



We Deserve Fair Play

Ambivalence toward cheating is as big a danger to our sport and industry as cheating itself.



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When asked to write an article for *USHJA In Stride's* “Bigger Picture” column, I had a flurry of ideas. A great deal is going on in our sport right now—should I write about the new Green Hunter section or the new leadership at the United States Hunter Jumper Association/United States Equestrian Federation? Or should I discuss the growing concern about the survival of non-circuit, one-week horse shows or the need to protect/promote jogging and presentation?

As I tried to narrow my interest, I received an email from the United States Equestrian Federation regarding recent, high-profile penalties being levied for doping infractions. In the days that followed, additional doping scandals came to light. My inbox and cell phone were inundated with questions and comments. The in-gate at the horse show was buzzing. It seemed the new, enhanced push toward sport integrity and anti-doping (“medicating” is a severe misnomer with dire consequences,

and must be avoided) really is at the center of the “Bigger Picture” right now.

It’s important to note from the beginning that cheating is different from making a legitimate mistake. Our regulatory and testing processes are weighted toward the exhibitor to give him or her the benefit of the doubt regarding issues such as dosages or cross-contamination.

As a personal example, I was once issued notice for an overage of an allowed substance in one of my show horses. The USEF staff assisted me in reviewing my barn poli-

cies to prevent any future infractions. The difference between this mistake and cheating (particularly with banned substances) comes down to intent.

Regrettably, corrupt and dishonest behavior is expected in professional sports, especially when big money and high-profile reputations are at stake. Financial gain and fame are fierce motivators—for some people, they are stronger influences than the penalties of fines and a disgraced reputation.

The cheating that results is antithetical to the very concept of impartial sport.

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Make no mistake: Fair play is what makes competition meaningful and worthy of our time and resources. The deception from a few harms Hunter/Jumper fans, diminishes pride in our sport and disillusiones the young riders who admire and venerate our winning competitors.

The Question Is ‘Why?’

In my opinion, the outbreak of social media and water cooler talk has missed the point. *“Who did it? Was it his first time? Which horse? How did he get caught? What is his penalty?”*

The greater, nobler, more beneficial question is “Why?” For meaningful change, we should pay attention to the motivations and behavioral rationales that are exploited to excuse cheating.

Here are some explanations for why I believe people may cheat, be it doping or other rule breaking:

- **Deception is usually situational.** Often, the mindset revolves around how much the cheater can justify his actions. If a trainer has spent a lot of his client’s money and three years developing a horse to qualify for the Devon Horse Show in the High Performance Working Hunters, and he knows his horse is particularly spooky or fresh on the day of showing, he’s facing a lot of temptation. He could try to make a dishonorable decision seem “OK” in his own mind.

I recall when a friend went to a rated show without me, to give a young horse some mileage. Afterward, I asked her how it went, and she told me she had to give the horse Acepromazine because it was too wild. I assured her that next time the horse should be more settled and may be ready to show. She went on to explain that she had in fact showed anyway.

She rationalized this cheating by telling herself that she was giving the horse a good experience; that she didn’t give it that much Ace; that it was better than longeing the horse for an hour; that she was not going to win anyway, thereby not hurting other exhibitors; and that the owner of the horse was a kind, older person who would have been horrified to see the horse misbehave. All of those things

may or may not be true, but it was still against the rules.

My friend had found a way to explain her actions without losing the sense of herself as a good horseman and competitor. We see this same mindset applied to justify other abuses as well, especially in regards to the amateur rule. While she may not have hurt anyone, the slope is slippery, and one dishonest act may often lead to another.

- **Short-term perspective.** If tricksters were apprehensive about the long-term effects of cheating, they would be discouraged by the humiliation of being caught (see USHJA President Mary Babick’s “Letter to Members,” which was prompted by her Facebook post, “Why Aren’t We Embarrassed?,” on p. 10).

- **Perform. Post. Play. Post again. Repeat.** Social media has exponentially increased the pressure on athletes to perform impressively *every* time. As University of Pennsylvania professor Maurice Schweitzer said, “Broadcasting our success makes the psychological benefits of win-

ning even greater, and the constant comparison pressure (to others) we face makes us more likely to cheat.”

- **Winning is everything.** The more competitive a person is, the more he or she sees winning as an integral piece of his or her identity, and the more likely that person is to take the risks associated with cheating.

- **Extreme fatigue.** People can find themselves too exhausted to continue a fierce moral initiative.

- **External motivations.** Trainers and professional riders have a tendency to quantify their self-worth with the ribbons and accolades they receive from others. We have to remind ourselves to be our own motivators. Cheating would inherently weaken the feeling we get from accomplishing the goals we set for ourselves. Prominent trainer Miranda Scott told me that success in our

sport should be about achieving our best through hard work, practice and determination. She sounds smart.

As recent suspensions and fines were made public, I listened to people from my zone (USHJA Zone 3) and read reactions that were posted in public forums. I was shocked to find out that so many people fail to see that there’s a problem! In fact, some offenders seemed to gain acclaim and support following their infractions.

The breadth and assortment of excuses has been astonishing. The notion that everyone is doing it is monolithic nonsense!

Some people focused on the idea that only a few high-profile offenders get caught and many others never see penalty. The argument was: Elite athletes were victimized and exposed to unfair publicity by being unjustly singled out. Whether we agree about that or not, it doesn’t change the fact that doping is against the rules.

Some people argued the merits of banned substances—also irrelevant. If you want to get involved and change the rules, that’s a worthwhile but different conversation altogether. The current agreed-upon edicts that govern fair play are not subjective.



Cheating Is Never Acceptable

Ambivalence toward cheating is as big a danger to our sport and industry as cheating itself.

If we accept cheating in our sport, we accept it universally. If it's acceptable to defy the rules of fair play to win more and/or make more money, then we should not disparage Richard Nixon, Bernie Madoff or the crooked used-car salesman for getting ahead by taking advantage of others.

In Hunters and Jumpers, anyone cheating is stealing opportunity and success from you and your clients (if you're a professional) in one way or another, no matter the level at which you participate.

What can we do?

The leaders in the sport must walk the walk. We should strive to be above reproach. Our duty is to *exhibit* proper practices, not just encourage them. Peer influence can be a useful tool; small displays of ethical standards can be potent.

It's also time to discuss complicated but necessary topics such as secure stabling, reporting infractions, horsemanship norms and the like. We may even have to examine whether fines and suspensions really work.

As an organization, the USEF can take the steps to levy more meaningful punishments.

The cost-benefit understanding of punishment isn't as effective as we need it to be. In my opinion, it's time to suspend the horses in question, as well—independently from their owners and trainers. It's far too easy for people to bypass the rules with new ownership. This is the most efficient way to make people think about where they are buying horses. If horses receive their own independent penalties, sales barns will be incentivized to protect their consumers and play fair. These are the components that could shape conduct in the future.

We can do a better job creating a culture of integrity. It's as important to encourage honesty as it is to discourage deceit.

It's crucial that rule followers believe rule breakers are disciplined in a meaningful way. This is why testing must continue. Testing will not abolish doping, but it is, at a minimum, a deterrent to govern the scope of drugging.

When we hear about violations, it's normal to individualize them, to convince ourselves they are unique occurrences. By writing off the offense as coming from someone of low character who was lazy and who succumbed to his or her own moral failings, we haven't addressed the dilemma's origin. Worse, we have eschewed our own accountability.

How are we responsible? People covet recognition and tribute. The way we evaluate trainers and professional riders today has made it clear that championship ribbons and high price tags are what count.

If we decide as an organization and a community that we truly value fair play, horsemanship, inclusivity and learning, we can create an environment that impels our trainers, riders and students to feel the same way. We can literally shift the notion of what is valuable. In doing so, we may reclaim the loyalty and support of those who yearn to believe in competitive, clean sport.

Prominent skateboarder A.J. Kohn spoke simply to the "Bigger Picture" in all sports with regard to integrity and cheating: "Don't give cheaters a free pass. Don't say it's OK because it's just sports. Don't say it's

OK because it's entertaining. Don't say it's OK because it's about money. Don't say it's OK because you understand why they did it. Don't say it's OK because winning is what really matters. Don't say it's OK because you can't catch everyone. Don't cheat yourself with these flimsy arguments. Even if you don't aspire to some lofty ethical paradigm, think of it as preserving your own self-interest. Don't invite cheaters into your own life."

We can do better.

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