

British Dressage  
Equine Welfare





Bringing people and horses  
together in harmony

## Objective of dressage

The development of a happy, healthy athlete through harmonious education.

As a result, horses become calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding between athletes as a partnership.





## British Dressage Charter for the Horse

British Dressage requires all those involved in national and international equestrian sport to adhere to the FEI Code of Conduct and Equestrian Charter, and to acknowledge and accept that the welfare of the horse must always be paramount, and never be subordinated to competitive or commercial influences.

Everyone involved in the sport of dressage has a duty to adhere to the principles of good horsemanship and present a harmonious partnership between horse and rider at all times. In addition, all members of British Dressage agree to support and promote the following ten key principles that are integral to equine welfare:

- We recognise that the horse is an intelligent and sentient being and will be sensitive to all physical, emotional, and social interactions.
- We have a collective responsibility to care for the horse throughout its entire lifetime, before, during and after its competition career.
- We must ensure that horses have access to adequate food, forage and water, and that their nutritional needs are met at all times.
- We have a duty to provide a suitable physical environment for the horse to live comfortably and securely, with a sufficient supply of clean bedding.
- We will provide horses with the freedom to interact and exercise with other animals and humans in open spaces, in the best interests of their mental and physical health.
- We will ensure that all tack and equipment is correctly fitted and well maintained, used for its intended purpose, and sympathetic to the horse.
- We will ensure prompt and appropriate treatment in case of injury or illness, and pledge strict adherence to all vaccination, microchipping, biosecurity, and anti-doping regulations.
- We agree that all veterinary decisions must be made in the best interest of the horse, informed by the latest scientific advice, avoiding unnecessary treatment or medication.
- We will respect every horse equally, ensuring that our training and performance goals are consistent with the individual's age, ability, level of maturity and development potential.
- We commit to ongoing training activity to achieve positive and harmonious interactions between horse and rider, based on the horse's natural characteristics and behaviour.

# British Dressage Horse Welfare Statement

In all respects, our over-riding principle is that the welfare of the horse is paramount and should never be subordinated to competitive or commercial influences, or any other factors. All guidance in the BD Members' Handbook should be read and applied in accordance with this principle.

By participating in British Dressage activity, members agree to abide by the Charter of the Horse and BD Code of Conduct for Horse Welfare at all times. To maintain a consistent standard and approach to equine welfare, in both national and international competition, BD also adopts the FEI Code of Conduct for Horse Welfare and the FEI Equestrian Charter. All BD members are expected to adhere to these equine welfare policies governing both national and international equestrian sport, regardless of their individual role.

It is the responsibility of the Board of Directors of British Dressage (BD) to take the lead on welfare matters, formulating all associated policies and procedures. Technical Committees will also make policy recommendations on welfare issues relating to the areas that fall within their remit, which will then be reviewed by the Board. Equine welfare is a standing agenda item on all Board, Technical and Regional Committee meetings, with an escalation process in place to address any welfare issues or concerns that may arise.

## Code of Conduct for Horse Welfare

British Dressage welfare rules and policies have been developed in consultation with World Horse Welfare. In all respects, the welfare of the horse must come first. Achieving high standards of horse welfare involves following proven methods of horse management, applying knowledge of good horsemanship, and understanding horse behaviour, while keeping up to date with current scientific knowledge.

Those in the sport of dressage are normally very caring of their animals, and most welfare-related incidents are usually due to a lack of knowledge and understanding. Welfare breaches are never acceptable, however, whether they are deliberate or through a lack of awareness, so we have a proactive approach to horse welfare and its implementation to prevent such situations occurring and maintain the highest standards at all times.





## General Welfare and Care at Home

At all stages during the preparation, training and competing of horses, welfare must take precedence over all other demands. For example:

- Good horse management, based on the Five Domains of animal welfare (nutrition, environment, health, behavioural interactions, and mental state / experiences) and the Three F's (friends, forage and freedom).
- Provision of suitable stabling or shelter and extended access to turnout or exercise daily, as well as socialisation with other horses/ponies (where available).
- Feeding the correct amounts of forage daily, with adequate supplies of water.
- Exercise and training that is compatible with the principles of good horse management and does not compromise equine welfare.
- Farriery, foot care, and shoeing must be of the correct and proper standard.
- Sensory hairs around the mouth, nose and eyes must not be clipped or shaved as this may reduce the horse's sensory ability. Areas of hair that must be clipped or shaven to allow veterinary treatment are exempt from this rule and a veterinary certificate will need to be sent to BDHQ.
- Any practices that could cause physical or mental suffering or distress to the horse will not be tolerated in any circumstances.
- Horses must be treated sympathetically and humanely when they are no longer able to compete, whether through prolonged injury or retirement.
- Proper care and consideration should be given to the lifetime care of the horse, to ensure that it has a life well lived at all stages, before, during and after its dressage career.

Everyone involved in equestrian sport and the care of horses, regardless of their role, must make every effort to keep their knowledge and expertise, up to date. Access to relevant horse care and stable management training and education is provided by British Dressage and other member bodies across the British Equestrian Federation.

## Care When Riding

Riders must train and present their horse in a sympathetic manner, according to the recognised scales of training.

The horse's current physical and mental stage of maturity should be taken into consideration when planning their competition or training activity.

All head/neck postures must be achieved as sensitively as possible and in accordance with a horse's natural head carriage and conformation.

To maintain the suppleness and health of the horse, it is expected that different head positions may be used in the warm-up – from stretching/lengthening and contracting/shortening of the horse's muscles, and from periods of relaxation to heightened physical effort. However, hyperflexion is not acceptable at any time.

The aim of the warm-up is to present the horse in the arena moving with athleticism and freedom, and in a balance commensurate with their stage of training.

A cool-down period after the performance is critical to the horse's well-being, the intensity of exercise should be decreased allowing the horse to relax mentally, and for heart rate and respiration to return to normal.

## Fitness to Compete

Horses / ponies and riders must be fit, competent and in good health before they are allowed to compete.

- Fitness and competence – participation in competition is restricted to fit horses and athletes of proven competence, which will be assessed by the judge during the test.
- Health status – no horse experiencing or showing symptoms of disease, lameness or other significant ailments or pre-existing clinical conditions should compete, or continue to compete, when to do so would compromise its welfare. Veterinary advice must be sought whenever there is any doubt.
- Pregnant/recently foaled mares – mares must not compete after their fourth month of pregnancy or before the foal is weaned. Most mares can begin a gradual reintroduction to ridden exercise or training around eight weeks after a complication-free foaling. Any mare that has experienced complications at birth should be fully examined by a veterinarian and passed as fit to compete before recommencing activity. These requirements also apply to mares that have lost a foal.



## Equine Carrying Capacity and Fitness

All BD members are required to uphold the highest standards of welfare, health, and wellbeing, and central to this is the harmonious partnership between horse and rider.

The rider should be the appropriate size for their horse or pony and suitably mounted, in terms of weight, height, size and frame. The horse and rider partnership must be in balance, and the rider should not exert undue influence on or restrict the horse's natural way of going.

The rider should be proportionate to their horse or pony, with the core stability, suppleness, and fitness necessary to achieve a harmonious way of going. The age, type, fitness, and body condition score of the horse or pony should also be considered when assessing carrying capacity.

As a general guideline, it is recommended that the maximum load of an equine, including tack and equipment, should not exceed 20% of the horse's total body weight, based on a horse with a 'good' condition score (in accordance with BHS guidance, a healthy score is 2.5 to 3 out of 5, unless your vet advises otherwise). In most cases it would be optimal to maintain a ratio below this level.

It is the members' responsibility to ensure that they respect these guidelines, in the interests of equine welfare. Everyone involved in the sport of dressage has a role to play in ensuring that these guidelines are followed during BD training and competition activity, including organisers, officials, and coaches.

The purpose of this guidance is to ensure that a member's way of riding is effective and sympathetic to their horse. It is not a measure to prevent their participation. If any member feels that this may cause issues for their equine partnership, then it is recommended that they consult with their vet and coach for further expert advice.

**Additional training and education resources are also available on the BD website, including information on nutrition, general health, and fitness.**

## Care at Competitions

All British Dressage competitions, training and events are run with the welfare of the horse as the paramount consideration, without prejudice to equine welfare standards.

- Fitness to travel – a horse must be fit to travel to and from a competition.
- Transport – during transportation, care must be taken to avoid injury or risk to horse health. Vehicles must be safe, well-ventilated, and maintained to a proper standard.
- Transit – all journeys must be planned carefully, and include contingency plans, to minimise any potential stress to horses and allow regular rest periods, with access to food and water.
- Unloading – horses must not be left standing on lorries any longer than absolutely necessary and should be walked regularly.
- Competition areas – horses must be trained and compete on suitable and safe surfaces. All equipment and arenas must be designed with the safety of the horse in mind.
- Ground surfaces – all competition and training surfaces must be prepared and maintained to optimal condition to minimise the potential for injury to the horse.
- Stabling at events – stables must be safe, hygienic, comfortable, well-ventilated and of sufficient size for the type and disposition of the horse.
- Stable provision – access to clean, good quality bedding must always be available. A fresh drinking water supply and wash-down facilities should be provided by the venue, while riders must ensure that horses have access to adequate feed and roughage.
- Extreme weather – competitions must not take place in extreme weather conditions if the welfare or safety of the horse may be compromised. Provision must be made for cooling horses quickly after competing in hot or humid conditions.



## Tack and Equipment, including Fitting

Tack must be designed and fitted to avoid the risk of pain or injury to the horse. All tack and equipment should be cleaned regularly and kept soft and pliable to prevent injury through rubbing. Tack and equipment must be correctly fitted and used as intended by design, in accordance with the manufacturer's guidelines, as poorly fitted, over tightened, or inappropriate tack can cause pain, injury, and discomfort to the horse.

### Bit

The bit is used to facilitate communication between the horse and rider. The contact with the bit should be sympathetic and softened once the horse reacts positively to the aid. Sustained and/or forceful rein aids, causing the horse to demonstrate discomfort or pain, will be deemed as inappropriate riding. A rider must never use rein aids to punish the horse.

### Nosebands

Nosebands should be correctly fitted in a way that allows the horse to mouth on the bit. They should not be fitted too tight, or positioned so high that they rub on the cheek bones, or so low that the skin gets pinched between the noseband and bit. This applies to all types of nosebands, including both the upper and lower noseband.

### Saddle

The saddle and girth should be correctly fitted to avoid any rubbing or discomfort to the horse.

### Spurs

Spurs are optional, but if worn must be correctly fitted and only used to refine and support the rider's leg aid, thereby improving a horse's responsiveness. Excessive or persistent use of the spur is not acceptable. There must be no blood visible, no raising or reddening of the skin, no sore patches or bruising.

### Whip

The whip should only be used as a training aid, to support the rider's leg when a horse is not confidently forwards, or to increase activity in the hind legs. It could also be used to help keep a horse straight and attentive. The whip should be held with the tapered end pointing towards the ground and must be used with care. Any use of the whip other than as a training aid will be deemed as unacceptable.



## Examples of Abuse

- Misuse of aids – abuse of a horse using natural riding aids or artificial aids (e.g., whips, spurs, bit, etc.) will not be tolerated.
- Artificial aids – excessive and inappropriate use of spurs and/or the whip (such as location or frequency) is not acceptable.
- Over-working – to ride/compete an obviously exhausted, lame, or injured horse.
- Lameness – riding an unsound or unlevel horse.
- Distress – To allow any horse or pony to manifest unnecessary distress or fail to alleviate distress. This includes any mental or physical suffering, whether caused by the rider or avoidable external factors.
- Aggression – Any form of aggressive or forceful action, whether when riding or handling the horse from the ground, is unacceptable. Under no circumstances should a rider act in a negative manner to chastise or punish the horse.
- Force – Any use of force and exerting unnecessary or excessive pressure on the horse, including inappropriate or disproportionate corrections, is not tolerated.
- Hyperflexion – over flexion of the horse's neck, by exerting force or pressure through the reins to hold the head in an unnatural position (also referred to as Rollkur), is not permitted.
- Blood – if fresh blood shows anywhere on the horse, particularly in the mouth or area of the spurs, it will be eliminated by the judge.

British Dressage takes a zero tolerance approach to all instances of abuse. If you witness any actions or behaviour that contravenes our equine welfare policies, please follow the escalation process and reporting procedure detailed on page 10.

## Veterinary

- Doping and Medication – use of doping or abuse of medication is a serious welfare issue and is not acceptable. After any veterinary treatment, sufficient time must be allowed for full recovery before competition.
- Veterinary attendance – at domestic international fixtures and national championships, veterinary expertise must always be available on site, and all other national competitions must have a vet on call. If a horse is injured or exhausted during a competition, the athlete must dismount, and a veterinarian must check the horse.
- Veterinary treatment – wherever necessary, the horse should be collected by ambulance and transported to the nearest relevant treatment centre for further assessment and therapy. Injured horses must be given full and proper supportive treatment before transport.
- Lameness – if a horse / pony has been eliminated during a test for lameness, they cannot compete or be ridden again on the same day. They may only be presented for a subsequent test at a multi-day competition and / or championships with written veterinary certification that the horse has been passed as fit to compete.
- Competition injuries – the incidence of injuries sustained in competition should be reported to British Dressage for monitoring purposes. In the event of retirement during competition, the Judge at C is responsible for completing and submitting a welfare incident report form. If an injury is sustained on site but out of competition, the venue organiser should complete and submit a welfare incident report form.
- Euthanasia – if the injuries are deemed severe, and potentially life-threatening, the horse may need to be euthanised on humane grounds by a veterinarian, following consultation with the owner of the horse, with the sole aim of minimising suffering.



## Surgical Procedures

Surgical procedures that threaten horse welfare or the safety of other horses and/or athletes are not permitted.

A horse is not eligible to compete when a limb or part of a limb, is hyposensitive or hypersensitive (both of which shall constitute 'abnormal' limb sensitivity). Hypersensitive limbs have an excessive or abnormal reaction to palpation. Hyposensitive limbs include any alteration in sensitivity induced by a neurectomy or chemical desensitisation, for as long as the alteration in sensitivity persists.

To continue participating in British Dressage competition, horses that have previously had these surgical procedures on any limb must be re-examined and certified as fit to compete by a veterinarian. The registered owner will need to provide a veterinary certificate and complete a surgical procedure additional information form, detailing the specific nature of the operation, with written confirmation from the vet that the horse has undergone a full assessment, including when ridden, and has been passed fit to return to competition. The Welfare Panel will then review the evidence presented and determine whether the procedure contravenes BD rules and regulations on grounds of equine welfare.

Horses that undergo surgical procedures on any limb that may put its welfare or the safety of other horses and/or athletes at risk must have a minimum period of six months' rehabilitation. After this point, the registered owner must provide BD with a veterinary certificate post-rehabilitation, detailing the specific details of the operation, with written confirmation from the vet that the surgery does not contravene BD rules and regulations and that the horse has undergone a full assessment, including when ridden, and has been passed fit to compete.

The Welfare Panel will then review the evidence presented and determine whether the horse can return to competition.

The Surgical Procedure Information form can be requested from the BD head office by sending an email to: [operations@britishdressage.co.uk](mailto:operations@britishdressage.co.uk).





## Competitions where a BD Steward is present

Where blood is noticed on a horse during the warm-up, the rider must be made aware, and the horse inspected. If the horse shows fresh blood in the mouth or area of the spurs, the rider must retire. If the rider fails to do so, this will be reported to the Judge at C, with supporting evidence, and the horse will be eliminated from that class. The horse may be presented for subsequent classes, but the rider must satisfy the BD steward that the horse is fit to continue.

Any fresh blood found by a BD steward during the post-test inspection in the horse's mouth or area of the spurs will be reported to the Judge at C and the horse will be eliminated from that class. If there is blood on any other areas of the horse's body, the BD Steward, in consultation with the Judge at C, will decide if the horse should be eliminated and/or is fit to continue in any further competition(s) in the event.

Any horse that has a 'sore patch' (an area where hair has been rubbed off and the skin is inflamed), in a location where there is a danger that the skin could be broken if the horse were continued to be ridden, must be withdrawn from competition. If the sore patch is not noticed until after a test has been completed, then elimination will only occur if the skin is broken. The horse may not continue to compete for the remainder of the competition thereafter, unless approved to continue by an independent vet.

## Welfare Reporting Procedure

Any breaches of BD welfare policies are unacceptable, whether deliberate or through lack of awareness, and any action or circumstances that lead to the distress of a horse must be reported to an official or representative of British Dressage, including the completion of an Equine Welfare Report form to be submitted to BD head office for further investigation.

If, during competition or training activity, abuse to a horse is witnessed by a BD official, whether a judge, steward or organiser, an intervention should be made immediately.

If any other individual or member of the public witnesses what they perceive to be abusive action or behaviour, they should raise their concerns with a judge, steward, organiser, or member of staff at the earliest opportunity.

All welfare-related incidents and eliminations should be reported using the Equine Welfare Report form, even if the matter has been satisfactorily resolved on the day. The rider involved will be informed when a report has been received by British Dressage. Report forms are available for download on the BD website.

## Welfare Escalation Process

In the first instance, any welfare concerns should be brought to the attention of the venue organiser, BD steward, or Judge at C, on the day of competition. An Equine Welfare Report form should be completed and submitted to the BD Sport Operations Manager, together with witness statements and any supporting photographic or video evidence relating to the incident. Equine Welfare Report forms are available for download on the BD website.

All reported welfare incidents will be investigated fully and referred to the BD Equine Welfare Panel, as deemed appropriate by the CEO of British Dressage. The Equine Welfare Panel consists of veterinary and welfare experts, nominated by the BD Board, who will review the evidence provided and put forward their recommendations for any action required.

This may be in the form of advice, guidance, and support for the rider, including any further training and education, or potential disciplinary action. Where necessary, matters will be referred to the Disciplinary Panel for consideration, which may include further sanctions.



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