

A horse died on the set of 'The Rings of Power': How to ensure the welfare of horses used in entertainment

March 31 2023, by Karen Luke



Credit: Amazon

The recent [death of a horse](#) on the set of Amazon's [The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power](#) is the latest incident raising questions about how humans use horses for entertainment and sport.

While a statement from producers said the horse's cardiac arrest occurred before the day's filming began, animal rights activists PETA

used the death to call on all screen producers to replace on-set [horses](#) with CGI and mechanical rig alternatives.

The incident feeds into growing [public concern](#) about horse [welfare](#) on film and TV sets, at the track and in equestrian sports.

But improving horse welfare is about more than just reputation repair—too often it's about survival for horses and humans.

Horse welfare in film and TV

The riding of a horse over a cliff to its death for the movie Jesse James (1939) led to the establishment of [American Humane](#), which now oversees around 100,000 animals on more than 1,000 productions each year.

While things have improved since the early days of film and television, deaths and mistreatment of horses still occur.

In 1987, on the set of [The Man From Snowy River II](#), a seriously injured horse was killed using the blunt end of an ax.

More recently, the high-profile series [Luck](#), starring Dustin Hoffman, was canceled following the deaths of three horses.

The good and bad of unprecedented global exposure

In 2021, the Tokyo Olympics beamed to a [global audience](#) the excessive [whipping and punching](#) of modern pentathlon horse Saint Boy and show jumper Kilkenny's [spectacular nosebleed](#) during the controversial show jumping program.

While the bleed must have been obvious, officials did not intervene to stop the ride.

Confronting images, and the perceived failure of organizers to protect the horses involved, brought into clear and global focus the indisputable welfare issues faced by horses competing at the elite level.

The global outcry led to [actress Kaley Cuoco offering to buy Saint Boy](#) and the [withdrawal of the equestrian phase from modern pentathlon](#).

Risk to humans and horses

Horse welfare does not just impact animals.

Since the 1840s, 873 jockeys are known to have [died in race falls](#) in Australia.

Internationally, the sport of eventing (where competitors complete three phases: dressage, show jumping and cross-country) reported 38 [rider](#) and 65 horse fatalities during or after competition between 2007–15.

Riding horses is considered one of the most [dangerous of all sporting pursuits](#), and the deaths of riders and jockeys, usually from falls, are common.

Public concern about risk to horses and humans through [horse racing](#) and equestrian sports, as well as screen production, also [threaten these industries' social license](#).

Better horse welfare is related to better rider safety

Our research offers hope for the horse industry and for those passionate about riding horses.

Last year, we [published a paper](#) demonstrating the link between horse welfare and rider safety. We asked riders how they cared for their horses and how their horses behaved when ridden—for example, we wanted to know how often horses were bucking or rearing.

From this information, we calculated a relative welfare score for each horse. We also asked riders about their accidents and injuries.

After analyzing the data from over 400 riders, we found the higher the horse welfare score, the fewer accidents and injuries a rider reported.

In a [subsequent study](#), we found horses with better welfare scores are more enjoyable to ride, most likely because they perform better and riders feel more in control, creating a win-win for horses and riders.

Good horse welfare means more than good health

Often good welfare is thought of in terms of an animal being healthy.



Horses played a pivotal role in the narrative of Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power. Credit: IMBD

While this is part of good welfare, [good health](#) alone is not enough—especially for a horse competing at the elite level or taking part in a film.

Horses are [neophobes](#)—this means they find new things frightening—so most horses are likely to find a movie set or traveling to a new location stressful. The most up-to-date [understanding of welfare](#) tells us that stress and poor mental health means poor animal welfare.

When a horse is stressed or in pain they [behave in a very predictable way](#)—they run away, panic, kick out or buck and rear.

Yet, anecdotally and in the media, people seeing a horse behaving in this way often claim the horse is crazy, unpredictable or just plain mean.

More likely, an "unpredictable" horse is suffering from poor welfare.

As part of our research program, we have developed a [new framework](#) to help horse owners identify aspects of their care and training that diminish horse welfare.

This information can be used to make modifications to improve horse welfare, and, importantly, can be applied to horses in any equine sector, including racing, sport and film and television.

Investing in the future of horses in entertainment and sport

Although a veterinarian assessed the recent horse death on the set of *The Rings of Power* as "unlikely to be associated with the horse's participation in the film," more can be done to protect horses and the industry.

In Australia, [no specific standard exists for the use of animals](#) in filmed media, and each state and territory has differing risk management guidelines.

An opportunity now exists for the industry to set a new standard for horse care and training.

An easily executable first step for the industry could be to insist a scientifically trained and credentialed equine behavior expert be involved in the recruitment and supervision of horse actors and their trainers at all stages of production.

This would ensure horse actors are appropriately trained to be on set and that horses are trained using the most up-to-date ethical methods.

Horse behavior experts could also help in scene design to minimize horses' exposure to stressful situations and identify tasks that are incompatible with good horse welfare.

If these suggestions were to be adopted, the film and television industry would be setting the benchmark for horse welfare—and pressure other horse industries to follow suit.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: A horse died on the set of 'The Rings of Power': How to ensure the welfare of horses used in entertainment (2023, March 31) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-horse-died-power-welfare-horses.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.