

EQUESTRIAN AUSTRALIA

SAFETY ALERT

RISK MANAGEMENT IN GOOD SAFE HORSEMANSHIP

The Need for a Safety Alert

Recent, and not so recent, equestrian tragedies have quite rightly triggered increased private, public and Government focus upon horse related safety.

Equestrian Australia welcomes any practical initiative that enhances horse related safety.

EA wishes to remind its members, as forcefully as it can, that the safe control of the horse and thus the safety of its handler/rider/driver etc. is of critical importance in all horse interactions by anybody and everybody for the whole of the time of any such interaction.

Good horsemanship cannot be achieved without safe horsemanship.

EAs rules, events and competitions are designed to foster and reward good horsemanship.

Accidents

Every time any person has anything to do with any horse there is a greater or lesser possibility of injury to the horse and/or the handler.

EA recognizes the truism that even the best trained and managed horses behave unpredictably, so there will always be accidents which may result in injury or death.

A few common illustrations:- well trained horses still shy and bump and tread on peoples feet, they shy and riders fall, they trip or slip and fall when there appears to be no obstacle at all, they clip obstacles and fall and so do the riders.

Acceptance of this reality should not result in complacency, but, on the contrary, cause horse people to be more vigilant to do all they reasonably can to avoid the avoidable injuries.

It is futile to just attribute blame for accidents after the event. However, it is most important to afterwards carefully review the circumstances to see if things could be done more safely in future.

The Responsibility for Safety

The primary responsibility for safety rests on the person physically in charge of the horse at a particular time. Safety is unnecessarily compromised if that person, whether supervised or not, does not constantly manage risk.

Never stop concentrating.

However, various other people have various responsibilities to do all they reasonably can to see that safest horse handling occurs. For example; the guardians of children handling, or in the vicinity of horses, occupants of equine premises for visitors- with or without horses; teachers of horse skills, however casual or informal, for their learners; employers for employees who work with horses, particularly those less skilled; lenders of horses; people who run events, for their competitors, spectators and staff; handlers for people who come up to the horse to admire it; and so on.

The point is that everyone who directly or indirectly participates in an interaction with a horse should do what he or she reasonably can to ensure that good safe horsemanship occurs and that risk management is ALWAYS happening.

In particular it is of critical importance that people new to or of limited horse management skills; visitors, pupils, new and inexperienced employees, be trained and supervised to the level required by the horse interaction they take part in.

That is good horsemanship.

What is risk management?

Good horsemanship has always involved contemporaneous risk management.

Risk management should never be seen as some separate additional task.

Some horse interactions only involve risk management, e.g. Do not place yourself within kicking range of a horse unless it is necessary. Any horse might unpredictably kick.

However, in the vast majority of horse interactions risk management is an inseparable part of the good technique of getting the interaction done. A simple example where a handler must be within kicking range:- if you are picking a horse's back hoof you let the horse know you are coming, approach and pick up in a way that does not upset the horse then use the hoof pick in a way that cleans, but does not make the horse want to kick free. The exact way you step by step approach and then pick the horse's hoof is learnt horsemanship.

EA believes all horse handlers should aim to conduct all horse interactions consciously and constantly following the widely accepted, four step risk management process

Control Manuals and lists

Good Codes of Practice, lists of possible horse interactions, manuals of horse behaviour, supervision manuals for various categories of people, training manuals and records, lists of hazards and how to control them, assessment lists, manuals for safe riding in enclosed and open areas, manuals or lists of safe infrastructure and tack construction and maintenance, safe horse transport manuals, lists of desirable biological controls, training videos, etc., etc., if accurate and practical, all have their place in fostering safety.

These aids to horse handling can only be guidelines because it is not possible to write responses in advance **to** precise horse behaviour.

However, even these guidelines have no practical value unless they translate into correct decisions by the horse handler at the time of the interaction.

It doesn't matter if these manuals are up on the wall or even in the handlers' hip pocket.

What matters is the instantaneous analysis, decision and implementation of learnt good safe horsemanship in the split second the risk arises. It should become second nature.

In simple terms, a horse handler cannot safely handle a horse and read a check list or guideline at the same time. Effective risk management in horse interactions is a learnt mental exercise, not a written one.

Modern horse handlers know that the days of training horses by fear of punishment are gone because the fear builds into dangerous resentment. Sooner or later that resentment becomes unpredictable violent behaviour .

Attempting to train horse handlers by fear of punishment is just as counter productive.

That is not to say that competitors, pupils, visitors, employees and other handlers should not face the penalty of removal from the horse interaction for failure to implement safe horse management practices.

All horse handlers must, of course, comply with whatever law they are bound by, whether it be the criminal law, contract law, the law of negligence, occupational health and safety law, or any other legal obligation. This Safety Alert is not legal advice. Members should take their own advice about such things.

Dynamic Risk Management:-

The continuous four step risk management process in the course of horse interactions-- The horse determines the time of risk arising.

Step 1: Identify risks –identify each specific thing before or as it appears which could cause injury to a horse handler and/the horse and/or property.

Step 2: Assess each identified risk – what harm could each risk cause, how serious could that harm be, and what is the likelihood of that risk turning into injury.

Step 3: Managing risks – take the most effective and reasonably practicable steps to prevent the risk maturing into injury.

Step 4: Review Risk Management – whether the steps taken to manage the risk, do or do not prevent injury, those steps should always be reviewed afterwards to see whether the horse handler can do it better next time the same type of risk arises. Warning When risk arises during a horse interaction, as it constantly does, Steps 1,2 and 3 need to be taken instantaneously. That is Dynamic Risk Management.

Illustration –Catching a Horse

To illustrate the process by example of catching a horse :- How will this horse respond to being haltered, is it likely to throw its head in a way that might injure me or itself because it is agitated, or it gets an unexpected fright? Is it likely to move its feet in a way that may hurt me? Is it likely to bump me? Is it in the vicinity of other animals or people which may cause this horse to hurt me by pulling the lead rope through my hand? Etc., etc. (Identify and Assess risk) (steps 1 and 2)

The handler then manages any of those identified risks by deciding not to catch the horse (eliminate the risk)(step 3) or haltering in a way that minimizes the possibility of those risks resulting in injury - how the handler gentles the horse, where he or she stands, what is looked at or for, how the halter is actually put on etc. (Managing the risk)(step 3)

The handler should, then or later, review the whole process and decide whether to do it better in future. (Review risk Management)(step 4)

The safe handler then commences to manage the risk in the next interaction– leading the horse to wherever it is to go.

A horse and rider/handler come to an obstruction (Identify and assess the risk), Avoid it (eliminate the risk) or walk or jump over it or through it (manage the risk).

And so on for the, usually many, successive interactions until the horse is released.

After the horse is released

Of course, risk to the horse does not stop when released and risk management continues – are the fences/stable sound, is there adequate feed and water, what inspections are appropriate? Is there a risk of falling timber and so on.

Static Risk Management:-

The Four Step Risk Management Process Also Applies in cases where the risk manager can determine the timing of the Process –

Some examples are the design and maintenance of stables, tack and other horse infrastructure, the design and review of manuals of horsemanship, the design and review of guidelines of what to do or wear in various horse interactions. The results may be physical (construction) or mental (what to do).

The difference is that in static risk management, the manager has the luxury of time to go more deeply into the process.

For example a ‘hierarchy of risk control’ which is a method of controlling risks by ranking them from the highest level of protection and reliability to the lowest can be utilized and questions of cost can dictate controls.

Description of all the techniques of that deeper analysis of risk management is beyond the scope of this Safety Alert.

Conclusion

There are many existing Codes, lists, protocols, books, magazine articles, internet material etc., which can have a role for safety educational, planning and reminder purposes. This memorandum is meant to be one of them.

For example, consistency with “Australian Standards: AS/NZS ISO 31000:2009, Risk management – principles and guidelines”. should be of paramount importance

Members are encouraged to consult as widely as practical by word of mouth and reading to find out the safest process.

The end point is, no matter how comprehensive it is and how long it takes, the static risk management process should also be all about actually applying the four step process to enhance safety in horse interactions.

Warning and Disclaimer

The purpose of this Safety Alert is to encourage good safe horsemanship in Equestrian Australia’s members and their dependents.

This reminder is not legal advice.

Members and other readers should take advice from qualified legal practitioners about any potential legal implications of their activities.