FEI Rollkur Controversy

The FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) has decided to allow Rollkur or extreme flexation of the neck in warming up from the 15th May in what may only be described as a sneaky back tracking of a change in rules which banned the practice only weeks earlier.

On the 9th February 2010 the practice was banned after controversial footage of Dressage rider was released onto YouTube showing the rider using extreme force for a prolonged period of time on his stallion - Watermill Scandic, while warming up at Odense Show in October 2009. After an enquiry the FEI concluded that there was no reliable evidence that the methods used by ‘Kittell’ were of an extreme nature, however the resulting public anger of the riders training technique resulted in the FEI to launch a significant review of its rules regarding warm up techniques.

The decision was made to ban the practice of Rollkur or extreme flexation of the horse's neck by aggressive force after a meeting at the International Olympic Committee’s headquarters in Lausanne which was chaired by Princess Haya, who is the president of the FEI, also in attendance were key equestrian riders, judges and officials of World Horse Welfare (formally the ILPH). Prior to the meeting Princess Haya had been handed a petition containing 41,000 signatories against the Rollkur practice.

Richard Davison, the captain of the British dressage team, said the ban would not affect him as he does not use the technique and nor do other members of the team. However, Davison, a triple Olympian and the manager of the British team at the Beijing Olympic Games two years ago, said he had some sympathy with the users of this system — when it is done correctly.

He went on to say “It’s the ultimate in a whole body workout for the horse — and when it’s practised by experts such as Anky Van Grunsven [the triple olympic gold medal-winner] and not overdone I think it’s acceptable”, he said. “You could liken it to an athlete’s warm-up — I’ve been in the gym at several Olympic Games and seen them warming up for a race — rollkur for the horse is similar to the extreme stretching which some athletes do when warming up for a competition. The difference is that a horse cannot tell you if something is hurting. The athlete also has privacy in the gym whereas the warm-up area at international shows has become increasingly accessible — and popular — with the public. "There’s no doubt it needed regulating,” Davison said. “The science behind it may be inconclusive in as much as we don’t really know whether it is harmful or not to the horse but the fact is it was creating an outcry from the public and the FEI have to accept that.”
Many horse trainers, veterinarians, equine therapists will no doubt have other ideas as to if the practice does cause damage to the horses cervical spine, muscular skeletal systems, and health as the practice is well documented to cause long term damage such as premature arthritis and other health issues.

Rollkur is a name used for extreme over bending of the horses neck to the point it is nearly touching its chest. The practice results in:

* The horses head is behind the vertical
* The horses neck is shortened.
* The poll is no longer the highest point.
* Crest high.
* The horse is unable to see where he/she is going.

Some of the affects from this un-natural and forced position are:

- Damage to ligaments between the withers and the base of the neck.
- Hollowing (under saddle) of the horses back.
- Tightening and tension in the scaenius muscles of the neck.
- Restriction of air flow through the nostrils.
- Clamping of the horses jaw.
- Inability to swallow while in a rollkur position.

Other affects are:

Due to the way of Rollkur, an excessive amount of stress is put on the cervical vertebrae which can lead to inflamation. The most common injury being the formation of bony nodules inside the ligaments and at the back of the skull.

The equine neck is very agile and the cervical vertabrae do not have the spinous processes that the other vertabrae have, allowing flexibility and a natural s bend. When working the horse on the bit, you are engaging the nuchal ligament and slightly straigthening the 'S' bend. The nuchal ligament also pulls on the supraspinous ligament thus engaging the equines back. The extreme curveture of Rollkur causes the lumber spine to lock which in turn stops the horse from being able to engage correctly from behind. The horse then needs to counter act by over use of the abdominals to work correctly. The lumbo-sacral area then seize, stopping the pelvs from coiling under.

Another problem caused by Rollkur is with the parotid glands. The parotidoauricular muscle becomes over built (which can occur with most dressage horses) - causing pressure on the gland and stopping them from functioning correctly whilst being ridden. This can cause long term damage and is caused by over bending and string backward traction on the reins. In order to work properly the muscles of all mammals need a good supply of oxygen. The equine needs to have a relaxed tongue and jaw to enable good breathing techniques. When the neck is curled up, the air pipe is pressed against the spine at the base of the neck, and bent at the top of the neck causing compression. The horse then needs to change the way he works to be able to breath correctly.

Rollkur can be seriously damaging - there are many other negative points resulting from Rollkur including effects on gaits and collection, effects from the bulging splenius muscle, psychological effects and the long term physical effects.

Given this evidence of Rollkur being so damaging why did the FEI change the ruling and give additional guidance to stewards that still allows the practice of Rollkur, on the 15th April in a FEI Press Release:

“The FEI Bureau today gave its unanimous approval to new Stewards’ guidelines on warm-up techniques produced by the Working Group formed after the round-table conference held in Lausanne on 9 February 2010.”
One of the key stipulations in the Working Group’s report was that all unacceptable training methods and techniques must be stopped immediately. The Working Group was also insistent that abuse of the horse should be avoided and, in particular, stressing the horse, aggressive riding and inflicting pain and/or discomfort on the horse must be prevented.

The current guidelines for FEI Stewards already include instructions covering aggressive riding, but the Working Group has created a new Annex (XIII) that includes clear instructions on action to be taken if necessary relating to flexion of the horse’s neck during pre and post-competition training.

The key initiatives in the new guidelines, which will be implemented from 15 May 2010, are:

- Movements which involve having the horse’s head and neck carriage in a sustained or fixed position should only be performed for periods not exceeding approximately ten minutes without change (diagrams defining the head and neck positions will be provided to the Stewards)
- No single neck position should be maintained which may lead to tiredness or stress
- The rider is not permitted to use rough, or abrupt aids or apply constant unyielding pressure on the horse’s mouth through a fixed arm and hand position

The guidelines state that it is the steward’s responsibility to ensure that riders respect the above procedures and intervene if required. The steward will intervene should he/she observe:

- Neck stretching achieved through forced or aggressive riding
- The use of extreme flexion if it does not comply with the above
- A rider deliberately maintaining a sustained fixed head and neck carriage longer than approximately ten minutes
- If the horse is in a state of general stress and/or fatigue
- The steward may also ask the rider to walk for a certain period in situations where the rider’s stress may cause undesired riding.

Only in exceptional circumstances and with the permission of the Chief Steward, may a pre-competition training session exceed one hour. There should be at least one hour break between any training/warm-up periods.”

This is clearly the FEI changing its own rules after giving the impression it is against Rollkur while in a meeting with WHW (World Horse Welfare) then away from the meeting and after barely allowing the ink to dry changed provided mere guidance to stewards to allow the practice.

This is a clear back tracking by the FEI which is a blatant disregard for the sport, its responsible riders and trainers. Shame on the FEI who have just proved money and getting results IS more important then the welfare of horses who take part through no choice of their own in the sport. Caz 2010 all rights reserved.

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**About the Author**

I'm a 30 something, horse owner, rider and trainer, I have a proven track record in training and rehabilitating difficult horses, with over 25 years hands-on experience. I have worked over the years at riding schools, stud farms, dealers yards and mostly with my own horses, but please dont discount this. I learnt more in six-months with my own 'REAL' horses then I learnt in years in establishments.

I myself currently have 9 horses that range from the golden oldies of 26yo and 25yo, down to my lovely Fally Stallion - I have shown and competed at various levels and my horses have achieved ribbons in everything I have aimed them towards.

I have also studied a great lengths (both practically and educationally) equine behaviour, health, nutrition, training, rider confidence, riding skills and riding in several spheres (Dressage, Show jumping, hunter classes, showing, XC and basic riding.) Along with many other areas such as genetics, colouration, blood line tracing and inherited conditions (such as Lavender foal in Arabs and Immune problems in Fell Ponies.)

I am a practitioner of Natural horsemanship and have vast experience in Parelli, and methods taught by Anderson, Rashid and others.