

University of Prince Edward Island

Faculty of Veterinary Medicine
Summary of Dissertation

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of the Requirements for the

DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Equestrian Perspectives: Exploring the role of humans in horse welfare through management and training

The welfare of horses used for human purposes is under increasing scrutiny, as evidence suggests horses may experience poor welfare conditions in both management and training. For example, horses are often kept in confined spaces far removed from their evolutionarily adapted living conditions. Dressage, in particular, faces growing risk of losing its social license to operate due to horse welfare concerns. This thesis explored equestrian perceptions of horse welfare in management and dressage training contexts. The first part of this thesis employed a quantitative survey to assess the consistency between horse owner attitudes toward different housing scenarios and their actual practices. Results revealed that while caretakers generally align their management choices with their perceptions of positive horse welfare outcomes, discrepancies exist between their intended welfare improvements and caretakers' perceived ability to provide good quality care.

Further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with horse caretakers selected from the previous questionnaire for having at least 1 horse assessed as overweight by a veterinarian. The aims of this study were to understand the motivators and barriers for caretakers to manage overweight horses. Qualitative analysis revealed that despite recognizing health risks, caretakers believed overweight horses reflected good horse care practices, reinforcing a reluctance to implement weight management strategies. When caretakers implemented recommended weight management strategies they faced challenges with practicality, feasibility and strategies that conflicted with their views about positive horse welfare practices.

The second part of this thesis explored equestrian perceptions of dressage training. The objectives included understanding how horse welfare is incorporated within dressage culture, how horse behaviours are interpreted, responded to and elicited from the rider and how coach-rider interactions influence horse welfare. Results highlighted the systemic issues faced by the dressage industry including how governing equestrian bodies may contribute to cognitive dissonance experienced by equestrians by stating to promote positive horse welfare but rewarding horse behaviours contrary to that message. Further, lack of actionable language used during dressage lessons often construed coach-rider communication, instilling fear in riders, and contributed to undesirable behaviours from the horse who is the downstream recipient of coach-rider communication.

Overall, this thesis highlights the crucial role that caretakers and equestrians play in horse welfare. Embracing holistic perspectives through systems thinking solutions may be necessary to better support improved horse welfare in management and training.

Publications

Ross M., Proudfoot K., Doiron G., Merkies K., Lundgren C., and Ritter C. (2025). 'My horse has a voice. Now, I'm trying to figure out what to do with it: Dressage coach-rider-horse communication. Anthrozoos. (submitted)

Mills M., Proudfoot K., Elsohaby I., Burns J., Ross M., McKenna S., Ritter C. and MacMillan K. (2025). The Effect of Benchmarking on Equine Management Practices and Horse Welfare on Prince Edward Island, Canada. Animal – Open Space. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anopes.2025.100093>

Ross M., Proudfoot K., Merkies K., Lundgren C., and Ritter C. (2025). A wicked problem: Systematic Issues Surrounding Canadian Equestrian Dressage. Animal Welfare. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/awf.2025.2>

Ross M., Proudfoot K., Campbell Nishimura E., Morabito E., Merkies K., Mitchell J. and Ritter C. (2023). "It's more emotionally based": Prince Edward Island Horse Owner Perspectives of Horse Weight Management. Animal Welfare, 33(e14), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/awf.2024.9>

Ross M., Proudfoot K., Merkies K., Elsohaby I., Mills M., Macmillan K., Mckenna S. and Ritter C. (2023). Horse Housing on Prince Edward Island, Canada: Attitudes and Experiences Related to Keeping Horses Outdoors and in Groups. Animals, 13(2), 275-290. June 4th, 1997. Vancouver BC, Canada <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13020275>.

Kleider N., Ross M. (2019). How to Utilize Food and Mild Sedation for Restraint and Safety During Diagnostic Limb Anesthesia. American Association of Equine Practitioners, 65, 493-498.

Presentations

(Invited) Ross M.*, Lundgren C., Proudfoot K., Merkies K., and Ritter C. (2025). Systemic issues facing the Canadian dressage industry and the coach-rider-horse relationship. Invited speaker research seminar day. Virtual: Hartpury University. March 7, 2025.

Ross M.*, Lundgren C., Proudfoot K., Merkies K., and Ritter C. (2024). "My horse has a voice. Now, I'm trying to figure out what to do with it": Communication Between Canadian Dressage Coaches, Riders and Horses. International Society for Anthrozoology. Hartpury, England. June 27-29, 2024.

Proudfoot, K. L.*, Ross, M.*, Khoddami, S.*, Vernick, J.* (2024). Advancing animal welfare through research, service, and education at the Atlantic Veterinary College. Proceedings of the Humane Canada Summit, Halifax, Canada. Workshop presentation. (National)

Ross M.*, Proudfoot K., Merkies K., Mitchell J. and Ritter C. (2023). Management of Overweight Horses in Prince Edward Island, Canada: Horse Owner Perspectives. International Society for Anthrozoology. Edinburgh, Scotland. June 15-18, 2023.

Ross M.*, Proudfoot K., Merkies K., Elsohaby I., Mills M., Mitchell J., Macmillan K., Mckenna S. and Ritter C. (2023). Horse owners' perspectives of horse weight management. Journal of Equine Veterinary Science. 10.1016/j.jevs.2023.104393. Dallas, TX, US. June 6-9, 2023.

Ross M.*, Proudfoot K., Merkies K., Elsohaby I., Mills M., Macmillan K., Mckenna S. and Ritter C. (2022). Understanding the Human Dimension of Horse Care on Prince Edward Island. Graduate Student Research Conference. Charlottetown, PE, Canada. October 13-14, 2022

Ross M.*, Proudfoot K., Merkies K., Elsohaby I., Mills M., Macmillan K., Mckenna S. and Ritter C. (2022). Horse Caretakers' Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Horse Care on Prince Edward Island. International Society for Anthrozoology. Virtual. July 7-9, 2022.

Poster Presentation

Doiron G.*, Ritter C., Proudfoot K. and Ross M. (2024). "Does he not understand?": Horse behaviour during dressage training and responses from coaches and riders. National Veterinary Scholars Symposium. St. Paul, Minnesota. August 9-11, 2024

Ross M*. and Bondi A. (2019). Dissecting Equine Lameness: Correlation Between Asymmetrical Hindlimb during Push-off and Horses Overall Performance. Vancouver, BC, Canada. December 6, 2019.

Awards

Zoetis Graduate Student Research Award, Canadian Graduate Student-Master's Award

Biographical Data –

Born in Vancouver BC, Canada