



## Regular IH Feature

Here at Intelligent Horsemanship, we love a good debate, and while we are all united behind the common values of non-violent horsemanship, that doesn't mean we have to agree on everything!

That's why we started this 'Intelligent Debate' section. In each issue, we tackle a different controversial issue that's rocking the horse world (or our Facebook feeds!) and we'll attempt to look at it from both sides. Names will be kept anonymous so that we can speak freely and say EXACTLY what is on our minds, and we won't be holding back!

**THE DEBATE:** Fat Shaming or Hard Truths? Are we too sensitive when it comes to talking about weight?

**THE DETAILS:** At IH we KNOW that riders come in all shapes and sizes, and while we encourage all our readers to maintain their (and their horse's) health and fitness, we also believe that there is an appropriate horse to suit almost everyone and we abhor any kind of bullying. However, we simply can't deny that weight is an issue. Studies clearly show that heavier riders (even skilled and experienced riders) place greater strain on the horse, and it's not just the riders – equine obesity is the number one manmade welfare issue according to World Horse Welfare.

**So how do we address this?** Is calling out an overweight horse or a heavy rider really fat shaming or are we just burying our heads in the sand? Are we too sensitive when it comes to talking about weight? Do we need to accept that some people are too heavy to ride full stop?



“The issue is not about being ‘overweight’ or ‘fat’ – it is simply about being too ‘heavy’ for your horse.”

Are we too sensitive when it comes to talking about weight?

**FOR:** Whether it's magazines emblazoned with weight-loss promises, supermarket shelves crammed with diet products, or Piers Morgan going off on another fat shaming tirade on Twitter... there's no denying that we are somewhat obsessed with weight in England! The equestrian world is no different.

By now, you've probably all read about Dr Sue Dyson's study showing that heavier riders can cause gait changes and even lameness (if not, read more about it here: <http://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/welfare/recent-research/effects-of-rider-weight-on-equine-performance>). You've probably been horrified looking at photos of tiny packhorses and donkeys struggling to carry heavy riders at tourist resorts around the world, and perhaps applauded when oversized riders were asked to dismount at HOYS. You've surely heard the numerous warnings from vets and professionals about why you need to watch your horse's weight. So why is it then, that we don't seem to be listening?

This debate isn't about whether weight is an issue (it IS), rather it's about our attitude to weight and conversations about weight in general. Surely, we can all agree that being overweight, certainly being obese, is a health issue. So why are we so sensitive to talking about it? If someone told you that

your horse was showing symptoms of colic, you would probably rush to call the vet, but if someone commented that your horse is looking a bit on the chunky side, how many of us would call a nutritionist? Or would you immediately get defensive, deny it, or start making excuses (he's been doing a bit less work recently, he's insulin resistant, my yard doesn't allow winter turnout...)? What about if a friend commented that you had put on a few pounds recently and were possibly a bit too heavy to be riding your pony now? Would you stop riding and join the gym? Or would you be horrified that your friend is being so 'mean' and call her out for 'fat shaming' you? Would you defend yourself, saying your horse is 'fine' and you're an 'experienced rider' who is far more balanced and capable of riding your horse than a beginner?

“...if you find yourself having to defend your or your horse's weight, there is a good chance that those 'nasty' comments might have some truth to them.”

I think we need a reality check. It might sound harsh, but if you find yourself having to defend your or your horse's weight, there is a good chance that those 'nasty' comments might have some truth to them. If you're posting a photo on Facebook asking whether people think you are too big for

your pony or if your horse looks overweight, you probably already know that the answer is yes. Instead of jumping to deny it, how about you hop on the scales with all your tack and see what the numbers say?

As someone cursed with a 'see-cake-gain-three-pounds' metabolism and as a former endurance rider who's always ridden small Arab-type horses (not an ideal combination!), I understand all-too-well the difficulties and embarrassments that come along with conversations about weight. But it's still not an excuse.

Here's the conclusion I've come to: READERS, we need to stop being so sensitive. Weight is a health issue, pure and simple. If you are overweight, you ARE compromising your health and fitness, and if your horse is overweight, then you are compromising his health and fitness too. It's that simple. If you own a horse, you have a responsibility to make sure that you are fit enough and light enough to not cause unnecessary stress or pain. And if you are too heavy for your horse then you need to change horses or lose weight. No arguing, no excuses.

And before you label this 'fat shaming', it's not. I don't believe in judging someone on how they look, and I think people are beautiful at any size. I'm not judging you for being overweight or for being heavier than 'average'. But I WILL judge you for riding your horse if you are too heavy for him or allowing your horse to become

morbidly obese, because you are making a CHOICE that impacts your horse's welfare. That isn't fat shaming, it's just a cold hard fact, and sorry, but I won't think twice about pointing it out.

**AGAINST:** Pippa has had her 14hh pony, Pumpkin, since she was 13 and has no intentions of ever selling him. 'He's the pony of a lifetime' she says. Pippa's now 23 years old and Pumpkin has seen her through various issues, such as low self-esteem and various bullying episodes, but now it seems Pumpkin is the cause of some of the pointed and unkind remarks.

Pippa has not only grown in height since she was 13 but also her weight has rather ballooned, meaning she's just over 14 stone (nearly 90 kg) on a 14hh pony weighing around 450 kg, so with a normal General-Purpose saddle, she's definitely over the 20% maximum that the horse welfare guidelines promote.

Yes, she would like to lose weight for her own as well as Pumpkin's sake, but anyone who has ever tried losing weight knows that while 'eat less, exercise more' sounds simple, it's certainly not easy. Especially when you're working ridiculous hours in an office job with no time to cook or plan meals and the only 'time out' Pippa enjoys is riding and looking after Pumpkin. Even that isn't enjoyable any more though with the Yard Police making pointed remarks how she's too heavy for Pumpkin and 'can't be doing his back any good'.

Various forms of one-upmanship are very common in the horse world. People look for ways to show their superiority. Some people flaunt that they have a prettier horse or prettier equipment, or they may take the 'I'm more ethically correct than you' road. Often on the internet this type rarely mention real horse abuse (and are sat at their computers – not out raising money for World Horse Welfare!) but find easy targets in owners who love their horses, but aren't able to keep up to what have been chosen as the 'ideal standards' of keeping a horse with no sympathy for individual circumstances. Yes, of course, we should all be concerned about horse welfare and riding a suitable sized horse is part of this, but more-often-than-not, the 'Rider Weight Police' become just one more way to make a fellow horse person feel bad about themselves.

The truth is, we do need to be sensitive when it comes to issues of weight, because it IS a sensitive issue. Everyone is built differently, some people are naturally larger than others, and for those who are overweight, there are often many reasons (medical, physical, or emotional) why they might struggle to lose the weight. Similarly with an overweight horse – in our winter

'18 issue, registered nutritionist Claire MacLeod sympathised with horse owners who were doing everything they could to help their overweight ponies lose weight, but were still struggling. She emphasized how important it was to help them make small, practical changes, as opposed to piling on the blame and adding to the guilt that they already felt. Pulling someone down and shaming them for their (or their horse's) appearance is not only cruel, but it's hardly going to be effective in helping them make changes and become healthier.

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Another really important thing to remember (and Sue Dyson made this very clear in the results of her study) is that the issue is not about being 'overweight' or 'fat' – it is simply about being too 'heavy' for your horse. You can have a normal BMI and be perfectly fit and healthy, but still be too heavy for your horse (in fact, many of the riders being asked to dismount at shows like HOYS are not overweight, they are just adults riding ponies that are too small for them). But rather than focusing on the overall picture, it all too often ends up being about targeting riders who are overweight, regardless of the size and suitability of their horse – and that IS fat shaming.

It's not helped by the fact that articles about rider weight are more-often-than-not accompanied by comparative photos of slim riders vs. larger ones, further driving home the ideal that this is about 'fat' vs. 'thin' rather than just weight. Consider that a tall, fit (even handsome!) male is more likely to exceed the recommended 20% than a 5ft 2 woman carrying a few extra pounds, and you start to realise that yes, this HAS become an issue of fat shaming.

The bottom line is that by allowing fat shaming of any sort (even if the intentions aren't malicious), we create a culture in which it is deemed ok to comment on and judge people on their personal appearance. Riding is already considered an elitist hobby or sport, and riders are already judged on their talent, money, horse's breeding, coach's credentials, tack, and more... Do we really want to add body type and appearance to this list? If we continue down this road, how long will it be before only a privileged few be considered suitable to ride? ☹️

### Get involved!

This isn't about who's right or wrong, or picking a winner – the aim is to get you thinking and more importantly, considering different points of view. So get involved and let us know your opinions! Did we miss a key point? Think we've both got it wrong? Got a great idea for a debate topic that you'd like us to discuss?

Let us know at [editor@ihhq.net](mailto:editor@ihhq.net)