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Exploring Professional Riders' Understanding and Experience of Feel Within the Equestrian Dyad

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ABSTRACT

More than just technical skill and trained movements, riding involves horse and human dynamically sensing and responding to each other. Horses' superior tactile sensitivity and heightened perception of non-verbal cues suggest that, whether intentionally or not, the dyad is constantly communicating. This complex horse–rider interaction is anecdotally referred to in the equestrian world as “feel.” Although considered a valued attribute of talented equestrians, little is known about riders' understanding and experience of it. This study sought to investigate professional riders' perceptions of feel. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted online (6 female, 3 male, $M = 49.38 \pm 17.9$ years) exploring the riders': (1) understanding of the concept of feel; (2) recognition of feel in self and others; (3) perceived influential factors; and (4) perception of the horse's role. Interviews were analyzed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis. Four key themes were generated from the data to represent the riders' understanding and experience: (1) feel as an ideal (2) feel as a training tool, (3) feel as feedback from the horse, (4) feel as self-awareness. Feel is perceived as a multifaceted skill, with physical, cognitive, and emotional components, which is key to optimizing performance and equine welfare. Good feel is believed to distinguish exceptional riders and be a transcendent experience. However, it is regarded as difficult to teach. Riders emphasized the influence of their body and mind on the horse, and a need to appreciate horses' communication and sentience and develop a reciprocal connection. Further investigation into riders' experience of feel within the dyad is warranted.

KEYWORDS

Equitation; horse; horse-riding; human–animal interaction; self-awareness

The interest in riding horses is documented as far back as ancient Greece (Xenophon, c. 430–335 BCE). An age-old bond, that was predominately utilitarian, riding is traditionally taught with a focus on control of the horse to execute movements. However, the changing nature of the horse–human relationship and the growing ethical consideration of horses' involvement in sport and leisure compels an evolving focus on the wellbeing of horse and rider. Riding requires the coordination of two adaptive sentient species who

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have differing physical, cognitive, and sensory abilities (Rørvang et al., 2020). Together, horse and human create an interdependent dyad that through training and practice aspires to synchrony and symbiosis (Krysiak, 2016). The more skilled the rider, the more refined, subtle, and instinctive their interaction with the horse (Tufton & Jowett, 2021). This skill is referred to in equestrian practice as “feel.”

Good feel is considered a highly valued, yet elusive ability of talented riders who are able to attune to and positively influence their horse. Dashper (2016) defines feel as “an embodied experience, felt and negotiated through intimate body-to-body communication, developed within a wider context – both historical and contemporary – of equestrianism.” The perceived disregard of feel by science was found to be a key reason equestrians choose to discount equine welfare evidence (Thompson & Haigh, 2018). Similarly, where knowledge of learning theory does not translate into improved welfare for horses or increased safety for riders (Luke et al., 2023), feel has been proposed as a gestalt to address the persistent theory – practice divide (Thompson & Haigh, 2018). However, there is a paucity of research on riders’ understanding and experiences of feel.

The communication method the dyad uses is physical and tactile – horses’ natural means of communication. The riders’ body and mind therefore play the determining role in the sensations perceived, interpreted, and transmitted. As prey animals, horses’ innate sensitivity enables them to pick up on minute changes in others’ heart rate, body odor, and muscular tension and tone, known as “intention” movements (Ladewig, 2019). Riders’ awareness and control of thoughts and emotions consequently play a pivotal role. Tufton and Jowett (2021) interpret equestrian feel as empathic accuracy. The horse–human relationship is likened to the coach–athlete “partnership”: the rider acting as coach responsible for optimizing the horse’s potential. However, fundamental differences in communication method and the balance of power, agency, and motivation implicit within this interspecies relationship highlight that first and foremost riders have a “response-ability” to perceive, interpret, and respond to horses’ communication and behavior accurately (Oliver, 2010).

Outside of equestrianism, the concept of feel has been defined as a multidimensional, multisensory experience and skill that is determined by the ability to accurately perceive inner states and sensations and incorporate physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual elements. When compared with recreational climbers, elite mountain climbers consciously monitor and regulate their felt experiences to inform their decision-making (Burke et al., 2010). Like mountain climbing, horse-riding is one of the more dangerous activities: 81% of equestrians are injured at some point in their career, 83.4% of these from riding accidents (Horses Only, 2023). Unlike other sports, the addition of the horse as living, sentient “equipment” involves unique and complex ethical considerations. Horses’ natural sociability and cooperative herd instinct enable them to adapt and entrain with others easily (Argent, 2012). Additionally, horses’ innate stoicism and the ability to suppress natural instincts are qualities utilized within the training process and valued as obedience and submission. However, these characteristics that make the interaction so appealing to humans leave horses vulnerable, most questionably to human ego and ambition. Abbey and Randle (2016) found improving riders’ awareness of horses’ sentience had an immediate corresponding effect on their riding: reducing horses’ stress behaviors, thereby improving welfare. Despite this recognition, Zetterqvist Blokhuis

(2019) suggests that the perspective and reactions of the horse are not discussed explicitly enough within the pedagogic process. Furthermore, Jones McVey (2017) infers a paradoxical industry, where riders seeking to cultivate feel are not encouraged to trust their own senses and experience but are taught to continuously seek external input and validation. However, it is possible that an increased emphasis on riders' awareness and understanding of their own and their horses' felt experiences would benefit equitation pedagogy. The purpose of the present study therefore was to investigate professional riders' perceptions and experiences of feel to gain insight into this highly valued, yet underexamined, element of equitation.

Methods

Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (ETHICS2022-279-LR). It complied with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Participants

Nine online semi-structured interviews were conducted (3 male, 6 female), which is comparable with similar studies on horse–rider interaction (Jackman et al., 2019; Lamperd et al., 2016). The use of purposive sampling enabled the selection of participants who matched pre-determined criteria (Campbell et al., 2020). Professional riders were defined as experienced riders (> 3,000 h) who work and/ride horses or coach as their main form of employment (Williams & Tabor, 2017). Selection criteria included: >18 years, primary income from riding, >10 years of riding experience, from any equestrian discipline, competitive and non-competitive. All the riders were UK based at the time of interview. The riders were invited to take part via e-mail and phone. The research requirements and procedures, including a question guide, were sent to participants in advance of the interviews to ensure informed consent. Participation was voluntary and confidential, unless participants requested to be acknowledged. No incentives were provided. Written and verbal consent were obtained, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions throughout the study.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews (SSI) are commonly used in sports and health research, enabling insight into participants' beliefs and behaviors via their own words. They are particularly useful when researching complex or ambiguous topics (Bearman, 2019). An interview schedule was developed using an established 5-phase process (Kallio et al., 2016) to provide an underpinning framework: (1) prerequisites for the use of SSIs were ascertained; (2) existing research was examined to identify knowledge gaps. Investigation of equestrian lay press and consultation with two experienced, qualified coaches provided additional practical understanding; (3) previous qualitative studies provided methodological guidance to inform the question guide (Lamperd

et al., 2016). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share perceptions and experiential descriptions, while probing enabled exploration and expansion of meaning; (4) the interview schedule was piloted ($n = 1$); (5) the full interview protocol was made available (see Table 1). This format ensured a consistent yet adaptable interview structure, allowing for individual variances and giving the interviewer scope to delve into emerging answers (Bearman, 2019).

Protocol

Demographic information, interview recordings, and transcripts were managed and stored securely in line with the University's Code of Research Practice (2020) and data protection legislation (Data Protection, 2018; GDPR, 2018). To protect anonymity, all participants were allocated numbers (i.e., R1, R2, etc.). Each interview, conducted by AS, lasted on average 44.63 ± 9.58 min (range: 26–55) and was audio- and/or video-recorded using either an iPhone 7 (Otter app) or Microsoft Teams (Version 1.6.00.22378). The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized prior to analysis.

Table 1. Interview protocol.

Questions	Justification
Please tell about your riding experience and background.	<i>Warm up question to build rapport and relax interviewee.</i>
Probes: How many years have you been riding professionally? Where did you train?	<i>Establish motivations and context.</i>
Please tell me about your understanding of the concept of "feel" as a rider.	<i>To establish participants' broad understanding of the concept and how they have developed this understanding.</i>
Have you always understood it like this?	
Probes: How has your understanding changed? Why do you think your understanding has changed?	
Please describe your experience of feel. Please tell me how you know you experience good feel.	<i>To identify how riders experience good feel.</i>
Probes: What made the difference?	<i>To explore what the riders perceive of feel to look like in other riders.</i>
How do you recognize when riders have good feel?	
What factors positively influence your feel as a rider?	<i>To identify specific factors that are considered influential.</i>
Probes: When do you experience your best feel?	<i>Positive and negative to balance valance.</i>
What factors may negatively influence your feel as a rider?	
How does the horse you are riding effect your feel?	<i>Explore riders' perceptions of the horses' role.</i>
Probes: What was it about the horse? How does riding different horses make a difference?	
Do you believe "feel" is a trainable skill for riders?	<i>To explore if riders actively consider and work on improving their feel.</i>
Probes: Why is this?	
How do you develop your feel as a rider? Please give examples.	
Reflecting on what we have discussed, how important is "feel" to you as a rider?	<i>Allows the participant to discuss more broadly.</i>
Is there anything you would like to add or comment on?	
Basic demographic info: age, gender, no. of years riding, discipline	

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to identify and generate themes across the data set. RTA is useful for determining ways a concept is constructed and represented within a population (Braun et al., 2016). The 6-phase process involved (1) data familiarization: the interviews were rewatched and transcripts read multiple times; (2) coding: key codes and phrases were identified and categorized (Ryan & Bernard, 2003); (3) theme development: subthemes and higher order themes were generated; (4) revision and refinement: findings and themes were discussed with the research team and “critical friends,” and refined; (5) naming; and (6) writing up. Additionally, themes were discussed with co-authors as part of a validation consensus, and agreement was reached that the research aims had been appropriately met. The analysis process was evaluated against the 15-point checklist for good RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to ensure a thorough, systematic, and rigorous approach.

Rigor

While the lead researcher’s personal experiences within equestrianism may have influenced the interpretation of the data, strategies were applied to mitigate this. These included prolonged engagement in the study and regular debriefing with the research team (Everard et al., 2021). A reflexive journal was used to document logistical details, methodological decisions, and researcher rationale and insights and enable review. In addition, findings and interpretations of the data were discussed with “critical friends” from equestrian and non-equestrian backgrounds to provide alternative viewpoints and perspectives (Smith et al., 2014).

Results

Nine professional riders, comprised of six female and three male individuals, took part in the study. They ranged in age from 29 to 79 years ($M = 49.38 \pm 17.9$) and had a mean of 38.9 (± 15.96) years’ of riding experience. All were actively involved in the industry earning their primary income from riding and coaching. The riders identified their primary discipline as dressage ($n = 6$), eventing (three-phase competition consisting of dressage, jumping and cross-country) ($n = 1$), showjumping ($n = 1$), and non-competitive equine training ($n = 1$) (see Table 2).

The purpose of this study was to explore professional riders’ understanding and experience of equestrian feel. Riding with feel was considered particularly relevant for professionals as it was believed to be what distinguishes exceptional riders and trainers. Four key themes were identified from the data: (1) feel as an ideal, (2) feel as a training tool, (3) feel as feedback from the horse, (4) feel as self-awareness (see Figure 1). While all the riders expressed feel as multifaceted, riders tended toward one or two of the key themes.

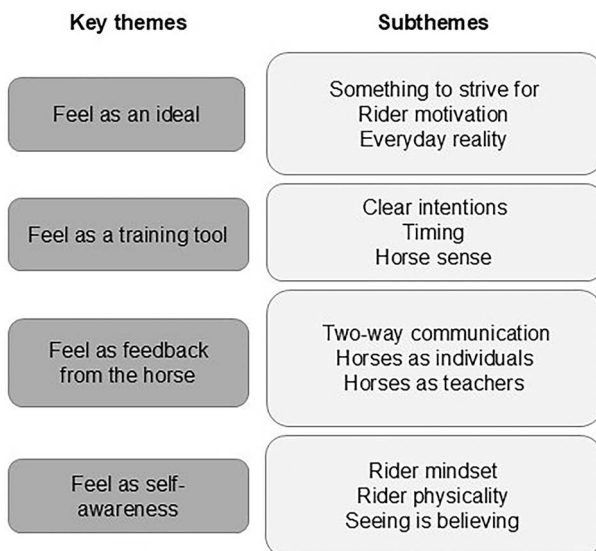
Feel as an Ideal

Riders used terms such as “connection,” “in sync,” “as one,” and “in tune” describing good feel as a transcendent “the whole feels relaxed and easy” (R8), “rather than being on the

Table 2. Demographic information on the participants.

	Gender	Age (years)	Years of riding experience	Discipline	Training background	Job role	Competitive level
Rider 1	Female	29	25	Dressage	UK	Rider/coach	Grand Prix (Under 25)
Rider 2	Female	68	50	Dressage	UK (BHS)	Rider/coach	International Grand Prix, European/World Championships, Olympic team
Rider 3	Male	79	70	Dressage (classical)	Spanish riding school UK (BHS)	Rider/coach	International Grand Prix
Rider 4	Female	61	50	3 day eventer	UK	Rider/coach	FEI CCI-5*, European/World Championships, Olympic team
Rider 5	Female	35	25	Training	UK (BHS)	Rider/coach	Non-competitive
Rider 6	Female	N/A	40	Dressage	UK (BHS)	Rider/coach	International Grand Prix
Rider 7	Female	46	40	Dressage (classical)	UK Germany Holland	Rider/coach Rehab yard owner	International Grand Prix
Rider 8	Male	36	20	Dressage	UK (World Class program) Germany	Rider/coach	International Grand Prix
Rider 9	Male	41	30	Show Jumping	Italy UK (BHS)	Rider/coach	International Showjumping (to 1.50)

Note: N/A = not available, BHS = British Horse Society.

**Figure 1.** Thematic tree.

horse, you are now in the horse with it"(R5) and motivating experience, "you practically only have to think it and it happens, and you're giving the smallest signals ... it's the most amazing thing, it spurs you on" (R2).

However, this experience was regarded as rare, and aspiring to this ideal was also considered unhelpful: “I think you’ve got to feel what you have on the day and go with that” (R8) and “feel can be bad ... it’s the ability to sense if a horse is stiff or crooked, if it’s lazy to the leg, if the contacts heavy, too light, one sided” (R2).

Feel was also perceived as an elusive rider skill that grows, develops, and changes over time: “you’re not taught about feel, it ... becomes more precise and detailed” (R2), “it’s definitely something that needs a lot of trial and error, and feeling it wrong before you can compare it” (R5),

as the years have gone on my perception of feel has changed ... I never regarded myself as a rider who had feel and then I realised I did have feel but I didn’t know what I was feeling ... I wasn’t always aware as to the cause and the effect of what was going on, as soon as I was made aware of it, then I did have the feel to sort the horse out, rather than someone have to tell me how to do it. (R6)

Riders discussed the reality of making a living: “in the business you need to make money, you need to go on, so there is difficulty trying to teach feel, difficulty trying to explain what feel is, in reality not everyone gets it” (R9). This perceived lack of rider feel was deemed to apply across the disciplines and levels: “some riders don’t seem to actually have any concept that it’s another living thing. They are not breathing, becoming tense, focusing too much on the technical elements of what they’re doing” (R5).

Interestingly, one of the dressage riders commented,

you can have a really bad test; it can feel bad and actually you get your best result. I think there’s definitely an element that I’ve had to learn that sometimes what you’re feeling isn’t always what’s seen ... I’ve definitely had to learn over the years to train myself to not always want the best feeling. (R8)

This highlights the significance of rider motivation and possibly competitive pressure to conform to an aesthetic ideal.

Feel as a Training Tool

Training with feel was perceived as the ability to accurately sense and shape the horse’s responses, “I could pretty much do anything with this horse because I’ve got him” (R5), to match the rider’s intent, efficiently and compassionately. The riders utilized their feel to make informed decisions: “it’s my tool, to help me decide what we’re doing” (R6), “you’re constantly trying to use your tools ... by what you’re feeling, to make it better, or make communication clearer to the horse” (R8),

You’ve got to be on a real level ... understanding, sensitive, ready ... clear, black and white, what’s right, wrong, full of reward and praise when it’s correct, but quick to pick up on mistakes, ear mark it, and repeat ... a rider with feel would be quicker to pick up these sorts of mistakes and be quicker to reward. (R4)

Within this study, the timing of riders’ cues was identified as reliant on feel: “the right moment when they feel good, and straight, and relaxed, you are constantly feeling for those training elements” (R8). Good timing was considered a result of being able to accurately sense the horse: “you’ve got to feel the reaction the horse is giving to time that ... it’s like driving a car, some people’s reactions and responses are quicker than others” (R6). The

riders emphasized the need for composed responses: “you have to react really quickly, but in a totally unemotional way ... correction, let go, correction, let go” (R1). Although the riders’ intent was the determining factor, they voiced a need to “adjust your riding to incorporate that horse’s needs” (R5) while “being sensitive and flexible in your training” (R4).

Feel as Feedback From the Horse

The riders acknowledged a requirement to pay attention to subtleties of horse body language: “a little movement of the ears or swish of the tail” (R3). Being able to perceive the nuanced energy of the horse was raised in multiple interviews:

like when the horse is tired, or when the horse can learn a little bit more, or when the horse is having a bit of an off day, or when it doesn’t feel quite right, or is a bit anxious, because some horses show it outwardly, but some horses get a bit closed off on you. (R8)

The riders referred to an emotional reciprocity that occurs within the dyad. This was linked directly to safety. Given the size and flight instinct of the horse, riders highlighted a requirement to be aware of a horse’s excitation levels: “I connect mentally with the horse as much as I do physically and I can understand why he’s getting anxious about something and sort it for him” (R6) and

You know being quick to react and understand what is ... really going through its mind, being able to pick up on what the problem is to encourage that horse to use its energy to work with you rather than against you. (R4)

This was linked to maintaining a two-way feedback loop: “you have to be very aware of how you’re feeling, as much as how the horse feels” (R6) and “The horse knows very well everything that is going on, he can feel you getting distracted in that moment, not connected or not happy ... the connection has to come from both directions, both horse and rider” (R9).

Rider feel was discussed as key to producing a happy, willing horse: “you want both working together, but equally independently, one not relying on the other, just naturally in a good balance” (R8). Additionally, the riders discussed the use of feel to identify horses’ resistance, discomfort, and pain: “when it’s not going right with the horse, listen to the horse” (R7) and “I feel like I’m a bit of an X-ray machine when I get on ... it’s definitely really useful with soundness and welfare” (R6). The riders considered the role of the horse as integral in developing feel: “It’s the horses that are actually teaching you” (R9). They provide a wider frame of reference to draw on, “the more different types of horses, the more your knowledge grows and your brain then can cope with different scenarios easier, if you’ve worked your way through them in the past” (R4), facilitating a rider to become more attuned: “you get on a different horse, you get a different response, different reaction, different feeling. It sharpens you up, makes you much more perceptive as to what you’re doing” (R6).

Feel as Self-Awareness

Rider accountability was emphasized throughout:

they are conscious of themselves and what they’re doing, and they’re able to put what the horse is doing and what they’re doing together. I think once they can match those two things, that’s when you say a riders got feel. (R6)

there can't be any egos ... it's been a very good lesson for me ... if the horse is going wrong or the horse has got negative tension, then you need to look at yourself and how you communicate with that horse. (R7)

Rider mindset was perceived as key: "if they are not open minded, and prepared to just sit back and basically feel what's going on, always full of preconceived ideas or perceptions then they limit themselves" (R6), "I've learned a mental discipline of emptying my mind" (R7), and

focus on the horse, read the horse, when to reassure them, when to pat them, but that takes quite a lot of focus, if your mind is a little bit elsewhere ... you can easily react in a negative way. (R8)

The professionals interviewed emphasized the importance of their body as their communication tool, "I use every single inch of my body in terms of nerves to feel what the horse is telling me" (R9), and voiced a responsibility to look after it for the benefit of the horse: "I'm very strict with myself about looking after myself ... I want to do the best for him and I want to be completely in the zone, using my tool of feel that I've developed" (R6) and "I do a lot of work off horse, ... I have to stretch a lot, riding horses all day makes you quite stiff" (R8). The professionals used terms such as "supple," "open," "loose," and "limber" to describe their physicality relative to feel, "to move in all their joints, to be coordinated" (R3), and enable a "give and take of all the movement through the horse and rider" (R7).

Discussion

All the riders interviewed emphasized an appreciation of horses as individuals with variable physical, cognitive, and emotional needs (Lundgren, 2019). The professional riders expressed a responsibility to ensure clear communication with the horse; to facilitate the horses' learning using well-timed tactile cues delivered via their seat, legs, and hands. While this highlights a need for riders to have underpinning knowledge of species-specific biological and ethological characteristics, it also recognizes horses' subjective agency (Merkies & Franzin, 2021). Yet, applying this to the practice of riding is only possible if riders can actualize this tacit knowledge through their body, enabling them to accurately sense and respond to the needs of the individual horse. Riding with feel therefore demands complete immersion of body and mind, supported by the rider's account of feel as a physical, mental, and emotional connection with the horse. To varying degrees, dependent on rider "feel-ability," riding is an effort to create a hybrid of horse and human (Maurstad et al., 2013). Arguably, riding with feel is an attempt to harmonize two differing species to such an extent that each other's thoughts and actions are recognized, affected, and enhanced by the other, blurring the interspecies divide. This idea of the centaur is, as Thompson (2011) suggests, "simultaneously an abstract metaphor, an ideal, a practice, an experience and a continuous work in progress."

Patton (2019) claims all riding involves exercising power over another, only varying in the level of sophistication applied. This acknowledges horses' necessary subservience to the rider's will and emphasizes riders' and trainers' duty of care to make informed value judgements about the amount of agency and self-expression afforded to the horse

(Lundgren, 2019). Despite this, Zetterqvist Blokhuis (2019) found recognition of the active involvement of the horse in mutual communication with the rider not to be part of traditional equestrian education. As a tacit skill, riding is acquired through experiential, situational learning, passed from one generation to another. This underlines the influence of coach and trainer and can mean that the industry is traditional and slow to change, maintaining outdated, sometimes abusive, practices despite contradicting welfare evidence (Karkulehto & Schuurman, 2021).

The increasing industry requirement for social license suggests that a cultural shift from a prevailing focus on technique and control to incorporate more practical wisdom or “phronesis” may offer a more contemporary training paradigm. Phronesis exemplifies a form of embodied wisdom where good action, such as “listening” to the horse, becomes a primary goal, encouraged in both training and competition (Zetterqvist Blokhuis, 2019).

The professional riders interviewed expressed concern to develop horses’ positive association with training. This view is underpinned by empirical evidence that horses respond to humans based on the valence of previous interactions and learning (Merkies & Franzin, 2021). Horses’ inability to self-report happiness or otherwise mean indirect behavioral, cognitive, and physiological indicators become pertinent (Webb et al., 2019). However, recognition of horses’ emotions has been found unreliable, even among experienced horse people (Braun et al., 2024). In the absence of verbal communication, humans only have their own emotional awareness and experience to draw upon.

Jones McVey (2021) found amateurs’ insecurity and lack of confidence in their connection with their horse resulted in frequent misinterpretation of horses’ behavior, often as defiance. These findings indicate a basic educational need to develop riders’ skills in reading and understanding the subtleties of horse communication to ensure correct translation and response to feedback from the horse. Unlike dog training, where direct face to face contact is relevant (Porter, 2019), riding relies on the human having to accurately perceive and interpret this nuanced feedback through their body and sense of touch. Humans’ biological and cultural predominance toward a reliance on linguistic communication and visual sense may in part explain the influential role of equestrian coach or trainer as “eyes on the ground.”

While all the riders interviewed coached, not all had formal qualifications; yet all expressed a need to also have a feel for the rider. This highlights a unique equestrian industry coaching demand: to balance the ambitions, motivations, and capabilities of the rider, with the talents and limitations of the horse. This complex role of mediator between horse and rider requires management of client narratives and expectations and the safeguarding of equine welfare within a highly competitive industry. Visual aids were regarded as useful tools, oftentimes highlighting disparity between felt and visual perception both in riders’ bodies and their horses. However, the riders interviewed understood feel to ultimately rely on their own bodily sense and awareness.

The descriptions of riding with feel align with Game’s (2001) assertion that riding requires “a mindfully embodied way of being” and Kabat-Zinn’s (1994) definition of mindfulness: “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” Recent evidence demonstrates that self-regulation, optimal performance, and psychological wellbeing are attained and sustained through non-judgmental present-moment awareness, with a focus on task-relevant stimuli (Josefsson et al.,

2019). As with infants and dogs, horses use human emotional cues to guide and regulate their behavior (Schrimpf et al., 2020), and they have been found able to smell happiness and fear (Merkies & Franzin, 2021). This reciprocity in horse–human emotional transference was recognized by the professionals as a need to be aware of, and manage, emotional states in themselves and their horse.

Self-awareness and regulation rely on two types of interrelated somatosensory perception: proprioception and interoception. Proprioception, the ability to sense body position and movement quality, including appropriate effort, force, and balance, is impaired by aging, injury, and pain (Jha et al., 2017), which are all found to be prevalent within the equestrian population. Interoception is the ability to accurately perceive physiological sensations, including heart rate and emotion (Critchley & Garfinkel, 2017). Correlations between individuals' interoceptive sensitivity, empathy, emotional control, and motor reactivity in response to another's actions suggests that improved self-awareness creates improved awareness of others (Pace-Schott et al., 2019). Therefore, for riders to cultivate their sense of feel, their interoceptive and proprioceptive perceptions need to be enhanced.

As riders' subjective assessments of pressure and tension do not correlate with actual measurements (Christensen et al., 2021), the use of technology to inform riders' haptic perception and sensitivity, both off and on horse, merits continuing investigation (Randle et al., 2017). Similarly, schooling riders' sensitivity and timing of aids in the same way as horses' responsiveness would improve rider feel (Wolfram, 2013). While riding provides this challenge, welfare and safety implications suggest that refining riders' somatosensory function off horse should become prerequisite or at least complementary. As Haraway (2007) recommends, humans interacting with animals need to train their bodies to anticipate and accommodate others' experiences and reactions in the world. Further investigation into horses' sensitivity to touch and pressure and the extent to which they sense and empathize with human emotions may establish implications (Scopa et al., 2019).

This study explored professional riders' retrospective career-based perspectives useful for gaining an initial understanding of equestrian feel. However, research on riders of varying levels (including para-equestrians), from wider cultural backgrounds, and from different disciplines would build broader industry definition. Additionally, exploring the relationship between riders' perceptual experiences and ridden performance evaluations or equine behavioral markers would provide further insight. Similarly, comparing rider perceptions to coaches' perspectives would identify how rider feel is observed from the ground and inform how coaches can work with riders to develop feel, as well as link to performance outcomes in subjectively assessed disciplines, such as dressage.

Limitations

There are limitations to consider. Although this study recruited participants through purposive sampling aligned to the inclusion criteria, the voluntary nature of participation and the use of non-probability sampling methods may have led to self-selection bias (Wang & Cheng, 2020). This may have increased the likelihood that participants only responded to the interview call if they perceive feel to be important to their riding. This can perhaps be

seen in the higher number of dressage riders in the final sample. Dressage is a subjectively judged equestrian discipline in which scores are awarded for horse and rider harmony and the ability of the rider to communicate with the horse in the execution of precise movements (Hobbs et al., 2020). As such, dressage riders may be more likely to attribute a greater importance to the concept of feel aligned to the determinants of success within the sport compared with other disciplines, such as jumping or eventing, which may prioritize speed or jumping technique. Further research on the importance of feel within other Fédération Equestre Internationale disciplines would establish a greater understanding of equestrian feel and its importance to training practices.

In addition, all riders in this study were classified as professionals, thus inferring their income and time are primarily based on equestrian activities, such as riding or coaching (Williams & Tabor, 2017). Increased time riding or working with a broader range of horses likely increased the participants' ability to communicate their understanding of feel; however, this could also raise questions as to the origin of feel as expertise acquired through experience or an innate characteristic of talented horse people. Finally, the aim of this study was specifically to ask riders about their perceptions of feel, rather than horse–rider interactions, which may have placed unintentional importance on the concept of feel above other facets of horse–rider communication.

Conclusion

The results indicate that feel is a highly valued, yet elusive equestrian skill, key to optimizing performance and welfare. Feel was perceived particularly relevant for professionals, both as an aptitude and as an intrinsic motivator. Riding with feel was voiced as the ability to actualize the rider's intent efficiently and compassionately, and it appeared to be underpinned by sensitivity to the subtleties of horses' communication and affective state. As in non-equestrian studies on feel, the riders perceived feel as a multidimensional skill, having physical, cognitive and emotional elements, and expressed utilizing their felt experience to inform and improve their decision-making. The professionals showed an enhanced awareness of the effect of their mind and body on their horse and emphasized the need to recognize and adapt to horses' variable physical, cognitive, and emotional needs, establishing a mutually informed connection. The findings suggest that enhancing riders' perceptions of their own body and mind, as well as increasing acknowledgment and understanding of horses' feedback within equitation pedagogy, would facilitate the development of equestrian feel. Further research and education in the application of teaching feel within the equestrian coaching industry is needed.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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