

Transforming Retraining: using multidisciplinary expert consensus to improve success rates in racehorses' second careers

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Optimal early retraining process is of paramount importance to maximise a racehorse's potential to have a good quality of life beyond racing. Many specialist retraining centres and equestrian professionals have valuable experience in managing this period of significant change in all aspects of the racehorse's lifestyle, but most racehorses are not rehomed via specialist centres. Outcomes for all former racehorses entering their second careers could be improved by identifying the common challenges of retraining and the common features of successful retraining. To facilitate this, it is imperative to identify how this transition is managed by those experienced in racehorse retraining, and those experienced in supporting retraining racehorses, i.e. veterinarians, physiotherapists, behavioural specialists and farriers.

The aim of this study is to optimise 'performance in early retraining' for racehorses entering their second careers. This project will identify the challenges of the retraining process, and determine the critical stages required to support improvement of the minimum expectation for outcomes for racehorses once their racing career has ended. The study will deliver a framework for a successful retraining process. In doing so, the welfare of horses transitioning in the hands of less experienced owners and handlers can be maximised by effective knowledge exchange with organisations and individuals who have the benefit of experience with large numbers and types of racehorses. The aim will be met by identification of the common features and stages of successful early retraining using a two-stage process involving stakeholders to achieve expert consensus. The first stage is an online survey of key stakeholders engaged or involved in retraining of racehorses in Great Britain and the rest of the world to identify common themes across different stakeholder groups. This will inform the second stage of the study, which is a process known as Delphi consultation. This stage involves 30-40 expert panellists responding to several rounds of questionnaires, and the responses are aggregated and shared with the group after each round unless consensus is reached. The Delphi method has been used for several applications in the horse such as defining equine behavioural stress indicators; and has been used by the authors of this proposal to agree on the most appropriate objective tools to measure the success of equine physiotherapy treatment. The direct outcomes of the project are 1) expert consensus of the common challenges, necessary stages and features of success within the retraining process 2) provision of training materials for owners and handlers of former racehorses. Having identified the common challenges by expert opinion, this project is also designed to provide the framework for a follow-on project, developing objective measures to assess the potential for individual racehorses to adapt to specific second careers following racing. These measures would provide objective behavioural and functional indicators of a individual's response to retraining at the various stages within the framework. This pump-primer provides the foundation for individual, objective and evidence-based 'training needs analysis' to be applied to retiring racehorses, generating tangible measures to improve racehorse welfare.