

Fit to Ride

With effect from September 2020, Sparsholt College will be implementing Fit to Ride Guidance for all its students and clients. Riding is a very demanding sport on the body, where nearly all major muscle groups are put under stress and need to maintain a certain position for some time requiring physical strength and endurance to do it safely.

The aim of introducing the Fit to Ride is to look at individual's body shape, flexibility and stamina to best match the rider to the horse enabling them to achieve their goals. Fit to Ride will incorporate students taking responsibility for ensuring that they lead a healthy lifestyle and healthy eating, in order that they are equipped not only for the physically demanding aspects of working and riding at the Equine Centre, but also being able to mentally cope with the academic aspects of the course.

While most healthy horses can easily carry a rider and saddle, they do have their limits. Therefore, as from September 2020 there will be an advisory weight limit of 16 stone for all riders. This does not mean if a rider falls under this advisory limit they will automatically be suitable to ride, as the rider will be assessed to combine their weight along with their physical fitness and mental resilience with the selection of horses available for that academic year. Numerous aspects are involved with the horse and rider combination including the age of the horse, its fitness and muscle development, the length of its back and its veterinary history. The horse selection varies each year at the College and whilst every effort is made to ensure a wide selection of horses can be offered, the College cannot guarantee its selection of horses from year to year.

Recent research has suggested that excessively heavy riders can induce temporary lameness and discomfort if not horsed suitably on a horse capable of carrying their weight, having a negative impact on the horse's performance and ultimately welfare. These results do not mean that heavy riders should not ride but suggest that they ride a horse of appropriate size and fitness, with a saddle that is correctly fitted for both horse and rider. At Sparsholt College whilst all saddles are professionally fitted to the horses, obviously each rider will fit into the saddle slightly differently depending on their shape and size, meaning there needs to be additional measures in place to ensure horse comfort. Again research has shown potential implications for saddle fit for the rider's position and weight distribution. For example, a tall rider riding in a small saddle is likely to cause the rider to sit at the back of the cantle, overloading the back of the saddle and making it more difficult to ride in balance.

The rider's skill, fitness, balance and coordination are important factors when working with such large animals. It is widely recognised that working with horses may be considered a high risk career and that this risk is further increased when inexperienced students work with horses and accidental injury may occur. To some extent the cause of such accidents is exacerbated by the unpredictability of horses and their size, however, this factor does not mean that little can be done to help minimise the associated risks. Therefore, emphasises will also be on individuals who may not have the physical capacity to safety control a horse from horseback if they are considered undernourished or not mentally resilient enough.

As a British Horse Society Centre, the Equine Centre has a responsibility to stipulate a rider size restriction for each of its horses and ponies. Although a sensitive issue, the recent research endorses action already taken by the College. The Equine Centre is dedicated to improving both equine and human welfare through educating its students and supporting them with a healthy lifestyle.

References

Bhs.org.uk. (2019). Effects of rider weight on equine performance | British Horse Society. [online] Available at: <https://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/welfare/recent-research/effects-of-rider-weight-on-equine-performance> [Accessed 14 Nov. 2019].