



## Horse Play in the Canadian West: The Emergence of the Calgary Stampede as Contested Terrain

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### Abstract

As one example of how modern Western societies are increasingly obliged to reconcile questions of civility and justice against common, indeed revered, practices that compromise nonhuman animals, this paper examines the recent history of public debate regarding the use of animals for public entertainment in the Canadian West. Using media-based public dialogue regarding the annual Calgary Stampede (and especially chuckwagon racing) as a case study and couching the high-risk use of horses in the sociological language of “sports-related violence,” the paper explores the various arguments for and against the continued use of horses at the self-proclaimed “Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth” despite unambiguous evidence of the harm that regularly, and sometimes graphically, occurs.

### Keywords

horses, animal sports, animal rights, media coverage, Calgary Stampede

### Introduction

As sociologist Brandt (2009) has observed: “Within the social sciences there is scant research about the relationship humans share with their equine companions. Most of the literature available examines cowboys of the Old West and Indian warriors and the purpose horses served in their lives” (p. 315). With few exceptions, mainstream sociologists have been slow to turn their attention to the place of horses in modern communities, and the sociological research on horse sports is negligible. Although sociologists of sport have significantly improved our understanding of the meaning of human sports participation and the way in which it may intersect with forms of harm, abuse, and victimization, they have again paid little attention to the meaning of animal participation and its potentially abusive outcomes.

While the extent, form, and meaning of abuse and violence in horse sports is hotly contested in public discourse in Canada, and while not everyone in

the horse community is indifferent to, or a violator of, animal rights, that Canadian news stories increasingly showcase inhumane treatment of horses, including news of horse injury and death, cannot be denied. Thus, this paper attempts to fill an obvious gap in the sociological literature as it pertains to “horse play” in Canada. Specifically, it explores how animal rights discourses have become inscribed in debates around the legitimacy of one of Canada’s best known cultural events—the Calgary Stampede and Exhibition, an annual agricultural fair running for ten days at the start of July. At a time of growing public sensitivity to forms of violence, victimization, and social justice, debates regarding how humans treat nonhuman animals have escalated, especially in the Canadian West where conservative attitudes toward the place of animals (including horses) in human entertainment cultures endure. Using media accounts as a source of data, this paper explores the cases for and against the use of horses for entertainment purposes in connection with injury, accident, and abuse episodes that occur during rodeo events at the Calgary Stampede, especially chuckwagon racing. At the center of this debate are questions of how humans should treat horses and whether past rationalizations of the risk, pain, and death animals suffer are as convincing as they once were in a culture apparently willing to more critically evaluate its established institutions and popular pastimes.

### **The Stampede and Embryonic Opposition**

There is no official count, but numerous rodeos are held annually in Canada. Although many events have no actual connection to agricultural or ranching traditions, rodeos are commonly perceived as a means of respecting and preserving a Western style of life which is associated with a heavily agricultural and ranch-based history. Among other activities and skills showcased in rodeo events, rodeos involve riding, roping, herding, and branding livestock. At the Calgary Stampede, rodeo events involving horses are numerous and diverse; these include chuckwagon racing,<sup>1</sup> bareback<sup>2</sup> and saddle bronc<sup>3</sup> competitions, barrel racing,<sup>4</sup> steer wrestling,<sup>5</sup> and tie-down roping.<sup>6</sup> The first chuckwagon race took place at the Calgary Stampede in 1923, and the event has become a massively popular spectator event drawing thousands of spectators to the Stampede grounds every year (Calgary Stampede, 2010c).

In the recent past, the North American media have become highly critical of the number and frequency of injuries and deaths that occur at the now globally recognized Calgary Stampede, which promotes itself as “The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth.” In addition to media interest, a number of animal

rights/welfare organizations, including People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Vancouver Humane Society (VHS), have strongly opposed the use of horses in these events. As noted by Rollin (1996), "...in the 1970s, a group of over 200 animal welfare/animal rights organizations signed a well-publicized document affirming that rodeo was absolutely unacceptable morally because of the pain and fear engendered in animals" (p. 3). In 2010 the British Government embarrassed the Calgary Stampede by strongly criticizing the event. In the UK, rodeos have been banned since the 1930s ("Calgary Rodeo Condemned by UK MPs," CBC, 2010).<sup>7</sup> It is clear that the Calgary Stampede has never been under as much pressure as it is today to protect its animals and validate their general treatment with more transparency.

### **Equine Literature and Sociological Knowledge**

One of the reasons that the use of horses in sport has only recently come to be queried with any assertiveness or consistency is because surprisingly little has been written on the topic. There are at least three ways that we might conceive of the body of written knowledge that does exist.

#### *Horses and the Social Sciences*

Although as an area of study the social sciences have largely ignored the role of horses, anti-speciesist animal-use studies are slowly gaining a presence in such research. This expanding body of attention involves the lives and experiences of numerous animals as well as politicized animal issues, such as the prohibition on English foxhunting (e.g., Marvin, 2007).

It seems likely that the animal rights movement of the 1970s (Singer, 2009) has drawn significant interest towards the treatment of farm animals, domestic animals, and animals used in laboratory and medical-testing facilities (cf. Shanks, 2003; Asdal, 2008; Knight et al., 2009). A growing literature is certainly emerging on the topic of animal rights and animal liberation, including studies which look at animal cruelty and animal abuse (Galvin & Herzog, 1992; Flynn, 2001; Block, 2003; Gaarder, 2006; Flukiger, 2008; Herzog & Golden, 2009). It is important for us to note that such work does not typically tend to examine animal abuse in and of itself; rather, it attempts to establish links between animal abuse and other types of deviance, such as interpersonal or domestic violence (Gallagher et al., 2008; Patterson-Kane & Piper, 2009) or childhood experiences (Ascione & Shapiro, 2009). Broadly speaking, the

sociological research on horses that does exist has included considerations such as the gender underpinnings of horse-owner relations, horse breeding, and forms of horse-human communication (Cassidy, 2002; Brandt, 2004; Birke, 2008; Hurn, 2008; Birke & Brandt, 2009; Brandt, 2009; Velija & Flynn, 2010).

Such research has also focused on aspects of corruption (such as gambling associated with horse racing). This is likely due to the fact that horse racing has a long history in North America, and it provides a fairly obvious avenue for studying “deviant” behaviors such as gambling and cheating. In 1968 Scott first published his seminal *The Racing Game: A Sociological Investigation of the Subculture of the Horse Racing Industry*. Rather than focusing on the horses themselves, the study zoned in on the lives of the human participants (e.g., owners, breeders, trainers, riders, and fans) and the social structures related to competitive horse racing (Scott, 2005). Elsewhere, Cassidy (2005) examined the ways in which young race horses are selected within the setting of an international thoroughbred auction, specifically exploring the role of bloodstock agents (those employed to select young horses on the behalf of purchasers) and how they develop methods of identifying successful yearlings at these auctions. Cassidy’s work focused on the professional vision that agents develop and employ in the selection of horses rather than on the interactions between horses and humans.

Yates et al. (2001) explore the controversial notion of horses as “victims.” They discuss the societal reaction—what they call a “moral panic”—to a number of horse attacks which took place in Hampshire, England, throughout the 1990s. In particular, they describe the amplified public response resulting from news of horse attacks which, they argue, represents a broader shift in public attitudes toward the mistreatment of animals which have historically been seen merely as the chattel of humans and have thus occupied a less important “master status” (Yates et al., 2001; Deutschmann, 2007). However, Yates et al. argue that despite individual-level changes toward the treatment of animals, compelling institutional-level changes have yet to be made in many societies, suggesting that horses continue to be considered principally as objects with diminished social worth and value.

### *Horses and the Sociology of Sport*

It is perhaps surprising that any serious or systematic inquiry into the possibility of forms of abuse within the sport setting has been largely ignored in the extant work. Wade (1996) acknowledges that the study of sport is principally concerned with the actions of humans, but it has typically ignored the animals

who may also be implicated in, or even central to, “athletic” or entertainment pursuits. He proposes that animals are typically used in sport in two ways: as a target to intentionally harm or even kill, as in blood sports (e.g., bullfighting, cock fighting, and other baiting “sports”), and as a piece of sporting “equipment,” as in rodeos, horse racing, and show jumping. The sociological research on animals in sport tends to focus on highly contested activities, such as dog fighting, cock fighting, and hunting (Hawley, 1989; Wade, 1990; Evans & Forsyth, 1997; Kalof & Taylor, 2007). Less directly violent and harmful sports have come under scrutiny only very recently. One example of this new research trajectory is a study of greyhound racing which explores the “sports-related violence” (SRV) occurring within the context of the dog-sport industry (Atkinson & Young, 2005) where behind-the-scenes kennelling, feeding, and competing practices can be inhumane and cruel.

With only occasional exceptions, the sociological literature currently available on horse-human relationships has largely ignored the treatment of the horses involved in today’s “horse” sports. As Wade (1996) notes: “. . . while the animals are not intentionally killed for the sake of these sports, their bodies and lives are subjected to a variety of forms of control and constraint, some of which cause the animals discomfort and put their welfare at risk” (p. 10). Young (2012) uses the concept of SRV to explain a number of practices within the sport community and argues that SRV involves “direct acts of physical violence contained within or outside the rules of the game that result in injury to persons, animals, or property; and harmful or potentially harmful acts conducted in the context of sport that threaten or produce injury or that violate human justices and civil liberties” (p. 15). Using this line of thinking, we can begin to explore the ways in which SRV unfolds in the context of animal sports by considering how animals—specifically, horses in our case—may be treated inhumanely in the pursuit of popular culture, entertainment, and profit.

Warner (2005) argues that in an attempt to find a champion race horse, farms “over-breed” or “factory farm” thoroughbreds based on the premise that the more horses bred the greater the chances of producing winning “stock.” She believes that in addition to increasing the rates of slaughter of unsuccessful horses, breeders also subject their horses to risky training methods. In particular, she notes their strenuous exercise regimens, extreme high-energy diets known to cause health issues, increasingly earlier and more intense training for young horses, and the use of medications to mask pain and injury. As Warner (2005) states: “One of the key issues connected to horse racing is how mass production in the industry has impacted on the quality of how horses are raised, the quality of stabling at tracks, and the quality of the tracks themselves” (p. 1).

These concerns are also echoed in the work of Yates et al. (2001) who argue that racehorses competing in Britain routinely face stress, harm, or death. This is illustrated by the alarmingly high rates of fatalities associated with flat racing and steeplechases. In addition to fatalities, racing horses frequently face ligament and tendon injuries rendering them incapable of performing. Further, once a horse has finished his or her racing career, he or she faces an uncertain future which may involve multiple sales and owners, neglect, or slaughter (Yates et al., 2001). This has again been confirmed by a recent analysis of the Equine Injury Database, which shows that there are approximately two fatalities per 1,000 starts in thoroughbred racing (The Jockey Club, 2010). This point is further emphasized by PETA ("North America: Home to the World's Deadliest Race Tracks," Mullins, 2010) who claim that this fatality rate is double the fatality rates of other parts of the world. The perils of the North American racing industry have also been examined by the journalistic community. For instance, focusing on what was referred to as "Breakdown: Death and Disarray on America's Racetracks," in 2012 *The New York Times* featured a series of articles which explored system-wide problems associated with horse racing.<sup>8</sup>

The question of whether horse sports may be viewed as SRV is timely as the animal rights movement continues to gain popularity and pace. During the 2010 Calgary Stampede, for example, a public outcry occurred over what was considered an excessive number of horse deaths, as expressed in the rather provocative headings of lead print media articles (e.g., "Stampede Horse Deaths Spark Debate," Fong, 2010). The concern over animal welfare has been growing both in frequency and pitch, as may be witnessed through even the most cursory analysis of media coverage, including the Horse Protection Act ("USDA Announces Recent Animal Welfare Act and Horse Protection Act Enforcement Actions," US Department of Agriculture, 2011), the process of doping equines in Olympic show jumping ("Four Riders Disqualified for Doping, and Norway May Lose Their Medal for It," Baker, 2008), a number of large-scale animal cruelty cases ("Starving Horses Seized, Man Arrested," Scheurich, 2011), the closure of the Calgary Stampede race track ("Calgary Thoroughbred Track Closing," Brown, 2007), and the closure of horse-processing plants and slaughterhouses in the USA ("Debate Over Slaughtering Horses Gains New Life: Congress Pressed to Ban US Trade in Meat Destined for Dinner Tables," Stuckey, 2008). It is clear from the varied manifestations of mistreating horses represented in this collage of media reports that the welfare of horses involved in sport is of increasing social concern, although there is not a lot of research on it.

*Horses in Popular Culture*

In contrast to the still clearly limited, but growing, social scientific and sociological body of research, there is considerable mainstream or “lay” literature devoted to welfare and safety issues within the horse community. Matters of equine welfare have grown and have become hotly debated within many communities. This is evidenced by the widespread reforms of Equine Canada and the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), an international horse-sport regulating agency founded in 1921 and recognized by the International Olympic Committee, which include welfare as a key priority (FEI, 2010; Equine Canada, 2011). As a further small example, the *2011 Canadian Horse Annual* magazine featured a substantial inquiry into horse welfare in Canada, focusing on the laws applicable to animal welfare in Canada and their relevance for cases of neglect and abuse, as well as legislation pertaining to the slaughter process including transportation to slaughter facilities (Wilson & Burton, 2011). Likewise, the March 2011 issue of *Horse & Rider* featured an article entitled “50 Years of Training Trends,” which outlined the changes in training techniques decade-by-decade as concerns over “what is best for the horse” became increasingly important (H & R Staff, 2011).

Recently, Heird (2010) addressed the inhumane methods used in training horses when speaking for the American Quarter Horse Association. Specifically, he explained the habituation that occurs when people and groups are involved in the sport for extended periods, which allows them to ignore the potentially harmful techniques used in training and competition. Further, Heird (2010) remarked on the increasing awareness surrounding animal rights and the ways in which this conflicts with existing training practices:

That’s where we are with animal welfare, especially equine welfare. Society has seen too many race horses breakdown. They have seen too many horses hauled in livestock trailers, unloaded maimed, cut and abused. They have seen enough Tennessee Walking Horses being sore, over-padded, over-weighted and abused. They’ve seen enough three-day event horses dying on a course because of the course’s severity. They’ve seen enough Arabians being whipped and scared senseless before going into a conformation class. They’ve seen enough hunter and jumpers being poled and forced to jump oxers backward in schooling. They’ve seen enough gaited horses being gingered, and I am afraid they are starting to see enough of some of the things we do to our own Quarter Horses. (p. 51)

This “take” on the process of habituation, or what sociologists would call “rationalization,” further underscores the formations of SRV outlined by

Young (2012). Risky or abusive actions are widely acknowledged and accepted by the horse community even though they may be viewed as deviant by observers or those outside of that community. Such practices have become so enmeshed in particular horse enclaves that its members no longer recognize them as being abusive, deviant, or even troubling. By this reasoning, horse “insiders” are not intentionally behaving in a cruel or hurtful way; they conform to the norms of a competitive animal subculture, which often requires adopting ultimately harmful practices. In sociological “dramaturgical” terms (Goffman, 1959), this is a world replete with “front regions” (where participants speak about the use of horses on the basis of public image and politically-sensitive positions regarding cruelty) and “back regions” (where known abuses are overlooked, rationalized, or remain hidden).<sup>9</sup>

Despite rationalization and such dangerous back regions, a growing public consciousness about horse safety, often teased out in popular culture sources, has contributed to the pressure to change some traditional methods and attitudes. In general, it is clear from a variety of publications that critics of animal cruelty are taking an increasingly aggressive stance against the use of harmful and risky training methods. This has been seen in both “Big Lick” Tennessee Walking Horse<sup>10</sup> competitions and in FEI level dressage competitions. In the former, a number of methods are used to sore the front legs of horses to create exaggerated movement. As an outgrowth of often scathing media inquiry, there are now a number of inspections which routinely occur to prevent the cruelest and most excessive of soring practices. For example, Raia (2009) explains that inspectors are now regularly sent to the US national Walking Horse Celebration to ensure that standards are met. Similarly, the FEI recently ruled against the use of “Rollkur,” a training technique used in dressage which requires the overflexion or hyperflexion of a horse’s neck. After protests by horse enthusiasts, the FEI has now prohibited this method, as outlined in a recent article featured on [www.thehorse.com](http://www.thehorse.com) (“FEI Imposes Sanctions on Controversial Dressage Training Method,” Ryder, 2010).

There are multiple and diverse indications from the lay community that traditional and strongly protected ways of treating horses are being challenged and that a shift in public consciousness is underway with respect to how people in the horse community are reflecting on horse training and competition conventions.<sup>11</sup> But these are not the only consciousness-raising changes regarding the training and treatment of horses. As Birke (2008) points out, what is known as “natural horsemanship” is an increasingly popular form of horse training which emphasizes a kinder, gentler approach to horse training than traditional methods. Birke (2008) discusses the contradictions involved in

horse riding, noting how people often discuss the liberty or freedom of the horse while at the same time seeking to gain more control over the animal. By comparison, natural horsemanship emphasizes a partnership between horse and handler, and teaches people how to control or manage the instincts of the horse in respectful and non-harmful ways.

In sum, while public concerns with horse safety and equine rights have not so far been matched by extensive research, attention to these issues seems to be growing, albeit unevenly, across a cluster of publications and communities. What these sources all share in common is a bubbling consensus that more knowledge is needed to validate already widespread concerns that horses are not treated as well as they should be, especially in sport and public entertainment settings.

### **A Note on Method**

Boasting a large equestrian community, and the setting for the “Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth,” Calgary, Alberta, provides an ideal site for investigating the care, due diligence, and controversy in a number of horse sports. Building on our understanding of the preceding horse research and what we know about horse sport abuse so far, we now use data from an in-depth content analysis of media treatment of the Calgary Stampede since 2005, using a selection of sources including a national newspaper (*Globe and Mail*), a local daily newspaper (*Calgary Herald*), a local tabloid newspaper (*Calgary Sun*), and several Canadian internet news sources (e.g., Canada.com, CTV.ca and CBC.ca). These sources were selected because together they represent the most obvious ways Calgaryans and Canadians more generally receive their information regarding Stampede issues, including controversial Stampede issues.

Most of the accounts we go on to discuss in terms of our principal themes of care, due diligence, and controversy pertain to news coverage of rodeo and, in particular, chuckwagon events. While not every article addressing Calgary Stampede events in these four Canadian newspaper sources (as well as related internet news sites) was included in our analysis, we collated and examined as many articles as we could regarding animal rights, safety, and injury/accident issues at the Calgary Stampede since 2005. As with all content analyses, we conducted a detailed and systematic review of the substantive content and style of these news articles (including discussions facilitated by the editorial functions of the sources in question), which now form the basis of the analysis to follow.

## The Calgary Stampede under Siege: A Summary of Recent Events

It is increasingly clear that horse welfare related to the Calgary Stampede has become “big news” in the Canadian media and in public debate. Our data underscore the tensions between those involved in the respective events and those involved in animal welfare/rights sectors. It is undeniable that horse fatalities have occurred regularly over the last decade despite efforts to change the rules and apply procedures to make the event safer for horses. Perhaps unsurprisingly, newspapers typically feature provocative headlines which, among other things, keep count of the number of deaths occurring at the Stampede.

In the buildup to, and during, the annual event, local and provincial news sites are awash in Stampede news, and analysis of this coverage quickly reveals several common themes. What started years ago as simple and literal news reports on animal injuries and deaths occurring (especially) during rodeo and chuckwagon events has now evolved into an ongoing and often inflammatory dialogue between animal welfare/rights activists and their opponents. In 2005, the media were focused on one particular accident in which nine horses were killed as they were transported into the city prior to the Stampede. While the incident did not take place during competition, the horses were going to be used in rodeo events, and various organizations used this as an opportunity to petition for the complete elimination of rodeo and chuckwagon events. This sentiment was also expressed in a highly critical CBC news report, prompted by the death of the horses, where fatalities (both human and livestock) resulting from chuckwagon racing and rodeo events were highlighted (“Deadly Accidents at the Calgary Stampede,” CBC News, 2005).

News articles pertaining to accidents, injury, and death at the Calgary Stampede in 2006 and 2007 focused on how many horses died, but this time they were in the connection with the events themselves. Also of interest during the 2007 Stampede was the media focus on safety reviews, which was elicited by a significant chuckwagon racing accident (“Calgary Stampede to Review Chuckwagon Safety,” CBC News, 2007). Few local articles focused on the opposition from the animal welfare/rights community, with the exception of one article which compared the Calgary Stampede to the annual Cloverdale (British Columbia) rodeo, which banned a number of rodeo events involving livestock (“Rodeo Ban Renews Stampede Criticism,” *Calgary Herald*, 2007). In 2008, the media focus shifted to the introduction of stiffer fines and penalties for unsafe driving, as well as the appointment of a chuckwagon safety commission, after an accident killed three horses and injured a driver in 2007 (“Ride Safe or Pay Stiff Penalties,” Down, 2008; “Chuckwagon Groups

Embrace Safety Push," *Calgary Herald*, 2008). Nevertheless, such articles paid far closer attention to the risks to chuckwagon drivers themselves from their "win-at-all costs" attitudes rather than to horse welfare per se. But, by 2009, this slant of media reporting had begun to change.

For example, one article argued that rodeo events could be characterized as flagrantly violent animal cruelty ("Calgary Stampede Called 'Brutal Violent Spectacle' of Animal Cruelty," Harris, 2009). This represented a stark shift in media language that began to consider the exploitative nature of these sports where horses are concerned. As the animal welfare/rights discourse gained popularity and support in the media, the articles became increasingly focused on the debate between animal welfare/rights activists and rodeo supporters. In 2010, the media again delved into similar events from a number of angles. In addition to the now predictable coverage of horse casualties, reporting several horse deaths (e.g., "4th Calgary Stampede Horse Dies," CBC News, 2010; "5th Calgary Stampede Horse Death Examined," CBC News, 2010), the 2010 media thrust also increasingly included the perspective of animal rights and animal welfare groups, including the Calgary Humane Society, the Vancouver Humane Society, the Alberta SPCA, PETA, and the League Against Cruel Sports. This was likely the result of a number of highly publicized attacks against the Calgary Stampede.

These protests included the British Government condemning the Calgary Stampede (as noted previously) and the Vancouver Humane Society running a provocative ad with a picture of tie-down roping with the sarcastic caption emblazoned upon it, "That's Entertainment?" (Vancouver Humane Society, 2011; "Bad 24 hours at the Calgary Stampede—4 Horses Dead, 1 Rider Injured," The Associated Press, 2010; Fong, 2010). However, this sort of coverage was not homogeneous or uncontested, and it was accompanied by counterarguments and positions representing more "protectionist" stances ("Quiet Sadness in the Chuckwagon World," Rutherford, 2010; "Stampede Horses Healthy and Happy," Platt, 2010).

In 2011 the *Calgary Herald* featured a number of articles pertaining to the rodeo and chuckwagon racing events of the Stampede outside of "Stampede season." In and of itself, this is indicative of a changing social sensitivity towards Stampede rituals and the use of horses in this setting. A number of 2011 articles in the *Calgary Herald* illustrated the struggle between animal rights activists and rodeo supporters. The first article regarding Calgary Stampede event rule changes was posted in the *Calgary Herald* on February 16, 2011, well in advance of the upcoming 2011 competition ("Outriders Wary, Drivers Supportive as Stampede Considers Chuckwagon Rule Changes," Down, 2011). This article focused on the potential rule changes and the

impacts that they would have on the drivers and outriders. The main concern of rodeo supporters was that the reduction of outriders could potentially result in the decline of chuckwagon racing because there would be no opportunity for the next generation to become involved. When these rule changes were accepted and implemented by the Calgary Stampede later in February, 2011, the media began to focus on the conflict between the animal welfare/rights activists and rodeo supporters. On February 24, 2011, the entire front page of the *Calgary Herald* was devoted to an article on the rule changes that had been implemented ("Safety Rules Beefed Up for Calgary Stampede Events," Storry, 2011). The report outlined revised safety protocols and focused on the ideological struggle between different groups and how these changes were unlikely to appease either group.

To illustrate this point, a later article noted that, as a backlash against rule changes, a number of outriders formed a group called *Preserve the West*, which threatened to boycott the Calgary Stampede if the rule downsizing from four outriders<sup>12</sup> to two was not reversed. Their concern was that these rule changes would, in their view, lead to the demise of chuckwagon racing altogether ("Outriders Back Down from Stampede Boycott," Myers, 2011). In actuality, the "chucks" remain the most popular spectator attraction at the entire Stampede. In turn, animal rights groups were also dissatisfied with the rule changes because animals continue to face undue stress for the purposes of human entertainment ("Stampede Rules Lack Teeth," Fortney, 2011; "RULES: Critics Slam Changes as 'Damage Control'," Storry, 2011). The debate continued at the 2012 Stampede, where three additional horses were killed in yet another horrifying chuckwagon crash ("Huge Chuckwagon Crash at Stampede," *Calgary Sun*, 2012).

## Discussion

Writing on the human treatment of animals, Shanks (2003) has argued that "the issue as to whether animals have rights (or indeed any other forms of moral standing) is a complex, divisive [one] that is apt to generate much heated argument" (p. 12). While Shanks focuses primarily on the use of animals for the purposes of biomedical research, this argument can easily be extended to the use of horses in sports and entertainment, such as rodeo events and chuckwagon races at the Calgary Stampede. A key issue to be addressed here is the role played by animal rights activists in this debate. With every consecutive annual Stampede, animal welfare/rights groups gain in popularity

and volume, and play an increasingly more central role in the media, although again they are never uncontested or unopposed.

The debate revolves around the broader changing role of animals in society. Historically, while prized in many cultures, animals have rarely been afforded the same significance as humans. To explain this, Shanks (2003) recalls Kant's philosophical position that because animals are not viewed as rational in the human sense, they are not considered to be of equal or even similar worth, and thus they become marginal to the "moral community." Recently, in many countries around the world, this mindset has been challenged by a growing sensitivity to the inappropriateness of disrespecting animals and to the harm, victimization, and cruelty that they may suffer. As noted by Galvin and Herzog (1992), "the animal rights movement has had a major impact on public opinion concerning the use of non-human species" (p. 141). This change in consciousness and language is illustrative of what is currently happening at the Calgary Stampede, as the media attention to public debate over accidents, injuries, and fatalities confirms.

The Calgary Stampede "horse-use" debate centrally focuses on the question of whether horses may be needlessly harmed in the pursuit of entertainment and "sport." One popular definition of animal abuse within the social sciences is "socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or death of an animal" (Ascione & Shapiro, 2009, p. 570). While our study provides clear evidence that animals involved in the chuckwagon races and rodeo are regularly injured or killed, what remains hotly debated is whether Stampede conventions constitute socially acceptable or unacceptable behavior. This sentiment was expressed in a media article by Harris (2009) where a spokesperson from an animal rights group spoke about fact that the injuries, accidents, and fatalities of the Calgary Stampede were not assessed with a critical eye because they have become such an accepted part of culture, certainly in Western Canada and specifically in Southern Alberta.

As Patterson-Kane and Piper (2009) indicate, a major criterion for what qualifies as "animal abuse" is based (perhaps oddly) on public perceptions of social sanctions. In the case of the Calgary Stampede, relatively few sanctions or punishments have been applied despite obvious and plentiful opportunities to do so and, in general, the use of horses for entertainment purposes has not been perceived as deviance. In turn, animal mistreatment has not been heavily sanctioned or closely scrutinized until recently, which suggests a quite novel shift in the public mindset to questions of animals, responsibility, and "justice."

The notion that using horses for sport constitutes deviance is also relatively new but, in the sociology of sport literature, Young (2012) outlines one application of his SRV concept by suggesting that sport is replete with examples of “animals being treated in a cruel and inhumane way” (p. 174). Again, what is seen as cruel and inhumane clearly varies, and it is this uncertainty which has resulted in the Calgary Stampede being viewed as such contested terrain. There are multiple perspectives and points of view, but essentially two main types of thinking prevail. On the one hand, animal welfare/rights activists argue that subjecting horses to any sort of potential discomfort, injury, or death is inhumane and cruel; on the other hand, proponents for the use of horses at the Stampede argue not only that animals are better cared for because of their involvement (it is certainly the case that some Stampede stabling conditions are “luxurious,” albeit temporarily, in comparison with others) but that they would most likely face a grim future, including slaughter, if they were not involved.

Whichever side of the argument one supports, several issues are worthy of further reflection. It is important to note that each in its own way represents shifts in public thinking:

1. Emphasizing the usefulness of Young’s notion of SRV, even the most cursory analysis of media articles relating to the Calgary Stampede since 2005 shows that risk is intrinsic to the events and that horses are hurt (or worse) on a regular basis.
2. As noted generally by McBane and Douglas-Coope (2005) and, more specifically, by the Calgary Humane Society (2011), horses involved in, and being trained for, rodeo face regular physical discomfort and mental distress. Accidents, injuries, and fatalities are simply a routine feature of the annual chuckwagon races at the Calgary Stampede. In the last six years alone a number of fatalities have occurred. In 2005, at least nine horses died while being herded to Stampede Park. In 2006 two horses died as a result of chuckwagon races, in 2007 three died, in 2008 one additional horse died, in 2009 two horses died, and in 2010 six horses died (four in chuckwagon racing competitions and the other two in other rodeo events). Despite the aforementioned rule changes to chuckwagon racing in 2011, an additional two horses perished during the 2011 chuckwagon races, and in 2012 three more died. Almost all of these deaths took place on the chuckwagon track.
3. Without exception, since 2005 at least one horse was fatally injured or euthanized in each annual Stampede, with a claimed 50 chuckwagon

horses dying between 1986 and 2011 (Vancouver Humane Society, 2011). While this could easily be interpreted as SRV, it also remains highly accepted within Western culture, as these events continue to be viewed as a tribute to a revered style of life and heritage. As such, it remains to be seen what the future of these events will hold across North America. Whether the UK will serve as an exemplar for others in banning rodeo also remains to be seen. What is clear is that the number of people and organizations questioning the use of horses in these high-risk sports is growing and becoming increasingly vocal.

4. As Atkinson and Young (2005) discovered in their study of greyhound racing, the “violence” found within the context of that sport is the result of humans “who choose to rationalize them in terms of the . . . principles of financial motives, exciting significance or tolerated customs” (p. 346): They believe that “the dogs are treated humanely”; “racing is healthy and exciting for the dogs”; “the sport is exhilarating for the audience”; and “the sport represents a suitable monitored cultural pursuit” (p. 344). These now familiar views are extremely similar to the ways in which incidents of risk/injury/death occurring at Stampede events have been rationalized by the competitors and supporters, as may be seen in a number of statements released on behalf of the Calgary Stampede and supporters of chuckwagon races. For example, news headlines such as “Stampede Horses Happy and Healthy” (Platt, 2010) and “Chucks Give Horses New Life” (Down, 2012, p. B8) aim to justify the sport as positive and even beneficial for the horses. Likewise, a number of articles boast statements arguing that the Stampede is safer than other venues (Schneider, 2010), and that it is unusual and upsetting to horse “insiders” to lose horses (“You think Cowboys Don’t Cry? Guess Again,” Tetley, 2012, p. A4). Despite such positions, because of the tangible rewards for winning events at the increasingly corporate and financially lucrative Calgary Stampede, the well-being of the horses cannot be separated from the ever-increasing emphasis on winning—which means trophies, prize money, TV broadcasting deals, sponsorships, and recognition, among other things. Further, a number of competitors in these events argue that the rodeo and chuckwagon races are popular and draw large supportive—and crucially, paying—audiences, suggesting that the potential harm to the horses involved is indeed acceptable because of the excitement the danger represents to the crowd. Finally, as suggested earlier, these events have been a traditional part of the Calgary Stampede for so long that horse injuries and fatalities have come to be viewed as

tolerated consequences of these high-risk sports, as a sort of “necessary evil.” A more classic case of Sykes and Matza’s (1989) “techniques of neutralization” (in this case, “denial of victim”) would be hard to find.

5. Clearly, organized pressure is paying off and the protests of animal welfare/rights groups have significantly impacted the public consciousness concerning the use of horses in this context. The Calgary Stampede has revised its rules and regulations regarding the chuckwagon races several times, but a high rate of accidents and fatalities continues to cast Stampede safety policies in a dubious light. As previously mentioned, on February 24, 2011 (almost half a year before the opening of the 2011 competition), the *Calgary Herald* featured a large front-page article devoted to the upcoming rule changes at the Stampede. This involved eight rule changes aimed at improving safety for the horses and other livestock involved in the chuckwagon races and rodeo events (Storry, 2011).<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Calgary Stampede Web site now features a section devoted to animal care. Here, the Stampede Board (which, it should be noted, is comprised of well-heeled and influential Calgarians) lays out the standards of care provided to the thousands of animals involved in the annual events. Specifically, the Board notes the involvement of both the Calgary Humane Society and the Alberta Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who monitor the well-being of animals and ensure the enforcement of The Animal Protection Act of Alberta (Calgary Stampede, 2010a).

### **Conclusion: The Calgary Stampede as Contested Terrain**

The Calgary Stampede and Exhibition has enjoyed close to a century of local, regional, and international support, recognition, and prestige, but its legitimacy has recently been brought into question for its particular brand of what we have called “horse play.” Few social, cultural or political issues now divide Calgarians and Albertans quite like the matter of whether—and how—horses should be used for public entertainment at the “Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth.” The role of the local media in this debate in disseminating various viewpoints as news is key, and the increasing resistance to the Stampede’s use of horses and animals more broadly cannot be understood aside from media coverage which, at the end of the day, represents the vehicle through which most people come to know the issue in the first place. It is our guess that many people attending, and often fiercely supporting, Calgary Stampede events have never stepped foot in a barn or ridden a horse, which in itself

demonstrates the lengths to which relatively uninformed persons will go to protect the hegemony of the Stampede.

As just one site in the broader debate regarding animal welfare/rights and social justice, the Calgary Stampede represents a fascinating setting for the assessment of a changing social climate regarding the use of animals in all aspects of life, from factory farming to pharmaceutical testing to sport, games, and play for popular entertainment. The use of horses at the Calgary Stampede has grown as an issue to be squarely a matter of what sociologists would call contested terrain, where there is a clear struggle between supporters or traditionalists and proponents of change. At the center of this debate is the thorny question of how humans should treat what Brandt (2009) called our "equine companions" (p. 315) and whether the techniques of neutralization that have been used to rationalize risk, pain, and death in this century-old tradition are as compelling as they once were in a Canadian culture that is apparently increasingly sensitive to the use and abuse of animals, including horses, in some of its most revered social institutions.

The issue of animal rights at the Calgary Stampede is clearly a complex one involving multiple points of view, some of which are opposed and some of which overlap. For animal rights groups such as PETA the only viable solution to the debate over using horses in the Calgary Stampede, or indeed in any such competition, is the abolition of all events involving animals. This has not happened so far and seems unlikely to occur. On the other hand, animal welfare groups such as the Calgary Humane Society are interested in working alongside the Calgary Stampede to improve animal-related entertainment by suggesting and implementing changes that better respect animals and render events safer for animals and human participants alike. As noted previously, despite initially frosty exchanges between the two, the Calgary Humane Society has grown to have an important and influential role within the debate over using horses in the Calgary Stampede; through partnership with the Stampede, the Calgary Humane Society has successfully influenced a number of rule changes that might not have occurred without pressure being brought to bear on an otherwise quite autonomous Western Canadian institution.

Currently, the Calgary Humane Society plays a vital role in this debate by monitoring the well-being of horses during the annual competition itself, but this is not to say that when animals suffer the various sides in the debate see eye to eye or quickly reach consensus on what should be done. Clearly, as with all cultural phenomena that are contested, the matter of whether and how animals might play a role at the Calgary Stampede is deeply ideological, and it can quickly be oversimplified when things go wrong. At the time of writing,

the role of horses in chuckwagon racing and other rodeo events at the Calgary Stampede commands as much public attention—and news space—as it ever has, and as a public issue it shows no sign of disappearing soon.

Finally, as complex as the horse-use debate already is, centrally entangled in this debate is the question of whether there is a difference between animals used for entertainment and animal abuse. In this paper we are not making the argument that all sports involving animals are cruel. Rather, our principal and sociological purpose has been to show that the Canadian public has become increasingly concerned with animal sports that are inherently dangerous to both the human and nonhuman participants. Clearly, the breadth of views on the use of animals for public entertainment is extremely wide, spanning from abolitionists on the one hand to supporters of existing (or even amplified) risk on the other. It seems naïve and unrealistic to suggest that animals, including horses, should never be used in sports or that these events might magically disappear under the weight of public opposition any time soon. Again, what seems important at a time of shifting public sensitivities to forms of injustice, exploitation, and violence is to more thoughtfully and openly consider how these dimensions weave through our popular pastimes which, far from representing the ethical use of animals, seem to point in the direction of rationalized (and too often comfortably rationalized) harm. At the very least, our data suggest that the popular media will continue as the central arena in which these debates are voiced and opposed, and that the Calgary Stampede's growing status as contested terrain is as inevitable as the next death in its most spectacular public crucible—chuckwagon racing.

## Notes

1. Chuckwagon racing is a timed event involving a team of four thoroughbred horses pulling a covered wagon around a track, followed by two outriders (prior to 2011, the races included four outriders). Teams compete against one another in heats, aiming to have the fastest time and the fewest penalties so that they can move on to the final race, with the biggest prize money payout (Calgary Stampede, 2011-2012).

2. In bareback competition, a cowboy rides a bucking horse holding onto a leather strap with one hand. The contestant must ride the horse for eight seconds and is disqualified if his free hand touches any part of the horse. He is marked according to the form and style of his ride, including his spurring.

3. In saddle bronc events, a cowboy rides a bucking horse using a saddle with braided reins that are attached to the horse's halter. Like the other bucking events, the rider must remain on the horse for eight seconds and is disqualified if his loose hand touches any part of the animal.

4. Barrel racing remains the only women's event at the Calgary Stampede. In this event, riders race through a cloverleaf pattern made up of three barrels.

5. In steer wrestling, a steer is let out of the chute, and a cowboy and his horse chase it. The goal of steer wrestling is for a cowboy to jump from his horse's back onto the steer and to use his strength to wrestle the steer to the ground.

6. The goal of tie-down roping is for a contestant to rope a running calf, dismount his horse, drop the calf on to its side, and tie up three of the calf's legs in the fastest time. The calf must remain tied up while the contestant remounts his horse.

7. While we note that the UK has banned rodeos domestically, we should also point out that in the UK there is a different agricultural history that does not have roots in a "cowboy culture" like the North American West (there is, for instance, far greater attention to fox hunting and other more culturally pertinent activities involving animals, hunting, and competition). In this respect, the UK rodeo ban is intriguing, but it may not be the best exemplar for understanding the Calgary Stampede as contested terrain.

8. In one *The New York Times* article, Drape, Bogdanich, Ruiz, and Griffin (2012) argue that the increased rates of horse breakdowns can be linked to the infusion of casinos at racetracks, the revenue from which has resulted in huge prize incentives for trainers and horse owners. In their words, this "has created powerful and dangerous incentives to run sore, tired, or otherwise unfit horses in pursuit of that big score" (p. A1). The authors argue that this "fast cash" culture has resulted in races where the payout is worth more than the value of the horse, so that trainers are more willing to risk animal well-being in exchange for the possibility of a big payday. In this same critical review, the authors cite the closure of horse slaughter plants in the US as evidence of a growing interest in the welfare of horses (see Drape et al., 2012). However, in November 2011, US President Barack Obama signed legislation that made horse slaughter legal again with the first slaughter plant to be opened in New Mexico, which is also a state that happens to have some of the highest horse injury and fatality rates due to racing (see Dinan, 2011).

9. The fluid relationship between these Goffmanian "front" and "back" regions is often very difficult to discern, and again this difficulty ultimately masks abuse and abusers. For instance, in the buildup to the 2012 Belmont Stakes, "I'll Have Another" was preparing to be the first Triple Crown winner in 34 years after winning both the Preakness Stakes and the Kentucky Derby. However, the horse was withdrawn by his trainer prior to competing in the Belmont Stakes due to what O'Niell, the trainer, called a "freaky" injury. Upon further exploration, the freaky injury turned out to be a previous ailment which had been treated by veterinarians. Vet records for I'll Have Another indicated that the horse had been suffering from both osteoarthritis and tendinitis, and that the horse had been given powerful painkillers and synthetic joint fluid prior to the scheduled race at the Belmont (Drape & Bogdanich, 2012). Indeed, rather than being the benevolent horseman that the media initially identified (i.e., the Goffmanian front region), Drape and Bogdanich's inquiry revealed that the horses trained by O'Niell break down at a rate more than double the national average and that the trainer in fact had encountered a long history of abuse-related sanctions (the back region). They discuss the "troubled record" of the trainer, including the use of performance-enhancing techniques, such as the use of what is commonly known as a "milk shake" which reduces fatigue; over a dozen violations for improper drug use; and a staggering statistic of 12.0 incidents of injury or breakdown per 1,000 starts for the horses in his program.

10. These events have been referred to as Big Lick competitions because of the desired movement—the extremely high and quick step of the front legs (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2012).

11. It should be noted that all horse sport communities involve a hierarchy where trainers are considered experts who the novice/less-educated people pay to advise on how to ride and train horses. This "hierarchy of knowledge" is important to note because it is a central component for understanding why abusive practices are normalized and often go unchallenged.

12. Outriders play a central role in chuckwagon racing. According to Leusink (2012), “The outriders’ most visible role is loading the stove as the race begins. Their unseen job is to steady and gentle the horses before the horn sounds, and to be extra eyes for the driver during the race to be sure the driving horses are not having problems.”

13. Some of these changes included limiting the use of horses to four consecutive days, requiring that horses be identified prior to their use in a race so that they can be examined by a veterinarian prior to the race, reducing the number of outriders to two, and harrowing the track after every second race.

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