

BVA policy position on the use of animals in performance sport

Introduction

All questions on the use of animals by humans must be informed by an understanding of their sentience, including the capacity to feel both positive and negative emotions, pleasure, contentment, pain and frustration. Vets have additional obligations under the RCVS Code of Conduct to endeavour to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care.¹

One area where views can differ is the use of animals in performance sports, and BVA acknowledges that members of the veterinary profession may hold a range of perspectives on this. However, the veterinary profession is united in the desire to support and promote practices aimed at providing animals with 'lives worth living' and preferably with 'good lives'. Animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human want or need².

In developing this policy, BVA has started with the view that it is ethically acceptable to use animals for human benefit, provided that *"Wherever animals are used for human benefit, including for food, clothing, entertainment, sport, scientific research, education, transportation and companionship, this should be exercised responsibly, with compassion for the animals concerned, and due regard for animal welfare, including decisions on breeding and selection. Any use of animals for human benefit should minimise negative welfare impacts, promote positive experiences and work towards positive welfare outcomes for all animals involved."*³

BVA aims to provide leadership by articulating the veterinary profession's collective view of what good welfare looks like, and to advocate for continuous improvement by working with industry, regulators and the wider profession to help embed these standards in practice. All sports that include the use of animals should continually work towards ensuring and promoting positive experiences for the animals involved and removing or minimising any negative experiences, to ensure animals can experience at least a life worth living, and preferably a good life.

The aim of this position is to support vets, regulators, policymakers, industry, stakeholders, and the general public to recognise good current practice, as well as existing and ongoing welfare initiatives, and where necessary, understand what might be required to help animals involved in performance sports experience good welfare and at least a life worth living. Vets play a critical role in advocating for the welfare of animals throughout their lives in sport, and this policy sets out principles intended to support that role across all life stages.

Scope of this policy

For the purposes of this position, 'performance sport' refers to organised, competitive activities involving animals that are structured and regulated, with basic organisational features, such as:

- Recognised rules or standards of competition,
- Oversight by official bodies or associations, and
- In some cases, a commercial dimension, such as prize money, breeding potential, sponsorship, or an established industry infrastructure.

The activities that animals take part in are usually designed to showcase a combination of physical abilities, learned skills, obedience and agility. These activities may involve animals performing specific tasks or routines and can be judged on an established set of criteria.

¹ Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons. Accessed August 11, 2025. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/>

² British Veterinary Association, Full BVA Position on Animal Welfare (2021), <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4273/full-bva-position-on-animal-welfare.pdf>

³ Ibid.

The recommendations in this policy are focused on sports where there are governing bodies responsible for, and industry structures capable of, embedding welfare standards and introducing any necessary reforms. However, smaller-scale activities also raise important welfare considerations and should equally aspire to provide animals with a good life, so many of our recommendations will be applicable to such activities.

The policy is designed to work as an overarching set of principles for all performance sports which meet these criteria, now and in the future. However, it should be noted that the evidence considered when developing this policy largely related to thoroughbred horse racing and greyhound racing, since they are most frequently the subject of media enquiries for BVA. Whilst most of the principles discussed will apply to all sports, some aspects may not be applicable. This policy should be used as a tool to consider how a sport can best meet animal welfare needs, taking the wider context into account rather than focussing only on a specific negative aspect.

Assessing animal welfare

This policy position outlines BVA's welfare-based stance on the use of animals in performance sports. Welfare is the state of an animal in relation to their physical and psychological well-being, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) defines animal welfare as the "physical and mental state of an animal in relation to the conditions in which it lives and dies."⁴ This definition reflects the understanding that welfare encompasses not only external conditions such as environment and treatment, but also internal experiences such as how animals feel about their external conditions.

We support the Five Domains⁵ model for animal welfare assessment. The model outlines the key elements that should be considered when assessing welfare, the importance of positive welfare states and mental wellbeing, and how the actions of humans directly impact animal welfare. Since its inception in 1994, the model has evolved to consider developments in animal welfare science. The most recent 2020 model⁶ centres on the following five domains:

1. Nutrition
2. Environment
3. Health
4. Behavioural interactions with other animals, people and the environment
5. Mental state

It is important to note that welfare influences and pressures exist across all human uses of animals, whether for food, companionship, research, or sport. This policy does not suggest that such drivers are any greater in performance sport than other uses of animals, but rather they interact in different ways that create a distinctive set of welfare considerations. As with other animal uses, the combination of organisation, incentives and cultural expectations shape both risks and opportunities for welfare. One such driver to consider in the conversation around some performance sports is the commercial aspect. While this contributes to some sports' general visibility and the level of public awareness, it can also influence the way that animals are bred, trained and retired. In some cases, this can be positive, for example it can fund training, facilities, research and services which improve animal welfare. However, care must be taken to ensure it does not result in welfare risks, such as breeding without adequate consideration of lifetime welfare, or prioritising short-term performance over long-term health.

Structure of this policy

This position applies the Five Domains model specifically to performance sports, helping to develop the standards required to achieve good welfare. It is structured around the model, across three life stages:

1. Breeding and early life

⁴ World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), OIE Global Animal Welfare Strategy and OIE Animal Welfare Work Programme (2019), <https://www.oie.int/en/what-we-do/animal-health-and-welfare/animalwelfare/>

⁵ D. J. Mellor, "Updating Animal Welfare Thinking: Moving Beyond the 'Five Freedoms' Towards 'A Life Worth Living,'" *Animals* 6, no. 3 (2016): 21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

⁶ D. J. Mellor, et al. 2020. "The 2020 Five Domains Model: Including Human–Animal Interactions in Assessments of Animal Welfare" *Animals* 10, no. 10: 1870. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani1010187>

2. Training and competition
3. Post-career (including end-of-life)

These stages were selected to reflect the full lifecycle of animals involved in sport, from the point of decision to breed an animal intended for sport through to their lives after sport and their death. Some animals may not have a linear sporting 'career', for example those transferring between different sports, but all will go through these three stages during their lifetime.

The application of the Five Domains is supported by the use of diagrams, illustrating the key factors that influence whether animals can experience good welfare. These are not intended as prescriptive checklists, but as benchmarks that set out the standards of welfare that sports should meet, or be demonstrably working towards, if they are to fulfil their responsibilities.

There is public and professional concern that not all animals involved in sport achieve an overall positive welfare experience across their life span^{7,8}. In response, some sports have made significant investment into providing animals involved with a good life, or at least a life worth living, while others have further to go in meeting these standards consistently. Achieving these standards also requires individuals involved in the sport to be aware of their responsibilities, and for any regulations to be properly enforced. This position sets out standards a sport overall should realistically be able to achieve if its continued use of animals is to be supported on welfare grounds.

Breeding and Early Life

Well-managed breeding can support genetic diversity, robust health, and provide positive early experiences that build resilience and adaptability. As breeding choices shape long-term health and welfare, selection should prioritise traits that support good welfare across an animal's life, rather than short-term performance.^{9,10,11} All breeding decisions carry a responsibility to give every animal the best chance of a life worth living, and preferably a good life, with that responsibility extending throughout an animal's life.¹²

Welfare considerations apply to both the offspring and the breeding animals. All animals involved should enjoy appropriate nutrition, environments, healthcare, and behavioural interactions with their environment, other animals and people. Sub-optimal practices, such as restrictive housing, limited social interaction, intensive reproductive schedules, or overuse, should be avoided, as they can compromise physical health, cause stress, and result in negative emotional states.^{13,14} Assisted reproductive technologies may offer welfare benefits, for example reducing transport or improving biosecurity, but their use must be carefully assessed to ensure that any harms are identified and minimised, and that welfare remains the primary consideration.¹⁵

Where animals are bred overseas and later imported to the UK to compete, it is important to acknowledge the UK's role in creating demand in these markets and take action to mitigate potential welfare risks. This could mean refusing animals from sources that cannot provide suitable assurances on welfare conditions, or working with partners to ensure any potential welfare concerns are addressed.

⁷ Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission. "Results of General Public Survey" (2022). <https://equinewellbeing.fei.org/assets/documents/Results%20of%20General%20Public%20Survey%20-%20%20Equine%20Ethics%20and%20Wellbeing%20Commission%20Report%202022.pdf>

⁸ World Horse Welfare. "National Survey of UK Citizen Attitudes Towards UK Equestrian Sport Industries". June (2024). <https://storage.googleapis.com/worldhorsewelfare-cloud/2025/01/d57ccf39-uk-citizen-attitudes-towards-horse-sports-2024-final.pdf>

⁹ British Veterinary Association, BVA Position on Extreme Conformation (2018), <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3122/bva-policy-position-on-extreme-conformation-september-2018.pdf>

¹⁰ Fiona Rioja-Lang, Heather Bacon, Melanie Connor, and Cathy M. Dwyer, "Prioritisation of Animal Welfare Issues in the UK Using Expert Consensus," *Veterinary Record* 187, no. 12 (2020): 490, <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.105964>

¹¹ Van Marle-Köster, Este, and Carina Visser. "Unintended Consequences of Selection for Increased Production on the Health and Welfare of Livestock." *Archives Animal Breeding* 64, no. 2 (2021): 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.5194/aab-64-177-2021>

¹² British Veterinary Association, Full BVA Position on Animal Welfare (2021), <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4273/full-bva-position-on-animal-welfare.pdf>

¹³ L. Stallones, P. McManus, and P. McGreevy, "Sustainability and the Thoroughbred Breeding and Racing Industries: An Enhanced One Welfare Perspective," *Animals* 13, no. 3 (2023): 490, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/13/3/490>

¹⁴ David J. Mellor, "Updating Animal Welfare Thinking: Moving Beyond the 'Five Freedoms' towards 'A Life Worth Living,'" *Animals* 6, no. 3 (2016): 21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

¹⁵ M. L. H. Campbell and P. Sandøe, "Welfare in Horse Breeding," *Veterinary Record* 176, no. 17 (April 25, 2015): 436–440, <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.102814>

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Breeding for performance sports can lack consistent, sport-specific oversight.¹⁶ It may fall outside the remit of official regulatory bodies, and practices can vary widely both between sports and within them. This inconsistency must not create welfare risks. All stakeholders should recognise that they share a lifelong duty of care for every animal bred for sport, and ensure they have sufficient knowledge to breed and/or care for an animal. Veterinary professionals and other welfare experts should help to educate relevant stakeholders, and to facilitate changes in management which promote improved welfare.

Stakeholders increasingly recognise that welfare obligations are not limited to the animals who reach competition. In Thoroughbred racing, for example, the Horse Welfare Board's (HWB) expanded definition of industry responsibility has clarified that all animals bred for sport fall within the scope of ethical and welfare obligations, including those who never compete.¹⁷ This principle has been echoed in aftercare initiatives and traceability reforms in both the UK and Ireland.^{18,19} Where animals are bred with sport as their intended purpose, there is a shared responsibility across stakeholders to support welfare throughout the animal's life, recognising practical and legal limits to sports' ability to control welfare once animals change ownership or use.

Applying the Five Domains – breeding and early life

Any sport involving animals should be able to offer animals the opportunity to experience good welfare at each stage of their life, including breeding animals and animals being bred. Based on the Five Domains, the following standards outline what is necessary to achieve this, and what stakeholders need to achieve to safeguard welfare:

- 1. Nutrition:** Nutrition has physical, mental, emotional, cognitive and social effects. Animals should receive species-appropriate nutrition for each life stage.^{20,21} This includes adequate maternal nutrition, safe and effective early feeding, and access to water. Good nutrition during early life supports immune development, growth, and metabolic health.²² Breeding animals, both male and female, should also receive appropriate diets that support wellbeing, gestation and recovery.²³ Feeding should be seen as an opportunity to promote positive experiences.
- 2. Environment:** Animals should be raised in physical environments that enhance welfare, with conditions that support comfort, safety, and freedom of movement, helping animals to rest and recover as well as grow. Housing and care should provide adequate space, suitable bedding or substrates, good air quality without aversive odours or pollutants, access to shelter and shade, appropriate light levels, and effective noise control. Environments should also enable proper rest and sleep, and access to movement and surfaces that encourage appropriate development of strong and resilient tissues. For breeding animals, housing should meet all their needs and only use confinement or isolation where it is clearly required for welfare.
- 3. Health:** Breeding decisions should prioritise genetic diversity and long-term health, and should aim to select away from inherited disorders and traits that compromise welfare.²⁴ Breeding management should avoid practices likely to compromise physical and psychological health or welfare.²⁵ Breeding choices should also avoid perpetuating traits likely to require surgical or other invasive interventions to enable animals to train or compete, for example conformational or airway characteristics associated with impaired function. As new breeding technologies become available, they may raise additional welfare

¹⁶ Wenche Farstad, "Ethics in Animal Breeding," *Reproduction in Domestic Animals*, first published November 25, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rda.13335>

¹⁷ British Horseracing Authority, "British Racing Partners with HEROS to Expand Its Safety Net and Begins Roll-Out of Further Aftercare Initiatives," July 20, 2022, https://www.britishhorseracing.com/press_releases/british-racing-partners-with-heros-to-expand-its-safety-net-and-begins-roll-out-of-further-aftercare-initiatives/

¹⁸ Retraining of Racehorses, RoR Strategy 2024–2026, 2024, <https://ror.org.uk/ror-strategy-2024-2026>

¹⁹ Treo Eile, "About Us," 2024, <https://www.treoeile.com/about/>

²⁰ L. Stallones, P. McManus, and P. McGreevy, "Sustainability and the Thoroughbred Breeding and Racing Industries: An Enhanced One Welfare Perspective," *Animals* 13, no. 3 (2023): 490, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13030490>

²¹ L. P. Case, *The Dog: Its Behavior, Nutrition, and Health*, 3rd ed. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2023)

²² J. Leng, C. Moller-Levet, R. I. Mansergh, and R. O'Flaherty, "Early-Life Gut Bacterial Community Structure Predicts Disease Risk and Athletic Performance in Horses Bred for Racing," *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): Article 8372, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-64657-6>

²³ L. Stallones, P. McManus, and P. McGreevy, "Sustainability and the Thoroughbred Breeding and Racing Industries: An Enhanced One Welfare Perspective," *Animals* 13, no. 3 (2023): 490, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13030490>

²⁴ R. D. Jolly, K. E. Dittmer, and H. T. Blair, "Animal Medical Genetics: A Perspective on the Epidemiology and Control of Inherited Disorders," *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* 64, no. 5 (2016): 195–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2015.1129296>

²⁵ P. McGreevy, J. Berger, N. De Brauwere, and O. Doherty, "Using the Five Domains Model to Assess the Adverse Impacts of Husbandry, Veterinary, and Equitation Interventions on Horse Welfare," *Animals* 8, no. 3 (2018): 41, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/8/3/41>

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concerns and should be approached with caution and strong oversight.^{26,27} In the early years of life, preventative veterinary care should be prioritised, and non-therapeutic interventions should be avoided, particularly where they may be undertaken primarily for appearance or perceived performance benefit, rather than the animal's welfare.²⁸ All possible measures should be taken to ensure an animal's early life supports their long term health, including correct development of tissue growth to reduce later risk of injury.

4. Behavioural Interactions:

- **Environment:** Animals should be able to explore, play, and become confident in varied surroundings that promote positive welfare and prepare them for the environments they may encounter later in training, competition, or post-career life.²⁹ This should include exposure to different surfaces, noise levels and visual stimuli. Enrichment should foster curiosity and adaptability with the aim of reducing stress in competitive settings.³⁰ Preparation for the environments animals will later encounter in sport should be introduced gradually and based on reward rather than punishment.
- **With other animals:** Species-specific needs should be considered, including the importance of socialisation for animals that naturally live in social groups. This is important in ensuring animals are comfortable when later exposed to the presence of other competitors or teammates in sport. Early interaction can also teach species-specific behaviour, help to develop behavioural stability and promote positive experiences.³¹
- **With humans:** Regular, positive handling can lay the foundation for trust and reduce future stress. Interactions should be predictable, calm, and appropriate to the developmental stage, while recognising that different species, and individual animals, may have different handling needs.³² This early exposure to humans can reduce the likelihood of undue stress during training, transport, or competition, where animals often interact with unfamiliar humans in an intensive environment.³³

5. Mental State: The early stages of life are when the foundations are set for an animal's future. The way young animals are cared for at this point will influence how they respond to training, competition and life after sport.³⁴ It is important that all care at this stage focuses on helping animals grow into healthy and well-adjusted individuals who can cope with new challenges and the demands of a sporting career. Supporting positive mental states from the very start is part of the responsibility that comes with breeding animals for sport. Animals who are emotionally resilient are more likely to adapt to changes and stressful situations, helping them to achieve a good life during their competitive career and after it ends.^{35,36}

Recommendation 1: All stakeholders involved in performance sports should formally recognise and share a collective, lifelong duty of care for every animal bred for sport, regardless of whether they compete.

Recommendation 2: Breeding and early life management decisions should prioritise long-term health and

²⁶ Maria Puchalska and Olga Witkowska-Piłaszewicz, "Gene Doping in Horse Racing and Equine Sports: Current Landscape and Future Perspectives," *Equine Veterinary Journal* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1111/evj.14418>

²⁷ British Veterinary Association. "Gene Editing." *BVA Policy Positions*. Accessed September 22, 2025. <https://www.bva.co.uk/take-action/our-policies/gene-editing/>.

²⁸ T. Q. Holmes and A. F. Brown, "Champing at the Bit for Improvements: A Review of Equine Welfare in Equestrian Sports in the United Kingdom," *Animals* 12, no. 9 (2022): 1186, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12091186>

²⁹ David J. Shepherdson, Jill D. Mellen, and Michael Hutchins, eds., *Second Nature: Environmental Enrichment for Captive Animals* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999)

³⁰ Saskia S. Arndt, Vivian C. Goerlich, and F. Josef van der Staay, "A Dynamic Concept of Animal Welfare: The Role of Appetitive and Adverse Internal and External Factors and the Animal's Ability to Adapt to Them," *Frontiers in Animal Science* 3 (2022): 908513, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fanim.2022.908513>

³¹ C. Hall and R. Kay, "Living the Good Life: A Systematic Review of Behavioural Signs of Affective State in the Domestic Horse (*Equus caballus*) and Factors Relating to Quality of Life. Part I: Fulfilment of Species-Specific Needs," *Animal Welfare*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1017/awf.2024.38>

³² Jean-Loup Rault, Susanne Waiblinger, Xavier Boivin, and Rebecca B. Hemsworth, "The Power of a Positive Human–Animal Relationship for Animal Welfare," *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 7 (2020): Article 590867, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.590867/full>.

³³ Andrew N. McLean and Janne Winther Christensen, "The Application of Learning Theory in Horse Training," *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 190 (2017): 18–27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2017.02.020>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

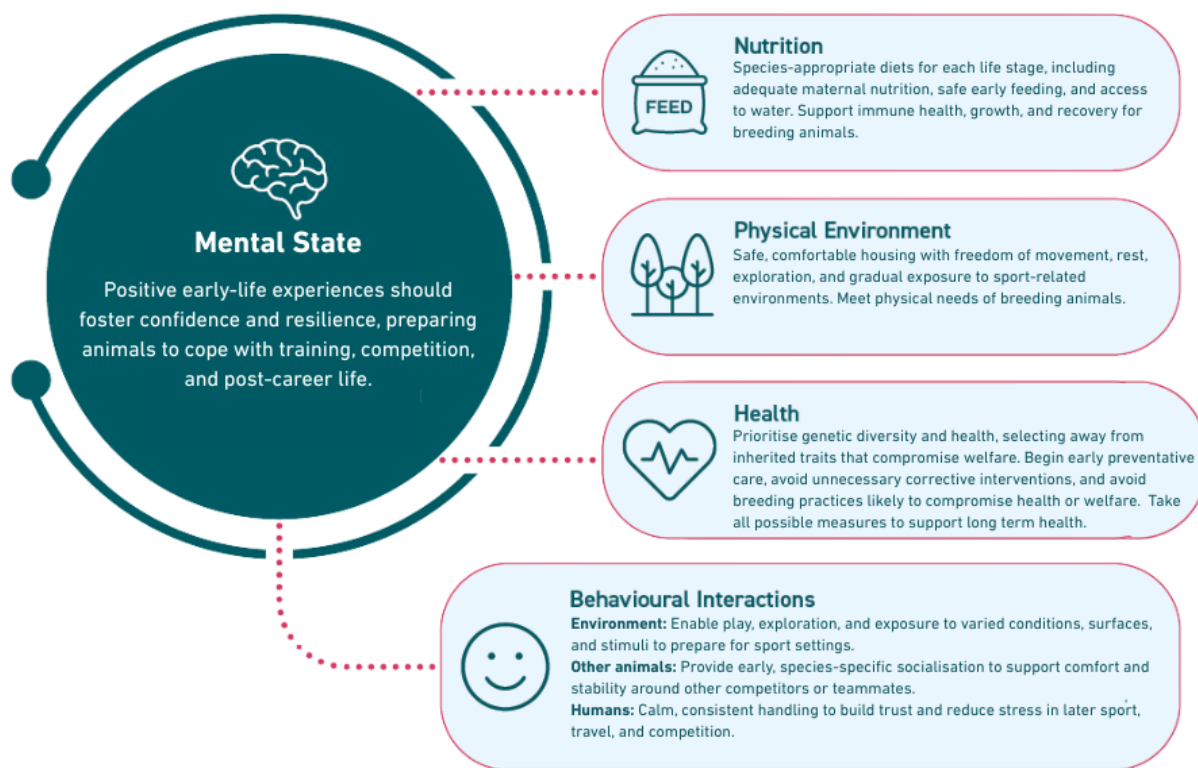
³⁵ M. Campbell and C. Lee, "A Perspective on Strategic Enrichment for Brain Development: Is This the Key to Animal Happiness?" *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 8 (2021): Article 720422

³⁶ F. Cirulli, A. Berry, L. T. Bonsignore, and F. Capone, "Early Life Influences on Emotional Reactivity: Evidence That Social Enrichment Has Greater Effects Than Handling on Anxiety-Like Behaviors, Neuroendocrine Responses to Stress, and Hippocampal Synaptic Plasticity," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 34, no. 6 (2010): 808–820, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0149763410000321>

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welfare over performance goals. This should include avoiding inherited disorders, preventing overuse of breeding animals, and ensuring physical and behavioural needs are met.

Figure 1: Welfare principles for breeding and early life



Training and Competition

The training and competition phase is the most visible and regulated stage of an animal's life in performance sport. Depending on the sport, animals may be undertaking a range of challenge types and levels, from minimal to peak physical and behavioural performance, sometimes in unfamiliar environments. Although this stage can present significant welfare risks, it also offers an opportunity to model practices that support good welfare.

Both the intensity and duration of demands placed on animals should be considered. While much attention focuses on avoiding harm, it is equally important to consider whether animals can have positive experiences through participation. Training and competition can provide valuable opportunities for exercise, stimulation, and the expression of natural behaviours.

These benefits should not be outweighed by harms. Animals should be appropriately prepared for what is expected of them, including physical conditioning and psychological preparation to reduce stress, fear and anxiety, build confidence, and prevent injury. Throughout their competitive careers, they should be supported to experience comfort, pleasure, interest, confidence, and a sense of control.

Applying the Five Domains – training and competition

The Five Domains can be used to help identify those conditions and interactions during training and competition likely to enhance welfare:

- 1. Nutrition:** Diets should meet species' needs while supporting the energy demands, hydration, and recovery required with training and competition. Feeding should prioritise long-term health over short-

term performance gains. Food should also be considered as an opportunity to provide positive experiences, for example, through variety, taste, or natural foraging opportunities where appropriate.^{37,38}

2. **Environment:** Some performance animals may experience frequent travel, unfamiliar venues, and long periods in stabling, kennels, or transport. Welfare risks here may include compromised biosecurity, poor ventilation, excessive noise or light, physical restriction, boredom, interrupted sleep, and exposure to thermal, auditory, visual and social and olfactory stressors.³⁹ Environments should be designed to meet physiological and behavioural needs and provide a balance of predictability and positive stimulation. Animals should also be gradually and positively exposed to new stimuli and experiences, so that they are prepared for competition environments without unnecessary stress. Any equipment used in sport should be designed and fitted to optimise comfort and avoid injury. Riders, handlers or human competitors should be fit and skilled to avoid creating discomfort or injury to the animal. In sports where ground conditions or facility design can influence injury risk, these features should be welfare-compatible, evidence-based, regularly inspected, and adapted in light of new research.^{40,41,42}
3. **Health:** Focus on minimising risk of injury and ongoing monitoring are vital throughout this phase.^{43,44} All health and welfare decisions should prioritise the animal's long-term health over immediate performance, even when commercial or competitive pressures are involved. Animals should be suitably trained to ensure they have sufficient strength, endurance, stability, flexibility and physiological fitness to be protected from injury and to be able to safely meet the demands of the sport. Suitable recovery periods should also be built into training programs to avoid risks such as exhaustion and repetitive strain injuries. All animals competing should be genuinely fit to do so. While anti-doping rules should deter use of banned substances, legal medications should also be used responsibly, for example, to avoid masking pain that requires rest.⁴⁵ It is also important to ensure that necessary treatments are not withheld or delayed, even if that results in an animal being stood down from the competition. Preventative care should also address the common injuries and physical stresses linked to each sport, as well as provide protection from diseases. To prevent pain and injury, it is also essential to ensure appropriate equipment and surfaces are used at all times, and that these are well maintained. The sport itself should also be designed to minimise the risk of injury or fatality. Good biosecurity is also essential whenever animals from different locations come together for training or competition. Sports bodies, event organisers and participants share responsibility for preventing the introduction and spread of infectious disease with veterinary professionals playing a key role in promoting and supporting good practice.
4. **Behavioural Interactions:**
 - **With the environment:** Animals should have regular chances to move, explore, and rest away from competition arenas or confined housing. Access to different environments, such as pasture for grazing, safe free-running areas, or spaces for natural activities, helps keep them physically fit, mentally engaged, and able to adapt to new competition settings. Environments should also provide animals with opportunities to make choices and exercise control, for example, through the use of feeding devices or other enrichment that encourages natural behaviours and problem-solving.^{46,47}

³⁷ Mellor, David J. "Enhancing Animal Welfare by Creating Opportunities for Positive Affective Engagement." *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* 63, no. 1 (2015): 3–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2014.926799>

³⁸ A. D. Ellis and C. Hall, "Environmental Enrichment," in *The Welfare of Horses*, ed. Natalie Waran (Academic Press, 2025), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B978032399508500001X>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ B. Hothersall and R. Casey, "Undesired Behaviour in Horses: A Review of Their Development, Prevention, Management and Association with Welfare," *Equine Veterinary Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 146–154, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2042-3292.2011.00296.x>

⁴¹ D. J. Mellor, "Positive Animal Welfare States and Encouraging Environment-Focused and Animal-to-Animal Interactive Behaviours," *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* 63, no. 1 (2015): 9–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2014.926800>

⁴² H. Hayati, D. Eager, and P. Walker, "The Effects of Surface Compliance on Greyhound Galloping Dynamics," *Proceedings of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Part P: Journal of Sports Engineering and Technology* 233, no. 4 (2019): 508–518, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464419319858544>

⁴³ G. Noble, "Horse Husbandry: Nutrition, Management and Welfare," *Animals* 13, no. 1 (2023): 169, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13010169>

⁴⁴ L. Stallones, P. McManus, and P. McGreevy, "Sustainability and the Thoroughbred Breeding and Racing Industries: An Enhanced One Welfare Perspective," *Animals* 13, no. 3 (2023): 490, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13030490>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Shepherdson, David J., Jill D. Mellen, and Michael Hutchins, eds. *Second Nature: Environmental Enrichment for Captive Animals*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, (1999)

⁴⁷ Arndt, Saskia S., Vivian C. Goerlich, and F. Josef van der Staay. "A Dynamic Concept of Animal Welfare: The Role of Appetitive and Adverse Internal and External Factors and the Animal's Ability to Adapt to Them." *Frontiers in Animal Science* 3 (2022): 908513. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fanim.2022.908513>

- **With other animals:** For most animals of naturally social species, regular contact with their own species remains important. This helps them stay emotionally stable, reduces the stress that can come from isolation, and supports the social skills they need to cope with the busy and unpredictable environments often found at competitions.^{48,49} Equally, animals should have the freedom to be with others or to spend time apart, depending on their individual temperament and needs. Social contact should therefore be managed in a way that supports choice and positive social interaction and is appropriate to each individual's needs.⁵⁰
 - **With humans:** Positive interactions with people are also essential.⁵¹ Training should be based on established learning theory so that animals are taught in ways they can understand, but without the use of equipment or methods which can cause fear or rely on force.^{52,53} This approach supports trust, reduces confusion and frustration, and helps animals feel confident in their work. Any equipment used must be comfortable, properly fitted, and designed to support communication and safety, not cause pain or restrict natural movement.⁵⁴ It should also be introduced gradually and positively so that the animal is not afraid or anxious about it.
- 5. Mental State:** Sports should provide regular opportunities for positive experiences, while minimising and outweighing negative ones, so as to support the overall positive mental state of animals involved. This is consistent with providing opportunities to live 'good lives' as defined in the literature^{55,56,57}. Cumulative stress, anxiety, and frustration should not be regarded as inevitable consequences of participation and should be actively identified, monitored, and reduced. Animals should be trained and competed within physical and psychological limits, informed by evidence (including from behavioural medicine), and veterinary oversight. Training and competition routines should be designed to minimise stressors, allow for decompression, and provide some degree of predictability and control. Positive experiences such as play, bonding, exploration, and rest are indicators of good welfare and should be actively promoted alongside performance.⁵⁸

Recommendation 3: Owners, trainers, handlers and other persons responsible for the care, training or management of animals, together with veterinary professionals should ensure that health and welfare are prioritised in all training, competition and veterinary decisions, even where this may conflict with performance goals. Decisions should be guided by what best supports animals' lifetime capacity to experience positive welfare.

Recommendation 4: Training and competition routines should be designed so that animals have the opportunity for experiences that are more positive than negative. Positive opportunities should be actively embedded, while negative experiences should be minimised and avoided as far as possible. Training methods should be consistent with learning theory, avoiding punishment or practices that cause fear, pain, or confusion.

⁴⁸ Kaitlyn Denommé, "Social Buffering as a Tool for Improving Rodent Welfare." *Comparative Medicine* 72, no. 1 (February 2022): 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.30802/AALAS-CM-21-000033>

⁴⁹ Lee, C., Verbeek, E., Doyle, R., Bateson, M., & Colditz, I. G. (2022). Social behavior in farm animals: Applying fundamental principles. *Animals*, 12(14), 1762. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12141762>

⁵⁰ David J. Mellor, "Updating Animal Welfare Thinking: Moving beyond the 'Five Freedoms' towards 'A Life Worth Living'," *Animals* 6, no. 3 (2016): 21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

⁵¹ Marvin, Seth, Kevin Sorenson, and John R. Stevens. "Bringing Human–Animal Interaction to Sport: Potential Impacts on Athletic Performance." *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 21, no. 4 (2022): 849–869. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2021.1916084>

⁵² McLean, Andrew N., and Janne Winther Christensen. "The Application of Learning Theory in Horse Training." *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 190 (2017): 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2017.02.020>

⁵³ Nicola J. Rooney and Sarah J. Cowan, "Training Methods and Owner–Dog Interactions: Links with Dog Behaviour and Learning Ability," *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 132, no. 3–4 (July 2011): 169–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2011.03.007>

⁵⁴ Nankervis, K., J. M. Williams, and D. Fisher. "The Role of the Equestrian Professional in Bridle and Bit Fit in the United Kingdom." *Animals* 14, no. 22 (2024): 3188. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14223188>

⁵⁵ Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), "Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain: Past, Present and Future" (2009), Accessed February 19, 2026. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fawc-report-on-farm-animal-welfare-in-great-britain-past-present-and-future>

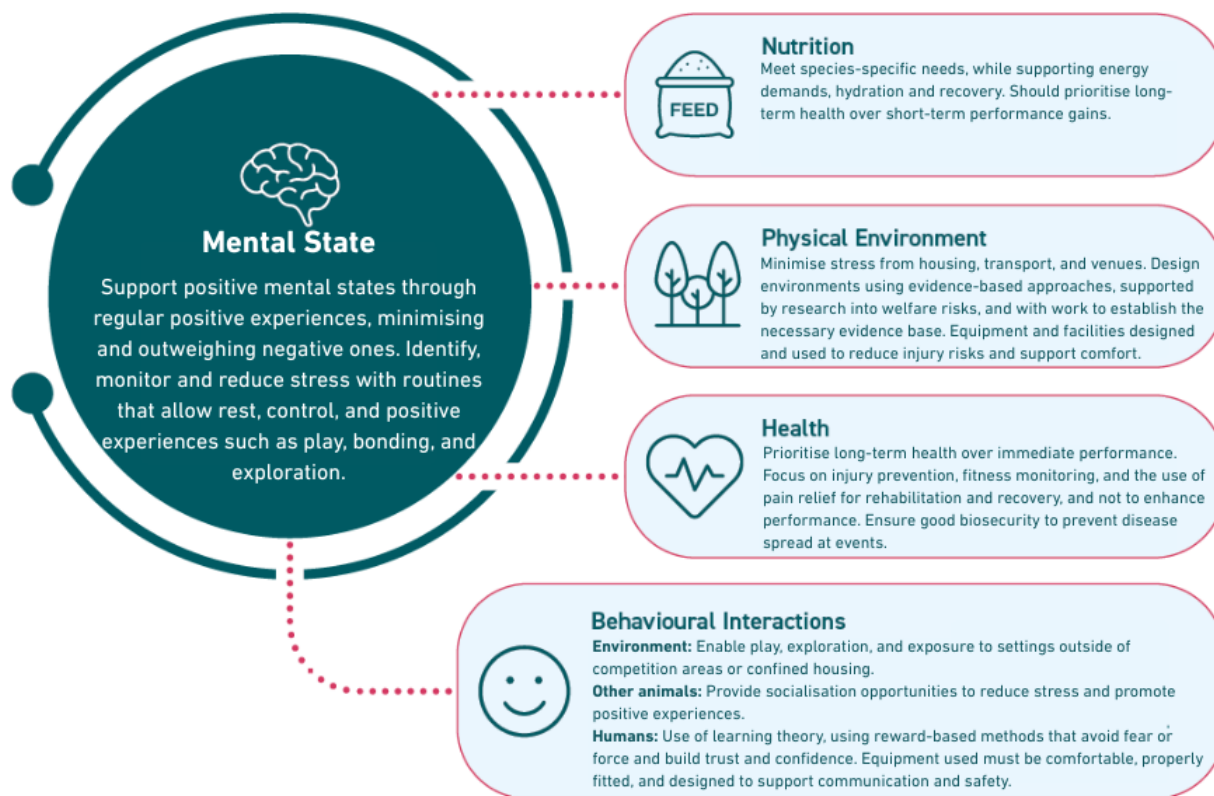
⁵⁶ Wathes, C, "Lives worth living?" *Veterinary Record*, 166: 468- 469 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.c849>

⁵⁷ Mellor, D.J. "Updating Animal Welfare Thinking: Moving beyond the 'Five Freedoms' towards 'A Life Worth Living'". *Animals*, 6, 21 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani6030021>

⁵⁸ D. J. Mellor, "Positive Animal Welfare States and Encouraging Environment-Focused and Animal-to-Animal Interactive Behaviours," *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* 63, no. 1 (2015): 9–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2014.926800>

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Figure 2: Welfare principles for training and competition



Post-Career

The end of an animal's competitive career does not end the sport's responsibility for their welfare. Whether an animal retires after a long career in competition or never makes it to competition level, this stage can be one of the most vulnerable.⁵⁹ With well-supported transitions, whether into retirement, alternative careers, or companionship roles, animals can experience enrichment, social bonds, and positive experiences beyond their competitive lives.

Planning for a good life, or at least a life worth living, beyond sport should begin from the moment the decision is made to breed an animal for sport. This requires early consideration of post-career options, rather than last-minute decisions which can be driven by convenience or cost. Key considerations include providing adequate support when rehoming, ensuring suitable post-career housing, and avoiding unregulated sales.^{60,61,62}

Euthanasia also has a role in safeguarding welfare. When used responsibly and in the best interest of the animal, for example where an animal cannot adapt to a life after sport, or where a life worth living cannot be maintained, euthanasia may be the most compassionate option^{63,64}. However, every effort should be made to ensure that animals bred for sport are given genuine opportunities for a good life after their careers, rather than being left in circumstances where euthanasia becomes the only compassionate option. Regulators and policymakers should reflect on the levels and circumstances of euthanasia within sporting disciplines and ask whether animals are being given suitable chances of a good life, or at least a life worth living, after sport.

⁵⁹ Tim Q. Holmes and Ashleigh F. Brown, "Champing at the Bit for Improvements: A Review of Equine Welfare in Equestrian Sports in the United Kingdom," *Animals* 12, no. 9 (May 5, 2022): 1186, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12091186>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Stevens, E. G., T. Baker, and N. Lewis. "Dealing with Sentient Surplus: A Moral Economy of Greyhound Rehoming." *Leisure Studies* 41, no. 5 (2022): 687–701. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486211054843>

⁶² C. W. Rogers, K. A. Legg, and J. Gibson, "Commercial Equine Production in New Zealand 4: Welfare Implications of the New Zealand Production Systems," *Animal Production Science* 63, no. 15 (2023): 1482–1489, <https://doi.org/10.1071/AN22424>

⁶³ Horse Welfare Board. *A Life Well-Lived: British Racing's Five-Year Welfare Strategy*. British Horseracing Authority, 2020. Retrieved from British Horseracing Authority.

⁶⁴ British Veterinary Association. *BVA Guide to Euthanasia*. London: British Veterinary Association, <https://www.bva.co.uk/resources-support/ethical-guidance/euthanasia-of-animals-guide/>

Responsibility extends to all animals bred for sport, not only those who reach competition. While industries cannot control every stage of an animal's subsequent life, they are responsible for supporting a transition into welfare-compatible post-career pathways. This includes, as far as practicable, integrating effective traceability, preparing animals behaviourally and emotionally for life after sport, and contributing to rehoming or aftercare infrastructure. Where external barriers exist, such as ineffective traceability systems, stakeholders should lobby relevant governments and regulators to improve this.

Applying the Five Domains – post-career

Based on the Five Domains, the following standards outline how welfare needs can be upheld during retirement and at the end of an animal's life:

- 1. Nutrition:** Diets should be adapted for changed activity levels, with a focus on maintaining health and appropriate body condition, and meeting the needs of the animal's lifestage (eg food tailored to senior animals).⁶⁵ Feeding should continue to be seen as an opportunity to promote positive experiences.
- 2. Environment:** Animals need access to environments that support rest, freedom of movement, and comfort with consideration for age, mobility, and social preferences. Environments should offer predictability to support relaxation and calmness, and include options for outdoor access, resting, and thermal comfort.
- 3. Health:** Ongoing preventative health care is essential. Retired animals may develop chronic conditions or require long-term management of issues that began earlier in life, and their capacity to cope with new roles or activities will vary.^{66,67} For some, limitations may relate not only to health but also to conformation or behavioural and psychological capacity. Adequate access to veterinary care remains key, and end-of-life decisions must be based on welfare need, not solely on economics or convenience.
- 4. Behavioural Interactions:**
 - **With the environment:** Retired animals should have safe opportunities to explore new surroundings, access varied terrain, and engage in species-typical behaviours such as grazing, foraging, and play.⁶⁸
 - **With other animals:** Where appropriate for the species and the individual, retirement should include opportunities for ongoing social contact and interaction to provide comfort, reduce isolation, and support emotional well-being. Housing should be arranged with compatibility in mind to prevent stress and conflict.⁶⁹
 - **With humans:** Positive interactions help animals adjust to new contexts, experience security, and remain behaviourally healthy.⁷⁰ Animals leaving structured sport environments may require support during behavioural transition, particularly those used to intense routines or limited choice.⁷¹ Behavioural preparation before rehoming and ongoing support afterwards can ease the transition out of sport and reduce the risk of rehoming failure.⁷²
- 5. Mental State:** Leaving sport may require adjustments for animals if they are exposed to new routines and environments.⁷³ By providing stability, security, and chances for enjoyable experiences, animals feel confident and content in this new stage of life. When a life worth living can no longer be maintained for

⁶⁵ G. K. Noble, "Horse Husbandry – Nutrition, Management and Welfare," *Animals* 13, no. 1 (2023): 169, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13010169>

⁶⁶ Anna M. Ford, *Beyond the Track: Retraining the Thoroughbred from Racehorse to Riding Horse* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2020).

⁶⁷ Kिर्रilly L. Crawford, Alison Finnane, R. Mark Greer, and Clive J. C. Phillips, "Appraising the Welfare of Thoroughbred Racehorses in Training in Queensland, Australia: The Incidence, Risk Factors and Outcomes for Horses after Retirement from Racing," *Animals* 11, no. 1 (2021): 142, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11010142>

⁶⁸ H. Hothersall and R. Casey, "Undesired Behaviour in Horses: A Review of Their Development, Prevention, Management and Association with Welfare," *Equine Veterinary Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 146–154, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2042-3292.2011.00296.x>

⁶⁹ A. Wiśniewska, M. Janczarek, A. Kędzierski, and E. Wilk, "Minimizing the Effects of Social Isolation of Horses by Providing Visual Contact with Other Horses," *Animals* 12, no. 17 (2022): 2180, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12172180>

⁷⁰ Jean-Loup Rault, Susanne Waiblinger, Xavier Boivin, and Rebecca B. Hemsworth, "The Power of a Positive Human–Animal Relationship for Animal Welfare," *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 7 (2020): Article 590867, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.590867/full>.

⁷¹ Henry Buller, Karen Fox, Kloe Bentley, and Kristy Yeung, "Dealing with Sentient Surplus: A Moral Economy of Greyhound Rehoming," *Animals* 12, no. 7 (2022): 903, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/25148486211054843>

⁷² H. Hothersall and R. Casey, "Undesired Behaviour in Horses: A Review of Their Development, Prevention, Management and Association with Welfare," *Equine Veterinary Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 146–154, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2042-3292.2011.00296.x>

⁷³ Henry Buller, Karen Fox, Kloe Bentley, and Kristy Yeung, "Dealing with Sentient Surplus: A Moral Economy of Greyhound Rehoming," *Animals* 12, no. 7 (2022): 903, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/25148486211054843>

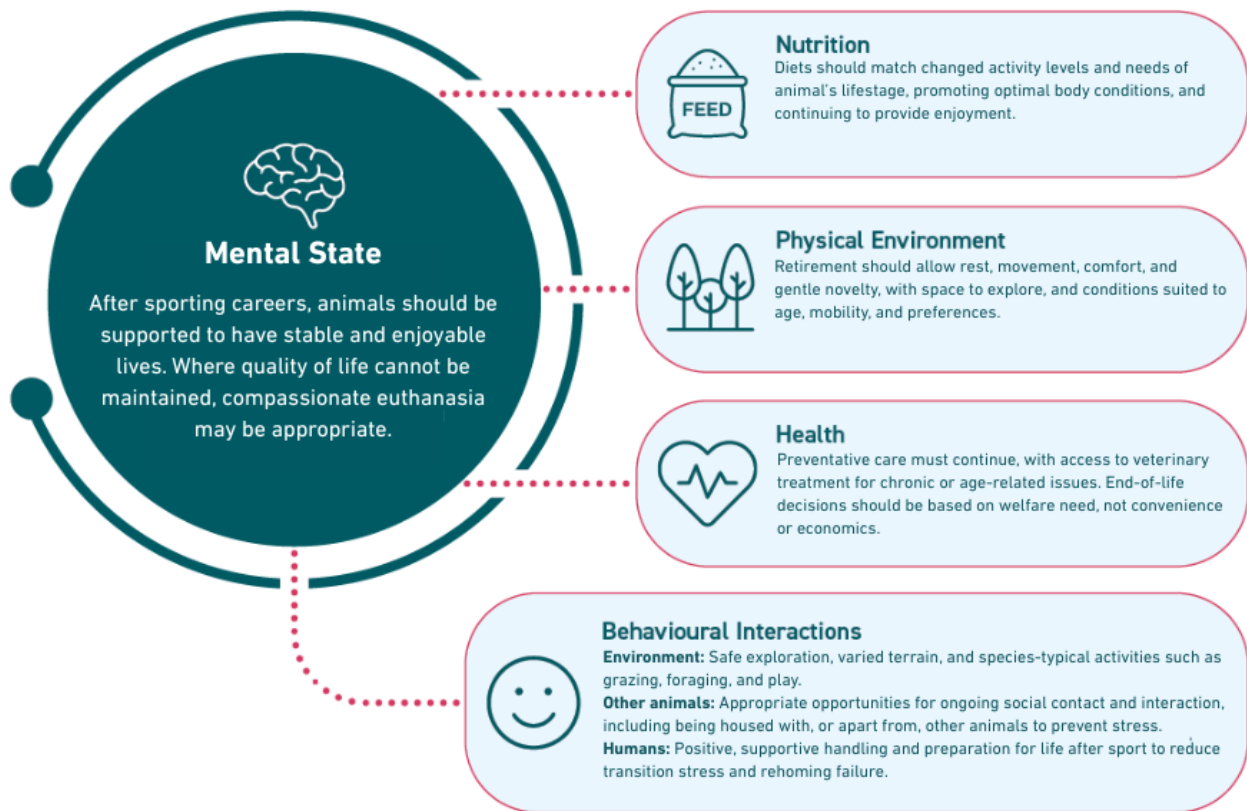
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an animal, end-of-life care must focus on keeping them free from fear, pain, and distress. In those situations, euthanasia may be the most compassionate choice.^{74,75}

Recommendation 5: All stakeholders involved in performance sports should consider what happens to animals after their sporting career, starting from the point of breeding. This should prioritise at least a life worth living through appropriate care, retraining, rehoming or retirement. While no system can control every part of an animal's future, all those involved in the sport share responsibility for planning early and making sure suitable aftercare options are available.

Recommendation 6: Animals leaving sport should be supported through a managed transition that reflects their individual welfare, behavioural and physical needs. Not all animals will be suited to post-career roles, and where a good quality of life cannot be achieved, euthanasia may be a humane and appropriate option.

Figure 3: Welfare principles for post-career



Cross-cutting issues

While looking at welfare stage-by-stage helps to identify the needs and risks animals face at each point of their lives, some issues cut across every stage. Traceability, the roles of vets and the obligations of regulators are three areas that have a significant impact on animal health and welfare, and on their opportunities to live good lives. However, it must also be recognised that how far these opportunities can be realised will also vary between individuals.

⁷⁴ Horse Welfare Board. A Life Well-Lived: British Racing's Five-Year Welfare Strategy. British Horseracing Authority, 2020. Retrieved from British Horseracing Authority.

⁷⁵ British Veterinary Association. BVA Guide to Euthanasia. London: British Veterinary Association, <https://www.bva.co.uk/resources-support/ethical-guidance/euthanasia-of-animals-guide/>

Traceability

Effective traceability is the foundation of lifetime welfare responsibility. It requires accurate, accessible record of animal's identity, ownership and movement across their life, to enable accountability and interventions where necessary. As legislation currently stands, responsibility for this is divided between sporting regulators and national systems, and the effectiveness depends on both.

Weak or fragmented systems limit understanding of welfare outcomes and allow animals to fall through gaps, especially those who never compete, retire early, are sold overseas, or move through unregulated routes.⁷⁶ Many systems are currently outdated, relying on paper-based records, lacking proportionate enforcement mechanisms, or being overly complex. Traceability is often strongest during the competition phase when regulatory oversight is highest, but significantly weaker before and after, creating risks for welfare, public health, and public confidence.

To be effective, traceability systems should:

- Begin at or before birth, with formal notification systems
- Include accurate and accessible records of identification, ownership, movement, and health status
- Track animals regardless of whether they reach competition
- Be digitally integrated and user-friendly, reducing the burden on keepers and increasing compliance
- Be backed by legislation and enforcement, including penalties for non-compliance
- Include retirement, rehoming and end-of-life outcomes, not just active training and competition data

Efforts to improve traceability in sectors like Thoroughbred racing, including the development of digital passport systems and real-time updates, provides promise for the future.⁷⁷ However, improvements should extend beyond high-profile sports and include animals entering sport who were not initially bred for that purpose. A unified approach across all performance disciplines and species would help to close current gaps and ensure that every animal involved in sport remains visible within the system. This could be best achieved by developing UK-wide traceability systems encompassing all equids and dogs, before being extended to other species. Given the frequent cross-border movement of animals involved in sport, particularly between Great Britain and Ireland, traceability systems should also be interoperable with equivalent international systems to ensure animals remain traceable from birth, including those bred outside the UK but entering UK competition systems. Traceability systems should also interact with competition systems to enable identification of potential disease transmission risks associated with specific events or locations.

Alongside individual records, collecting and sharing anonymised, sector-wide data is vital for improving welfare, for example, by identifying patterns in injury rates, rehoming success, or euthanasia decisions. Transparency on these outcomes is key to building public confidence and continuous improvement.

Recommendation 7: To ensure all animals involved in performance sport are identifiable, the UK Government, working with sporting regulators and industry, should establish a unified, digital, legally enforced, lifetime traceability system. This system should operate from birth and be interoperable with relevant international traceability systems to ensure animals bred outside the UK but entering UK sport remain traceable throughout their lives. This could be best achieved by encompassing all equids and dogs, before being extended to other species.

Role of Vets

BVA's position on animal welfare states that "Overall, the veterinary profession has a dual duty – to advocate for the best interests of animals under the care of individual veterinary surgeons (at individual level), as well as to advocate for changes and solutions to address the root causes of animal welfare problems (at community, national and international levels)."⁷⁸ As trusted clinicians and advocates for animals, vets play a central role across all stages of performance sport and must be supported to prioritise welfare, even when this conflicts with levels of

⁷⁶ Horse Welfare Board. A Life Well-Lived: British Racing's Five-Year Welfare Strategy. British Horseracing Authority, 2020. Retrieved from British Horseracing Authority

⁷⁷ Racing Digital, "Our Plan," accessed June 20, 2025, <https://www.racingdigital.co.uk/our-plan>

⁷⁸ British Veterinary Association, Full BVA Position on Animal Welfare (2021), <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/4273/full-bva-position-on-animal-welfare.pdf>

clinical understanding, or commercial, competitive, or reputational pressures. This requires clear regulatory backing for welfare-led decisions.

Sports should actively support veterinary decision-making based on welfare, fostering a culture where welfare consistently takes precedence. All stakeholders, including absentee owners, should understand their role in protecting animal welfare and have sufficient knowledge to reduce welfare risks. Vets can have an important role in educating those involved in performance sport about welfare needs, including on injury prevention and how improved welfare can support improved performance, and in facilitating changes in management which promote improved welfare.

Vets may face pressure from owners, trainers, or other stakeholders, particularly when an animal's ability to continue competing does not align with its welfare needs. Challenges can also arise from lack of clarity over day-to-day responsibility for an animal's care, since this may not always fall to the owner. These situations are complex and can place vets in difficult positions. While ethical pressures are a recognised part of any veterinary role, and vets uphold their professional duties, it can place significant strain on their mental health and well-being. To protect veterinary independence, sports should set out clear regulations on vets' responsibilities and, to the best of their ability, ensure that vets have access to the most complete medical and performance history of animals under their care. It would also be beneficial to provide basic traceability information, to enable vets to assess potential disease risk associated with locations or events. Effective enforcement of regulations is also necessary to ensure individuals cannot carry out practices which compromise this independence, such as pressuring or replacing vets to obtain a desired outcome.

Beyond clinical care, veterinary professionals should hold a formal role in governance, helping shape the rules and standards that influence welfare throughout an animal's sporting life. Allied professionals and welfare experts should also contribute and support a culture of good welfare.

Recommendation 8: Veterinary professionals should always have a role in governance bodies, rule-setting, and oversight of welfare standards, whilst protecting their clinical independence. Regulators and governance bodies must enable this by embedding and empowering veterinary leadership across their performance sport in the UK. They should actively support veterinary decision-making based on welfare, fostering a culture where welfare consistently takes precedence. Allied professionals and welfare experts also play a key role in supporting this culture.

Recommendation 9: Regulators, governing bodies and those responsible for the care of animals involved in sport should, to the best of their ability, ensure that vets have access to basic traceability information as well as the most complete medical and performance history of animals under their care.

Governance and Regulation

Strong regulation can significantly benefit animal welfare in sport, and where governing bodies exist, they can also act advocates and protectors of the animals involved. However, regulation and governance varies widely across performance sports, and many operate without formal governance. Approaches from governing bodies also differ, with some favouring voluntary codes over formal, audited requirements. In addition to formal regulation, education and professional guidance (including that provided by the regulators of sports which use animals) play a central role in delivering sustained welfare improvement. Governing bodies and sector organisations should support evidence-based training, continuing professional development, and clear practical guidance for owners, trainers and other stakeholders, recognising that cultural change and competence development are often as important as rule enforcement in achieving high welfare standards.

Any rules or codes should be based on clear, enforceable welfare standards that reflect the latest evidence, and compatible with at least a life worth living, preferably a good life. They should be transparent, accountable, properly resourced, adaptable to new evidence-based concerns, and set and enforced impartially, free from conflicts of interest, whilst also recognising that commercial stakeholders share responsibility for safeguarding animal welfare.

The role of governing bodies is not limited to enforcing rules. They can also shape how animals are perceived and valued within a sport, ensuring animal welfare is treated as a non-negotiable core value. It also ensures that veterinary professionals, welfare experts, and independent advisors have a meaningful voice at the highest levels of decision-making.

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Not all sports have formal governing bodies. In these cases, sector groups should develop guidance and voluntary codes to support stakeholders. Competition organisers can also require entrants to meet defined welfare standards, helping drive education and improvement across the sector.

Recommendation 10: Governing bodies should set and enforce clear welfare standards that are transparent, evidence-based, and adequately resourced, ensuring animal welfare is treated as a non-negotiable core value within their sport. They should operate with independence in rule-setting and enforcement to avoid conflicts of interest, while ensuring that all stakeholders, including those with commercial roles, are aware of a shared responsibility for safeguarding animal welfare. Sports without formal governing bodies should develop voluntary codes for stakeholders to follow.

Conclusion

Animals in performance sports should be supported to have at least 'lives worth living' and preferably 'good lives'. This applies not only during their moments of visibility in competition, but throughout their entire lives, from breeding and training to retirement and end-of-life. Safeguarding welfare requires a lifetime approach, and where challenges are identified, the veterinary profession has a key role in supporting and educating to ensure that welfare remains high priority at all levels of performance sport.

This position applies the Five Domains across three key life stages, setting out what should be considered to promote positive welfare in practice. It also sets out BVA's view that all sports involving animals should actively promote positive experiences and minimise negative ones, to maximise each animal's opportunities for a good life.