



Pony Club Australia listens to young members about the impact of periods on participation

Horse riding is particularly empowering for women, increasing their confidence and self-esteem. However, menstruation can make girls and young women self-conscious and/or reluctant to participate in physical activity. This is particularly relevant in horse sports where rules, regulations and dress codes typically require riders to wear tight riding pants in white or light colours.

To find out how menstruation impacts participation in Pony Club activities and competitions, Pony Club Australia partnered with researchers at the University of Newcastle (Drs Kirrilly Thomson and Julia Coffey) and the University of Western Australia (Dr Dani Barrington).

An online survey was conducted in September 2022, in which 333 female riding members aged 10-17 generously shared their experiences. Three quarters of participants (76%) said they had worried about people knowing they had their period whilst they were riding. Almost three quarters (71%) said they only worried when they had or were expecting their period, whilst 13% said they worried all the time and 12% said they worried sometimes. Over half of the participants (62%) said that they had been distracted from focussing on riding because of concerns that people would know they had their period.

Project leader Dr Kirrilly Thompson said that survey comments provided valuable implications for coach training and lesson planning. For example, “some riders were reluctant to follow coaches’ instructions due to concerns about leakage or sanitary products showing – such as when being told to lean forward over a jump. They also told us about the difficulties of changing products when long riding lessons were planned with short (or no) breaks, often at some distance from the toilets and/or horse floats where many girls kept products or a change of clothes”.

The survey findings suggest that young members’ concerns about people knowing that they had their period had a negative impact on their Pony Club participation. The impact was higher for non-competitive events (rallies, musters, training days, etc) than competitions, and more likely to prevent a rider starting (75% non-competition and 58% competition) than withdrawing from an activity (69% non-competition and 56% competition).

Almost all participants (91%) worried more about people knowing they had their period when they were wearing white or light-coloured riding pants. In 2022, PCA released National Gear Rules (1). The rules specify that ‘pants should be neutral colours (white, beige, cream, etc)’, although ‘coloured jodhpur inserts are permitted’ (1: 15), which is a reference to material with increased grip that might be incorporated inside the knees, thighs and/or seat.

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However, there are over 700 Pony Clubs and 20 Pony Club Accredited Centres that can define their own formal uniform. Participants were asked about the rules, regulations and dress codes at these local levels. Just under half (40%) said they were required to wear white, light or pale coloured riding pants for all activities and events. Most participants (80%) supported an option to wear darker coloured riding pants (mostly to reduce anxieties about menstrual leakage or visible sanitary products such as pads or period pants which are typically black).

A small number of participants said that they would not (8%) take advantage of the option to wear darker coloured riding pants – or were unsure (13%), mostly due to concerns about losing a ‘traditional’ horse riding look, feeling disrespectful to judges or drawing attention to the fact that they might have their period. However, participants referred to a variety of benefits for allowing darker coloured riding pants including being easier to clean, less likely to show underwear, more flattering and more affordable where families are required to purchase white/light riding pants for Pony Club/Centre activities in addition to everyday riding wear (some participants described how they took a spare pair of white/light riding pants to events/competitions).

Pony Club Australia CEO Dr Catherine Ainsworth was grateful to all the riders who shared their experiences and values the relevant data that could be used to inform policy change to benefit riders. A similar study is being planned with riders in older age groups.

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