

Equestrianism in the United States: The Community Behind the Sport

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Introduction

Equestrianism, or as it's more commonly known, horseback riding, is a prominent athletic activity in the United States. There are many forms of riding, such as hunter/jumper, dressage, eventing, or the various western disciplines like reining. No matter what style of riding one does, there is almost always a community developed within groups of riders, from friendships found at individual stables to those created through interaction in nationwide competitions. As a rider for over thirteen years, I have personally experienced the familiar bonds that grow between fellow riders and even the rivalries between competitors in the many riding divisions. As stated by Sarah Evers Conrad (2015):

The horse industry is a very social community. Riders will socialize with their horses, each other, their instructors, barn employees, other competitors, etc. The equine industry is one where people help each other with their horses, at shows, on trail rides, during lessons and outside of the barn.

Equestrians are brought together by their mutual love of horses and enjoyment of the sport, and much of the communication between riders and equestrian organizations in the U.S. is through social media, like Facebook, or through magazines and catalogs, and most notably, much of the pertinent information and news in the equestrian community is presented through the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF). USEF, the “national governing body for the equestrian sport”, is involved in the organization and running of competitions throughout the nation, the funding of the Olympic Equestrian Team, and assists in the “protection and welfare” of horses “in crisis situations and natural disasters” (2018). In addition to this, on the USEF website,

members of the organization can find a myriad of information on rider and horse rankings, rules and regulations and even material on various horse breeds and riding disciplines. Any equestrians who are actively competing, buying and selling horses, or who are just interested in the horse world, rely on USEF for credible and up to date information. In this paper, I aim to present and analyze the means of communication among equestrians throughout the United States.

Methods

I used my own experience as an equestrian and knowledge of rider communication to narrow my discourse community research to three main sources of communication and information flow in the equestrian community. The first was the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF), the governing body of equestrian riding in the U.S.. I examined *Equus Magazine* and *Chronicle of the Horse*, and my final area of research revolved around social media communication in the community, specifically that found on Facebook and Youtube.

For the USEF website, I took note of the various tabs found on the homepage and what information they provided to readers. I analyzed how this information pertains to the community and how it can be used to guide riding and the function of competitions in the nation.

For the two magazines I researched, I looked into what they described their purpose as and then compared the information each magazine offers. I noted tabs and links found on the magazine websites and used the information I could find from the sites to examine what their purpose is to the equestrian community and how they are used as a source of spreading information.

My investigation of the two forms of social media was done with the intent of studying the more personal and colloquial style of communication that equestrians engage in. My research examined the format of these two platforms in addition to how they are specifically used by riders. I noted what types of riding topics are discussed on these and how the interactions between riders take place. I specifically analyzed the Facebook account of EquiSale Sport Horses on Facebook and the channel SmartPak on Youtube as examples of riding groups using social media to connect with other riders.

I have also interviewed my mother who has been engaged in the riding community as long as I have, not as a rider but as the person responsible for management of my horses and helping me throughout my growth as a rider.

Results/Analysis

United States Equestrian Federation

The primary source for any information related to hunter-jumper riding in the United States would be USEF. Upon entering the site, one is presented with numerous tabs: Start Riding, Learning Center, Compete, Network and News, Join USEF, Safe Sport, and Shop. Each of these tabs leads to a drop down menu providing more specific information ranging from Stable and Farm Safety and Introduction to Breeds under the Start Riding tab, to Rankings and Results and Rules and Regulations under Compete, to links for the magazines *Equestrian Weekly* and *Equestrian Magazine* under the Network and News tab (United States Equestrian Federation, 2018).

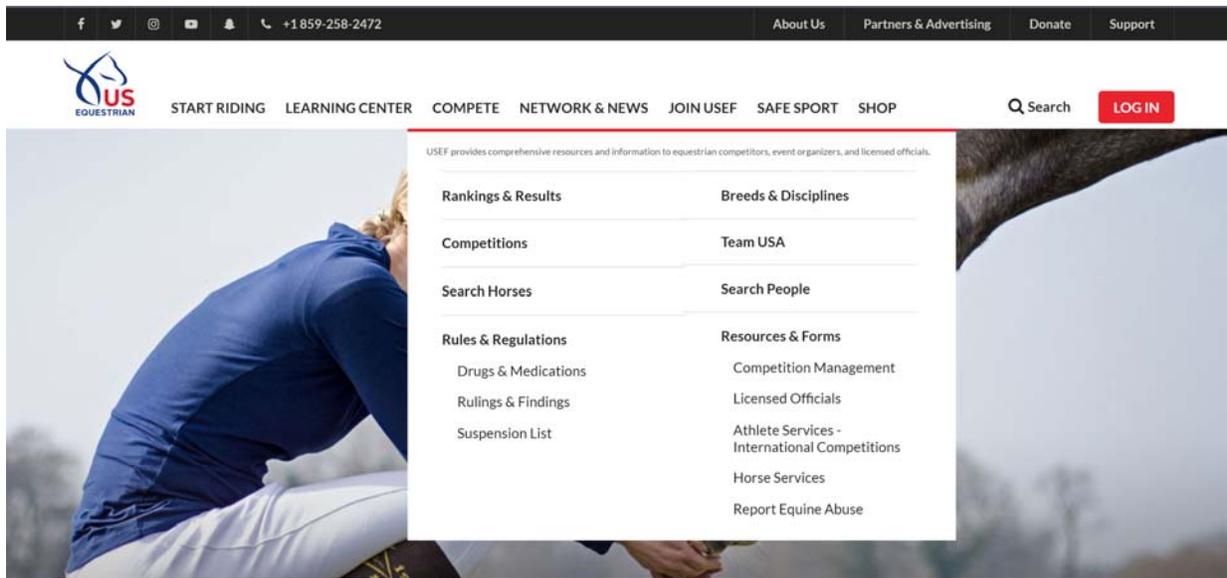


Photo: usef.org

The Learning Center provides videos and visuals that serve to provide introductory information on things such as beginning riding lessons, safety and welfare, to tips on becoming a better rider or competing better, like the video “Riding a Winning Jump-Off”, which is a type of competition class in the show jumping division. There is also a link to the USEF Network leading to live showings of competitions. USEF is the source for riders to go to for more logistical concerns related to competing and managing horses in the United States.

Magazines

EQUUS Magazine

EQUUS is described as “the magazine horse owners turn to for advice and information”, a place to find material on various breeds and disciplines where, “each month the *EQUUS* team presents the latest on equine research, horse care information and training techniques” (2018). On the magazine’s website, one can find tabs on behavior, diseases, management, riding, the

horse world, barn dogs, and lameness. Each tab opens a page with links to articles on specific issues within that topic and also has links to related videos.



Photo: equusmagazine.com

Subscribers of the magazine get a new issue each month that provides current information on all things relevant in the horse world. There are focuses on horse health and behavior, in addition to tips on perfecting riding skills and interviews with professional riders. *EQUUS Magazine* is a useful tool for riders interested in learning more about being active in properly caring for their horses and making sure they are physically fit to perform as athletes.

The Chronicle of the Horse

The Chronicle of the Horse has been around since 1937, and according to its description from *The Chronicle of the Horse* website, it is the “industry leader in providing news coverage of national and international sport horse competitions...offer[ing] everything from competition results to compelling features and thought-provoking commentary” (2018). On the left side of the homepage, there is a section called “Quick Links” which provides access to subpages including Chronicle TV, Archives, Marketplace, and Forums. Along the top, there are links to

things such as the current magazine issue, News, Features, Horse Care, and the sister magazine UnTacked. In the center of the homepage, is a slide show with links to current popular news topics and articles.



Photo:chronofhorse.com

Social Media

Facebook

I focused on the Facebook page “Equisale Sport Horses”. Upon clicking on this account, my attention was grabbed by a vibrant photo of a chestnut horse. In the description, the poster wrote “8YO, imported Hanoverian, 16.2h gelding with hack winning movement”, and continued to describe the horse’s personality, experience and suitability for riders (2018). They included links to Youtube videos of the horse in action, moving the reader from one form of media to another. This particular post had 158 likes, 23 shares, and over 106 comments, full of variants of “Price and location?” (EquiSale Sport Horses, 2018). That account, Equisale Sport Horses, is

based in Florida; however, going through the commenters, there were people from all over the United States reaching out for more information.



Photo: www.facebook.com/EquiSaleSportHorsesUSA

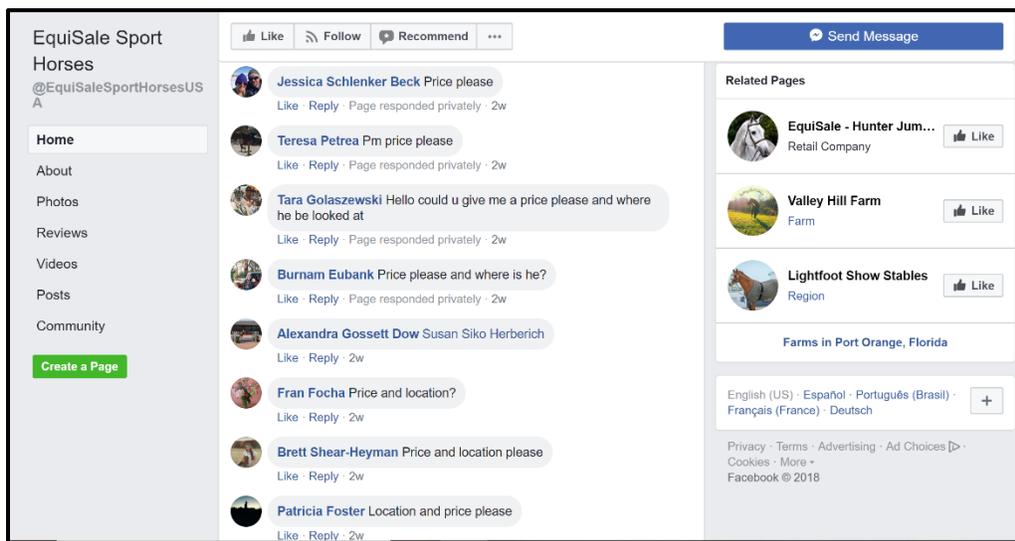


Photo: www.facebook.com/EquiSaleSportHorsesUSA

Youtube

On Youtube, the account SmartPak frequently posts short videos interviewing equine professionals, from riders to veterinarians, that provide viewers with noteworthy tips and

discourse related to a myriad of equine topics, such as with their most popular video “Stuff Riders Say” or their more recent ones, “Ask the Vet- The Do’s and Don’ts of Feeding Oats” and “SmartPak SmartCell Saddle Pad Review” (2018). Videos vary in length from seconds to hours. On Youtube, some channels like SmartPak focus on more informative discussions while personal accounts of riders feature videos depicting things such as riding lessons or barn chores. Just like with Facebook, the comments section on Youtube videos further allows riders to communicate with one another and professionals, posting queries related to the video or even inserting reviews on products.

Discussion

In the book *Equestrian Cultures in Global and Local Contexts*, equestrian culture is defined as “part of a broader system or web of social relations...[that] unfold through the specific and myriad things which ‘equestrians do, say, think and feel about, with and for horses’”, where, like with other cultures and communities, “aspects of an equestrian culture provide meaning, are important for social identity, and can be resilient to change” (p.2, 2017). From my examination of texts and digital communication pertaining to the hunter-jumper equestrian community, it is clear that outside of groups of riders at stables, this community is primarily brought together through access to digital means such as websites and social media where people worldwide can communicate with one another. However, when riders come together at competitions or other locations, as stated by Ellen Schurer, “No matter where you are, if you stumble upon someone wearing breeches, there is a feeling of kinship and camaraderie that is undeniable”. While questioning Ms. Schurer on what she interprets the riding community as, she told me that “the equestrian community is a group of likeminded people that love horses

and are passionate about horse riding as both a sport and a hobby”. Yes, the hunter-jumper community has a large focus on competing and progressing to higher levels as a rider, but underneath this sense of competitiveness and rivalry that comes with essentially every sport, there are friendships and an enthusiasm for all things horses that unites riders throughout the country. Social media and magazines allow for the share of information and stories and serve to not only further the business associated with equestrianism, but also create an interconnectedness between horseback riders.

When I was still actively competing, I frequently made use of USEF to see where I ranked in my division, Child/Adult Jumpers, and would also look through the results tab to keep track of my horses as well as see how horses I used to ride were doing in shows, as this tab presents each show in which a horse or rider competes and shows their placing in each class they ride in. It has been very useful for falling back on with any basic questions regarding competitions or rules for keeping horses in the United States, and furthermore, it is necessary that one is registered with USEF to be able to compete in many of the shows in the country. USEF as the official governing body, dictates the many rules and regulations for riding, right down to how a horse may enter a show ring and what clothing must be worn to be allowed to compete. USEF is the most credible source to use for material regarding official information on hunter-jumper competing and equine management.

The riding community makes significant use of social media including Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram to market horses, stables, training and more. I regularly find myself scrolling through my feed on any of these, particularly Facebook and will happen upon an advertisement for a horse for sale. Posts such as the one from Equisale Sport Horses are a

common occurrence in the feed of a rider engaged in his or her equestrian community. These posts are regularly filled with language only riders would likely understand, such as the “hack winning movement” comment stated previously which contributes to the need to be knowledgeable on horse related information to be able to be fully engaged in the community.

Besides being a way for fast communication between people across the nation, social media is also another way for riders to connect with their favorite equestrians, being able to follow their accounts, like their posts and keep up to date on the activity of accomplished riders. As Timm F. Wagner states in his article on social media communication, “social media has increasingly garnered the attention of marketers in all types of industries. In fact, for most companies, social media activities already constitute a significant portion of the promotion mix” (2017). This is very much the case for the equine industry as more and more companies have moved to utilizing social media, especially Facebook to advertise their services and horses. It is likely that as technology advances and social media continue to expand its influence on younger generations, that the riding world will continue to lean more on making use of these domains to communicate and maintain the success of the community.

Through magazines like *EQUUS Magazine* and *Chronicle of the Horse*, equestrians have access to a wealth of valuable information on equine care and riding, written by professionals in the field. These are adept in publishing information on current news regarding hunter-jumper competitions and horse care and focus more on rider lifestyle and feature various figures in the riding world in articles, just as popular magazines would do with celebrities. Although not a form of direct contact between riders, magazines serve a prominent role in conveying news and

tips involving competitive riding and horse care to the masses of the equestrian community in the U.S

Conclusion

I regularly experience having to explain to people that there is more to riding than what is commonly thought. I've had many people be completely unaware of the fact that disciplines outside of racing existed, let alone that the hunter/jumper discipline is as complex and far reaching as it is, and is even an Olympic event. As a result of this lack of awareness on the equine community, I made it my goal to research the functionality of the group so as to provide an introduction to the sport for those who know little of it. Equestrians make up a community of passionate riders of all ages and backgrounds. Riders are found throughout the United States and are brought together in travel to numerous prestigious competitions in the nation. Horseback riding is a sport to some, a hobby to others, and a career to many. Through analyzing literature and social media related to equestrianism, as well as utilizing my own experience with the sport, it became clear that equestrians are part of a community of people who thrive around a common interest in the bonds between humans and their horses. There is business to equestrianism through the buying and selling of horses, there is thrill in the challenge of competing and winning awards, but overall companionship and a sense of freedom is what describes the feeling of being part of a community of riders who focus on spreading the joy that is equestrianism. Having such diverse and easily accessible means of communication is what enables this community to be so inclusive and successful globally.

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