership is free and kids receive a welcome pack, a badge and newsletters but although it claims to have an ‘ongoing commitment to bring racing to a younger audience’ and to make the sport ‘more accessible, interesting, and educational’, the emphasis appears to be mostly on fun activities that are not necessarily related to racing. [23]

Goodwood’s GG club, on the other hand, charges £25 for annual membership but organises behind-the-scenes tours of the racecourse, and outings to stud farms and vets as well as providing badges and newsletters. Club members have been down to the starting post to talk to the race starter, walked part of the course while the groundsman explained the going and visited the weighing room to speak to the jockeys. During an interview with the club organiser it became clear that, although all interested children between 5 and 16 are welcome to join, one aim of the scheme was to involve the children and grandchildren of existing Goodwood members. These are a group of around 2000 who can access the most exclusive grandstands and restaurants, and pay up to £350 (over 500 euros) per year for the privilege. The hope is that many of the GG youngsters will progress to junior membership, for ages 17 to 25, and finally become full adult members of the Goodwood club. [24]

This type of initiative is unlikely to be followed elsewhere. When asked if they had considered starting a club for under 16s, over 70% of the questionnaire respondents said no. A few said they had thought about it but only one had active plans to introduce a children’s

club. Amongst the reasons given for not pursuing this idea were lack of funding or staff, insufficient racegoers, and racing at the wrong time of year or day of the week to attract sufficient children. It would appear from this survey that most racecourse administrators are content to bring children through the gates on the strength of free ice cream, fairground rides and face painting. The spokesperson for Cartmel, a small jumps course in the English Lake District summed this up, 'the attendance of children has always been high at Cartmel, however this is probably due to the fairground rather than racing.' Racing's authorities seem to have an equally blinkered approach. As a former director of the National Horseracing Museum at Newmarket put it, 'nobody in racing appears to be child friendly.' [25]

The Advent of Pony Racing

The other recent attempt to encourage the next generation of horseracing enthusiasts has come less from racing than from the Pony Club. In spite of its somewhat stuffy image, the organisation has taken steps in recent years to broaden its appeal. In 1998 it piloted its Centre Membership scheme, under which children without ponies of their own can join the Pony Club through a network of approved riding centres. The scheme has since been extended to include hundreds of riding schools and stables throughout Britain. The appointment of a new chairperson in 2004 has led to further developments. Although it had never previously included the discipline of race riding in its instruction for youngsters, the Pony Club was nevertheless instrumental in the launch of a pony racing scheme in which riders aged between 11 and 15 could learn the rules and basic principles of racing. This followed a horseracing industry review in 2003 that had identified a potential shortage of jump jockeys in Britain and noted that a constant stream of young talented Irish riders had learned their skills in Ireland's pony races. In France, pony racing on the flat and over jumps was also said to be very popular.

After racing became a Pony Club activity in 2004, pony races were initially added to the cards at eight jump meetings; that figure increased to 13 in 2006 and 22 in 2007. To supplement the training days offered within the Pony Club, the Northern Racing College also organises sessions for young riders during school holidays. [26] But with 70 point-to-point meetings also scheduled to stage pony races in 2007, the 500-odd young participants so far is likely to increase substantially. The difference between the Pony Club/British Horseracing Authority sponsored racing series and those organised at point-to-points is that qualification for the latter involves rider participation in a number of days hunting, thereby continuing the link between hunts and the rural community. [27]

Pony racing is said to be Britain's fastest-growing equine horse sport and a Pony Racing Association, with input from Pony Club, horseracing, hunting and point-to-point authorities has been set up to co-ordinate its development. However, viewed in the context of fifty years non-participation by younger teenagers in racing – since the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in the 1960s – the present initiatives are limited, involving less than 3 percent of Pony Club members. Although there is a long-term aim for inner-city children to have the opportunity of taking part, at present young jockeys are more likely to have family connections within the racing industry or equestrian sport. [28] If youngsters take part in horseracing at all, it is still almost exclusively as audience. Whether they are present at racecourses to watch the horses or consume the many other entertainments is debatable.

Conclusion

This brief study suggests that although children are increasingly encouraged to take part in riding as a leisure activity, they have tended to be ghettoised within British racing. Racecourses will entertain them and provide them with play areas but have made little effort to interest them in the serious business of the racetrack. For a limited number of young people this may be changing. Pony Club members have recently been given opportunities to take part in pony racing at a growing number of racecourses but cynics might say that this has only occurred because jump racing is encountering difficulties in sustaining itself. Given the

marginality of women in British racing, it is hardly surprising that children have been treated in similar fashion.

Notes

- [1] I should like to express my thanks to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for financial assistance towards the research costs of this paper.
- [2] Statistics from BEF website, BHIC, 2005, and website. While this is higher than the combined turnover of English and Scottish football clubs in season 2003/04 (Factsheet 10: the 'New' Football Economics, Centre for Sociology of Sport, University of Leicester), it still amounts to less than 1% of GDP.
- [3] Holt and Mason, 2001, 98; Hill, 2002.
- [4] for example Huggins, 2000 and 2003; Cassidy, 2002; Vamplew and Kay, 2005. Statistics from BHA website; sportscotland, 2003.
- [5] BHA website.
- [6] sportscotland, 2003.
- [7] Fox, 1999, xviii, 3, 70; Cassidy, 2002, 76.
- [8] Pony Club, 2007, 19, 74.
- [9] Calculated from Stratton, 1973; *Equestrian*, 16 March 2006; *Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 2007.
- [10] Pony Club, 2007, 19, 81.
- [11] *Financial Times*, 6 October 2007; *Sunday Telegraph*, 29 August 2006.
- [12] Huggins, 2000, 216-7, 110; Huggins, 2003, 69, 76.
- [13] Pony Club, 2007, 89; Williams, 1978, 49.
- [14] Fawcett, 1932, 18; *Badminton*, 1909, 618.
- [15] Williams, 1978, 36-7; Huggins, 2003, 135. Point-to-point is amateur jump racing and, like the Pony Club, has always been strongly connected with hunting
- [16] BHA website.
- [17] Hendrick, 1997, 1.
- [18] Vamplew and Kay, 2005, 231, 340, 261, 96.
- [19] BHA website.
- [20] *ibid.* See also Lee, 2001, 2004.
- [21] Fox, 1997, 15.
- [22] Following John Bale's work on sport and place, an interesting study might consider how racecourses, often used for sporting purposes on less than 15 days per year, can expand their activities and enhance their profile. Vamplew and Kay, 2005, 121, 192.
- [23] Ascot website.
- [24] Lyndi Norton, 2004.
- [25] Hilary Bracegirdle, 2004.
- [26] *Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 2004; Northern Racing College website. The college, along with the British Racing School at Newmarket, offers courses to young people who wish to train as apprentice jockeys or stable staff.
- [27] Although hunting with dogs was banned in February 2005, hunts and their supporters still meet to follow artificial trails instead of chasing foxes.
- [28] *Daily Telegraph*, 16 October, 2006.

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