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Demographic Profiling of Elite Dressage Riders

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Abstract: Although it is commonly believed that equestrian sports differ in the demographic profile of their participants, and certain socio-economic groups may be under-represented, very little research into equestrian sports exists. The aim of this paper was to provide demographic profiling of participants in elite level dressage and compare profiles across levels of disciplines. Data were collected from 157 competitors, across three levels of competition at one Dressage festival in the UK. Three case studies provided demographic profiling data each representing one level of competition. Across all levels of competition there were more female competitors than males although as the levels of competition increased the proportion of male competitors increased resulting in female : male odds ratios of 8.09 at lower levels of competition to 1.56 at highest levels. As the level of competition increased the likelihood of the rider being the owner decreased; at lower levels of competition 91% were sole owners of the horse which decreased to 63% at the higher levels of competition. Age profiling and sport participation support unique 'early start-late specialisation' Long Term Athlete Development model of equestrian sport. Commentary on equestrian sport is to date based on the absence of empirical data. This paper provides the first demographic profiling of elite level Dressage and demonstrates the unique demographic profiling of those involved in equestrian sport.

Keywords: Demographic, Profiling, Dressage, Equestrian, LTAD

Introduction

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILING IS not a new concept in the world of sport. Traditionally used in areas such as marketing and segmentation (Beech & Chadwick, 2007), demographic profiling is now utilised across a range of subject areas within sport including; community sport participation (Sport England, 2010), sport spectatorship (Shank & Beasley, 1998; McDonald et al., 2002) sport tourism (Ritchie et al., 2001) and sport injury (Jackson et al., 2004; Finch et al., 2007). An area which has yet to be reviewed using demographic profiling is elite sport participation. Participation in the top echelons of the sport development continuum is generally determined by the specific codification of the individual sport. Male and female participation in the vast majority of sports is sex segregated and the age profile of participants in the main would fall within a sport specific segment. Gymnastics for example has a lower age limit for participation but the age of participation for most sports will follow the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) Model.

The LTAD model has been formulated to suit both early specialisation sports such as gymnastics, and late specialisation sports such as track and field (Foreman & Bradshaw, 2009). Within the generic LTAD model athletes' development is based on their biological rather than chronological age, based on this the LTAD provides windows of opportunity for training and performance which will be sport specific. Each sport will therefore adapt the

LTAD to suit the physical demands of the sport and although the windows of opportunity may vary between sports they are likely to be an indication of the competitive life span of sport specific athletes. Equestrian sports do not fall within the traditional 'early-' and 'late' specialisation paradigm set out in the generic LTAD model and therefore provide a unique case study for demographic profiling.

There are many aspects of equestrian sport which make it unique: the relationship between athlete and animal, the fact that men and women compete equally against each other and the combination of individual and team dynamics. Some authors cite equestrian sporting disciplines as examples of events that epitomise social inequality, elitism and over-reliance on expensive tools (i.e. the horse) that many feel contribute more to competitive success than the human athlete's effort (Gandelsman & Smirnov, 1970; Guttmann, 2004; Merlini, 2004). However, there is little empirical evidence to support this and there is therefore a need for a sustained research effort to understand the development of equestrian sports, participation and the social context of equestrian sporting disciplines. With sports increasingly competing against one another for financial support and having to demonstrate broad appeal and participation (Bergsgard et al., 2007) the lack of knowledge about equestrian sport participation has implications from grassroots to elite with regards to athlete support, talent identification and performance analysis. In light of the need for further understanding of the efficacy of equestrianism in the context of sport, this paper sets out to discuss the sporting context of equine sport and the demographic profiles of athletes involved, focussing specifically on the sport of dressage.

There are several unique profiling characteristics of equestrian sport such as gender and age which will form the basis of this paper's discussion. However it is anthro-zoological relationship which appears to be a dominant factor when comparing equestrian to other sports. Comparisons between sports can be based on classification criteria. One way to classify sports is based upon the training objectives and the physiological and skill similarities necessary to attain and improve performance (Bompa & Haff, 2009). According to Gandelsman and Smirnov (1970) classification of sports based on skill classification and skill requirement, horseback riding is grouped together with motor sports and water events such as sailing, waterskiing and surfing. The skill classification of these sports is to 'perfect the conduct of different means of travel' and the skills requirements relate to the need for athletes to make quick decisions, develop complex skills through hours of training and awareness that the quality of the equipment (horse, surfboard etc) may influence the outcome of the competition (Gandelsman & Smirnov, 1970). Guttmann (2004) also compares the equestrian sport of horse racing to automobile racing and similar 'motor sports' and questions if they are sufficiently physical enough to warrant the name 'sports'?

Most equestrian sport has derived from the need to practice and develop equestrian (riding) skills and the majority of disciplines have their roots in achieving and demonstrating hunting and/or military prowess. Polo is believed to have first been played in Persia in the 6th century BC and was at first a training game for elite cavalry units. The sport of jousting became popular in 12th Century Europe to perfect the skills required during a heavy cavalry charge. Although this relationship with war undoubtedly emerged from a male dominated landscape, use of the horse in war was not restricted to men as is illustrated by Boudicca's famous chariot charges. Up until the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, only male riders were permitted to compete in any Olympic equestrian discipline including Dressage. Today however equestrian sport is the only sport represented at the summer Olympics where men and women

have the opportunity to share the winning podium. Outside of the Olympics women were competing in equestrian events alongside male competitors. Indeed Patricia Rosemary Smythe (known as Pat Symthe) first joined the British show jumping Team in 1947, the same year she won her first open category. Pat went on to compete in the 1956 Olympics where she won an individual bronze medal and was recognised as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) the same year.

Over time sports researchers have produced a large body of work on the agency of culture and gender processes in sport. Much of this work is a reflection of the universality of gender processes and practices that rigidly maintain distinctions between, and separation of, the sexes and naturalise power in the male athlete. Debate seems to focus on ‘male’ or ‘female’ sports and the consequence of participating in such a sport on the bodily form. There is no standard phenotype for horse riders, no definable gendered strength or weakness, yet the opportunity and relevance of competing equally in a sport, such as equestrianism, appears to go without discourse from those commentating on gender equality. One reason for this may be the fact that little attention is paid to the physicality of the rider; indeed it is the physical prowess of the horse which is often commented on.

To truly compare the gendered physicality of equestrian sport against other sports we must define the physicality we are referring to. For example, within the Olympic discipline of Dressage, scoring and hence placing are based on the quality of the horse’s individual required movements. How horse and rider achieve this is to all intents and purpose irrelevant. The relevance, therefore, of the gender of the rider is negligible, as it is the physical performance of the horse, rather than the human athlete who is judged.

Dressage is a French term meaning ‘training’ and as stated by the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) dressage is the highest expression of horse training and is used as the ground work for all other disciplines. Dressage is one of the world’s oldest sporting activities and can be traced back to times when the military would use it to prepare horses for battle (Fédération Equestre Internationale, 2007). The aim of dressage is to develop a strong partnership between horse and rider whilst encouraging the horse to be harmonious, calm, supple and flexible (Equestrian Federation of Australia, 2010b). The horse and rider work together to progress through the levels, each level building on the previous (Davis, 2005). Dressage is governed by the FEI and is a current Olympic and Paralympic equestrian sporting discipline. There is only a limited amount of research on the discipline specific demands on the equine athlete, however there is even less about the human athlete.

Age is often a characteristic used in demographic profiling. As previously mentioned most sports fall within the LTAD model and as a result tend to have a fairly sport specific age demographic profile especially in relation to elite sport performance. With regards to LTAD model, equestrianism does not fall into either an early or late specialisation framework. Age of specialisation appears to be a key issue for equestrianism because it is an early start sport, but also a sport where riders can go on to enjoy a career well into their 40s and beyond. The youngest athlete competing in the equestrian events at the Beijing Olympics was Brazilian dressage rider Luiza Tavares de Almeida at just 16 years old and the oldest athlete competing at the Beijing Olympics in any sport was 67-year-old Hiroshi Hoketsu, a dressage rider for the Japanese equestrian team. Hiroshi’s first Olympics were in 1964, where he placed 40th in the show jumping competition.

Equestrianism is uniquely classed as an ‘early start, late specialisation’ sport, with riders starting learning to ride by the age of 6, but only specialising in a specific discipline around

the age of 16 (BEF, 2009). That males and females appear to compete on an equal footing in most disciplines also indicates that developmental age may be less of a factor in equestrianism than in other sports. However, the potential life long career of riders means there are certain management issues and considerations which may be specific to the sport such as consequences of overuse injury, burnout and dropout.

The fact that individuals can continue to compete in equestrian sport well into later life provides a unique profile for equestrian sport. However, the sport development continuum also has a wide base. It is estimated that in the UK alone over 4.3 million people ride or drive, making equestrianism a more popular nationwide sport than cricket, rugby or fishing (British Horse Industry Confederation, 2009). Equestrianism as an industry in Britain alone has a turnover of over £4 billion per year and there are an estimated 1.3 million horses in the UK (British Equestrian Trade Association, 2010). The governing body of international equestrian sport, the International Equestrian Federation (FEI), was established in 1921 and today governs seven disciplines: Show Jumping, Dressage (including Para-Equestrian Dressage), Eventing, Endurance, Equestrian Vaulting, Reining and Horse Driving Trials (including Para-Equestrian Driving). The FEI has 134 National Federations and although this is less than the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF), with 213, and the International Federation of Football Association (FIFA), with 208, it exceeds many Olympic sports and represents all the continents. Despite this evidence of the popularity, longevity and economic importance of equestrian sports very little is known about them.

Methods

Demographic data were collected at an international dressage festival in the UK in 2009. The festival comprised of two events, the first being a national competition, Premier League (lowest level of competition at this event). The Premier League is a series of eight major competitions across the UK; the league offers direct qualification for the National Championships and is governed by British Dressage. The second event held at the festival under direct governance of the FEI was a CDI*** Small Tour and Big Tour (highest level of competition at this event). CDI*** (Concours Dressage Internationale) is an international dressage competition, split into two 'tours' again differentiated by level of competition.

Data on all the competitors were obtained from the schedule, a public document, in which they had given permission for information about themselves to be published. This included the riders' full names and details regarding the ownership of the horse. Gender was confirmed by direct observation during the public competitions. If a rider had entered more than one horse in a level of competition then only one entry was used for the purposes of data collection, however if a rider had entered in different levels of competition then they were included in data analysis at each level.

To complement this use of public information and to collect further demographic data a small scale questionnaire was administered with the aim of producing case study profiles of competitors representing each major level of competition (Premier League, CDI*** Small Tour and Big Tour). Competitors were first approached through an invitation, within the competitors' information packs they received on arrival. One competitor at each of the three levels was randomly selected from those who agreed to participate to provide case study data.

The descriptive and exploratory nature of this study resulted in largely categorical and frequency data. In international competition the numbers of competitors were small and therefore contingency chi-square tests would not be applicable. However the calculation of odds and odds ratios was suited to enable further understanding of these mutually exclusive categories. Ethical consent for the study was granted by the lead author's Institutional Ethics Committee.

Results

One hundred and eight competitors took part in the Premier League, thirty one in the CDI*** Small Tour and eighteen in the CDI*** Big Tour. Of the eighteen competitors in the CDI*** Big Tour five also took part in the Small Tour, of which one also competed in the Premier League. Just one Big Tour competitor rode two horses within this level of competition. Three other Big Tour competitors also took part in the Premier League competition. Of the thirty one competitors in the CDI*** Small Tour competition, the aforementioned five also competed in Large Tour and eight also competed in the Premier League competition. Two Small Tour competitors rode two horses in this level of competition.

Gender

At all levels of competition there were more female competitors than male. However it was noticeable that as the level increased (from Premier League to CDI*** Big Tour) the proportion of male competitors increased. Indeed although in the national level competition (Premier League) the odds of a competitor being male were only 0.11, competitors in the international competition had 0.34 odds of being male. Within the international competition the odds of being male increased from 0.32 at Small Tour level to 0.39 at Big Tour level (see table 1). This increase was especially obvious in the Female : Male odds ratios that decreased from 8.09, at Premier League level, to 2.13 at CDI*** Small Tour level to 1.56 at CDI*** Big Tour level. The over representation of female competitors seen at Premier League levels was therefore much reduced at the CDI*** Big Tour level.

Table 1: A Comparison of the Gender Representation in the Different Levels of Competition

	Male		Female		Total Number of Competitors	Odds Ratio
	Odds	Frequency	Odds	Frequency		
CDI *** Big Tour	0.39	7	0.61	11	18	1.56
CDI*** Small Tour	0.32	10	0.68	21	31	2.13
Premier League	0.11	12	0.89	96	108	8.09

Ownership Status of Horse

At national level (Premier League) and in the lower level international competition (CDI*** Small Tour) the competitors were likely to be the owner of the horse they were riding with odds above 0.6. However in the CDI*** Big Tour the odds of the rider being an owner of the horse had fallen to only 0.44 (see figure 1). The odds ratios of the rider being the horse’s owner rose from 0.79 at CDI*** Big Tour level, to 1.56 at CDI*** Small Tour and 1.78 at Premier League. Therefore as the level of competition increased the likelihood of the rider being an owner of the horse decreased. It was also noticeable that of the owner/riders in the Premier League competition 91% of them were sole owners of the horse. In the CDI*** Small Tour competition only 63% of the owner/riders were sole owners of the horse.

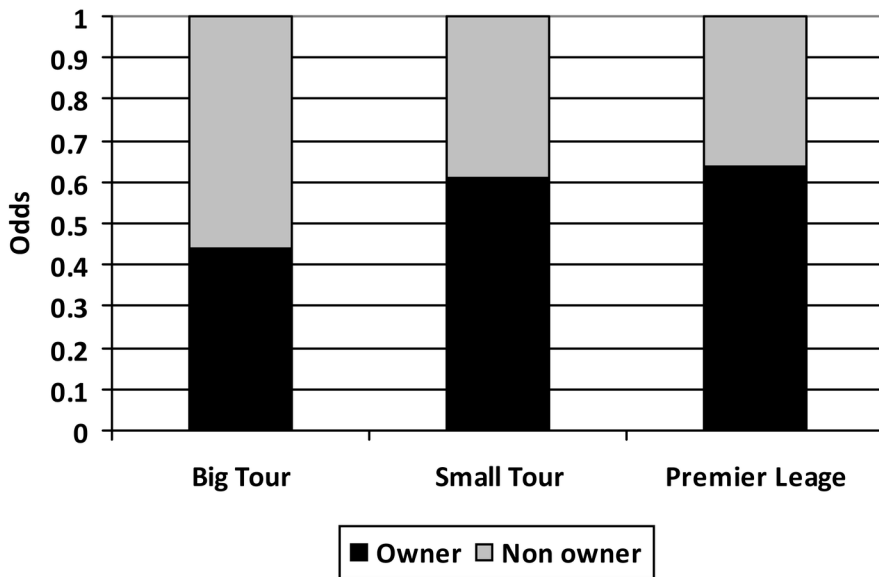


Figure 1: A comparison of the Odds of Competitors being the Owner of the Horse they Rode

Case Studies

The randomly chosen case studies were all White British female competitors. As the level increased (from Premier League to CDI***) their ages increased, from the Premier League level competitor being 18-24 years old, to the CDI*** competitor, who was 45-54 years old. The age at which the competitors had first competed in affiliated dressage varied from 18-24 years of age to 25-34 years of age. The Premier League competitor was the only competitor who did not gain their income from the equine industry, and was also the only competitor who did not classify dressage as their main equine sporting discipline and who had competed in other equestrian disciplines apart from dressage in the last twelve months.

Table 2: Demographic Data from Case Studies

	Premier League	CDI*** Small Tour	CDI*** Big Tour
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Current age (years)	18-24	35-44	45-54
Age when first competed in affiliated dressage	18-24	25-34	18-24
Horse Ownership	Sole owner	Joint owner	None owner
Ethnicity	White British	White British	White British
Income means	Not from equine industry	As dressage rider	Directly from the equine industry
Main sporting discipline	Eventing	Dressage	Dressage
Equestrian disciplines competed in last 12 months	Eventing, Show Jumping and Dressage	Dressage only	Dressage only

Discussion

The fact the men and women can compete equally against each, the potential age range of competitors and the requirement of an expensive piece of equipment (a horse) and associated stereotype image of elitism are all unique characteristics of equestrian sport. Yet to date none of these profiling characteristics have been investigated.

With regards to gender, in the context of this study there was evidence of male and female competitors at all levels of competition. However, at each level there were more female than male competitors although there was a noticeable increase in the proportion of male competitors as the level of competition increased. From the data set provided it is difficult to draw conclusions as to why there is an increase in the proportion of male competitors. Further investigation into the role of gendered homogenous differentiation within equestrian sport is required to address issues of physical superiority, lifestyle choices, performance pathways etc. (Bourdieu, 1993; Burt, 1995).

The age of the competitor increased with the level of competition, whilst this may also be seen in other sports what is different within this demographic data set is the age range of competitors across levels of competition from between 18-24 years (Premier League) to 45-54 years (CDI*** Big Tour) demonstrating breadth of competitive life. These findings mirror the earlier example of the dressage competitor age range from the Beijing Olympics (Luiza Tavares de Almeida, 16 years old and Hiroshi Hoketsu, 67 years old). The age at which the riders first competed in affiliated dressage ranged from between 18-24 years old to between 25-34 years old. These data support the discussion that equestrian sport does not fall into the traditional LTAD model. With regards to the case study data, the youngest athlete who was competing at the lowest level reported that she did not gain her income from the equine industry and dressage was not the only equine discipline she had competed in during the last 12 months. This particular case study supports the model of equestrian sport being an early start, late specialisation sport.

When reference is made to equestrian sport being elitist, ownership of a horse is often brought into the discussion. Horses are a requirement of the sport and there is no question that they are expensive assets. Buying and keeping a horse takes substantial financial commitment. As the level of competition increases it is likely that the cost of buying the horse also increases. At the elite level of equestrian sport very few riders compete on horses they own rather they rely on individuals or syndicate 'owners' as seen in horse racing. Results from this study show that at the lower levels of competition the competitors were likely to be the owner of the horse they were riding with odds above 0.6. However as the level of competition increased (and potential cost of the horse increased) the likelihood of the rider being the owner of the horse decreased. Although the results of this study indicate that at higher levels of competition external financial support may be provided through third party 'ownership' of the horse, at the lower levels of competition substantial financial resources are required by the athlete (rider). Lack of suitable resources may well act as a barrier to participation at the lower levels and restrict progression up through the competitive ranks.

It is estimated that there are 4.2 million riders and carriage drivers in Great Britain today (BEF, 2009) and equestrian sports number amongst the most successful Olympic and Paralympic disciplines in Great Britain. Although it is commonly believed that equestrian sports differ in the demographic profile of their participants from other sports, and certain socio-economic groups may be under-represented, very little research into equestrian sports exists. With sports increasingly competing against one another for financial support and having to demonstrate broad appeal and participation (Bergsgard et al., 2007), the lack of knowledge about equestrian sport participation has significant implications. The implications are not just financial as policy makers will be limited in the effectiveness of the policies and strategies they can implement if the information they have is only partial, or even incorrect.

Conclusion

This paper provides the first demographic profiling of participants in elite level dressage comparing profiles across the different levels of competition. The results of this study show that even though both genders can compete equally against each other in this sport, male and female participation rates differ across levels of competition. The age profile of athletes is somewhat unique in equestrian sport and the case study profiling supports the model of early start, late specialisation sport. Finally ownership of the horse (and related financial responsibility) also differed across the level of competition.

Commentary on equestrian sport is to date based on the absence of empirical data. The lack of clear acceptance of equestrian sport as a 'real' sport may diminish participants' access to symbolic (Bourdieu, 1993) and social capital (Burt, 1995) in the broader sport culture and may force them to seek recognition, opportunity and resources from within their own ranks. Equestrian sport is unique but it is a sport and as such deserves the attention of researchers to provide the evidence to support informed discourse. This paper is just the start and further proposed studies will now provide the baseline data from which further studies can expand.

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