

THE CONVERSATION

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Charlotte Dujardin with her horse Valegro after winning gold at the London Olympics. David Goldman/AP Photo

The Paris Olympics horse-whipping scandal shows the dangers of 'Disneyfication' in horse sports

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Over the course of the 2024 Paris Olympics, Charlotte Dujardin went from being Great Britain's most successful Olympics dressage rider to one of the most digitally shamed athletes in the history of the internet.

A video emerged which not only damaged Dujardin's career but reignited debate around horse welfare in elite horse sports.

By the time the video was published online by mainstream media, it had already gone viral on Facebook.

The video shows Dujardin deliberately striking the legs of a student's horse multiple times with a whip during a training session.

The footage is actually four years old, and questions have to be asked about the timing of its release during the Olympics. But both Dujardin, and elite level dressage, are now under intense public scrutiny.

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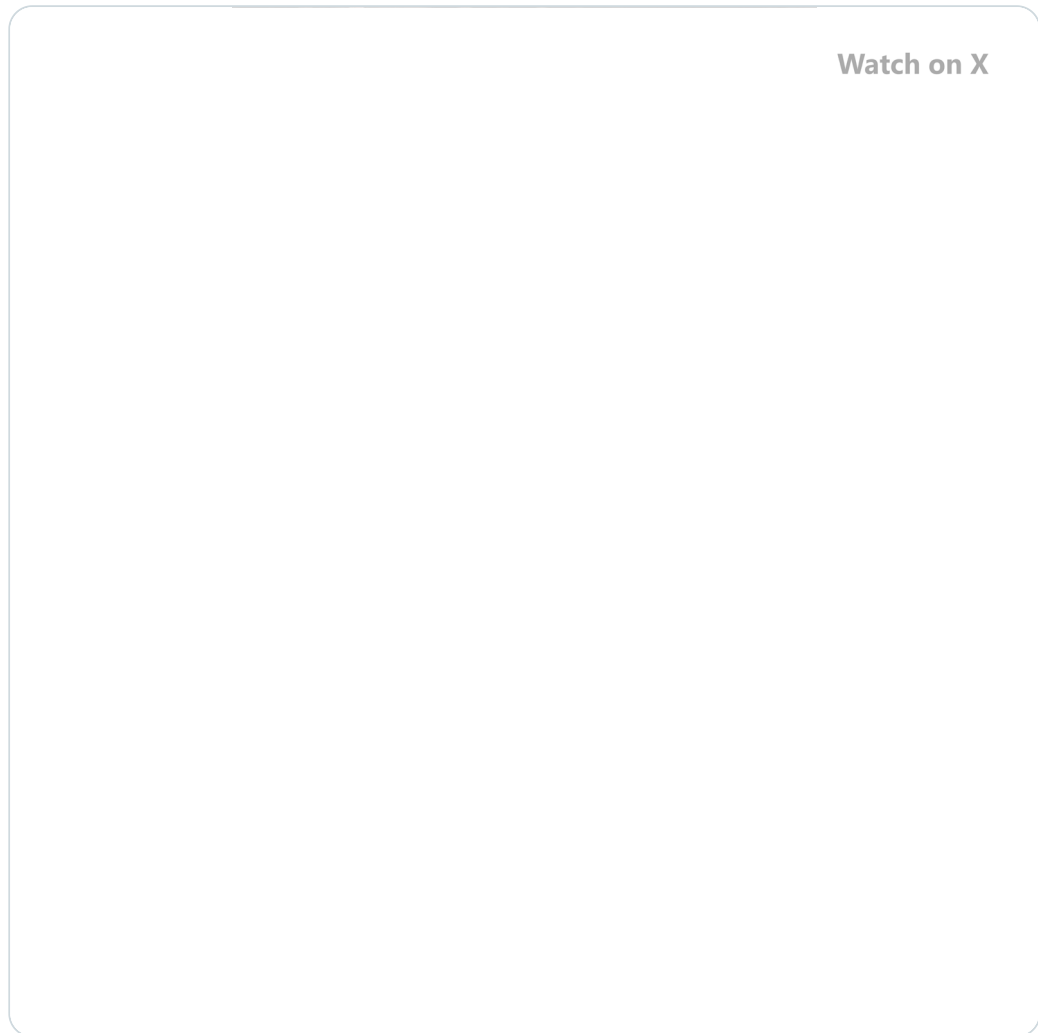


"This has brought the issue of horse welfare into really sharp focus."

Equestrian and Britain's joint-most successful Olympian Charlotte Dujardin pulled out of the Paris Olympics after a video emerged.

She's been provisionally suspended for six months.

[#BBCOlympics](#)



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The fallout

On her Facebook page, [Dujardin apologised and withdrew](#) from the Paris games.

She admitted she felt “deeply ashamed,” and acknowledged she should have “set a better example.”

But this did not stop the merciless online mobbing. Much of it came from fellow dressage riders desperate to distance themselves from what appears to be animal abuse.

The fallout has been immense.

Some activists and social media commentators have targeted other Olympic riders and the brands that sponsor them.

An online petition has also been started to [remove horses from the Olympics](#).

On the other hand, some riders have taken issue with the treatment of Dujardin, claiming she has been unfairly framed. Some supporters have united on social media under the hashtag #istandwithcharlotte.

What are rule-makers doing?

At the time of writing, the International Federation for Equestrian Sports (FEI) is investigating the Dujardin incident. On its website the FEI is very clear about its commitment to [prioritising horse welfare](#) in horse sports.

Excessive use of whips is already prohibited in most horse sports.

Long before Paris 2024, reports recommended strengthening surveillance with regard to [horse health and wellbeing](#) in the Olympics. But how this would be enforced in private training barns is not clear.

The FEI has also been criticised for [perceived failings](#) in its response to earlier scandals, such as in 2021 when the coach of Germany’s modern pentathlon team was [disqualified from the Tokyo Olympics](#) for punching a horse.

That shameful scene was painful to watch but it should invoke some compassion for both horse and rider, who were clearly both suffering.

Why would a rider need to whip a horse?

In analysing the situation, it is time to move the discussion beyond online public shaming to consider animal agency and horse welfare.

Perhaps wisely, Dujardin has not attempted to explain or excuse her actions in her public statements so far. But this means we don’t know why she whipped the horse in the training session.

It is possible she was training the horse to perform the kind of extravagant movement which is routinely rewarded in dressage scores at the elite level.

Sadly, there are many more horses who suffer far worse abuse in other industries and settings, much of it also caught on film.

The reason Dujardin was dragged into a maelstrom of digital shaming so quickly was due in part to the special, emotional place of the show horse in our popular culture.

It was also due in part to who she is or was: a global sports celebrity who embodied the hopes and dreams of her fans.

Back in 2012 Dujardin was a hero – not just for winning gold in London. She also achieved the seemingly impossible feat of rising to the top of the international dressage scene without the financial and political backing of a wealthy family.

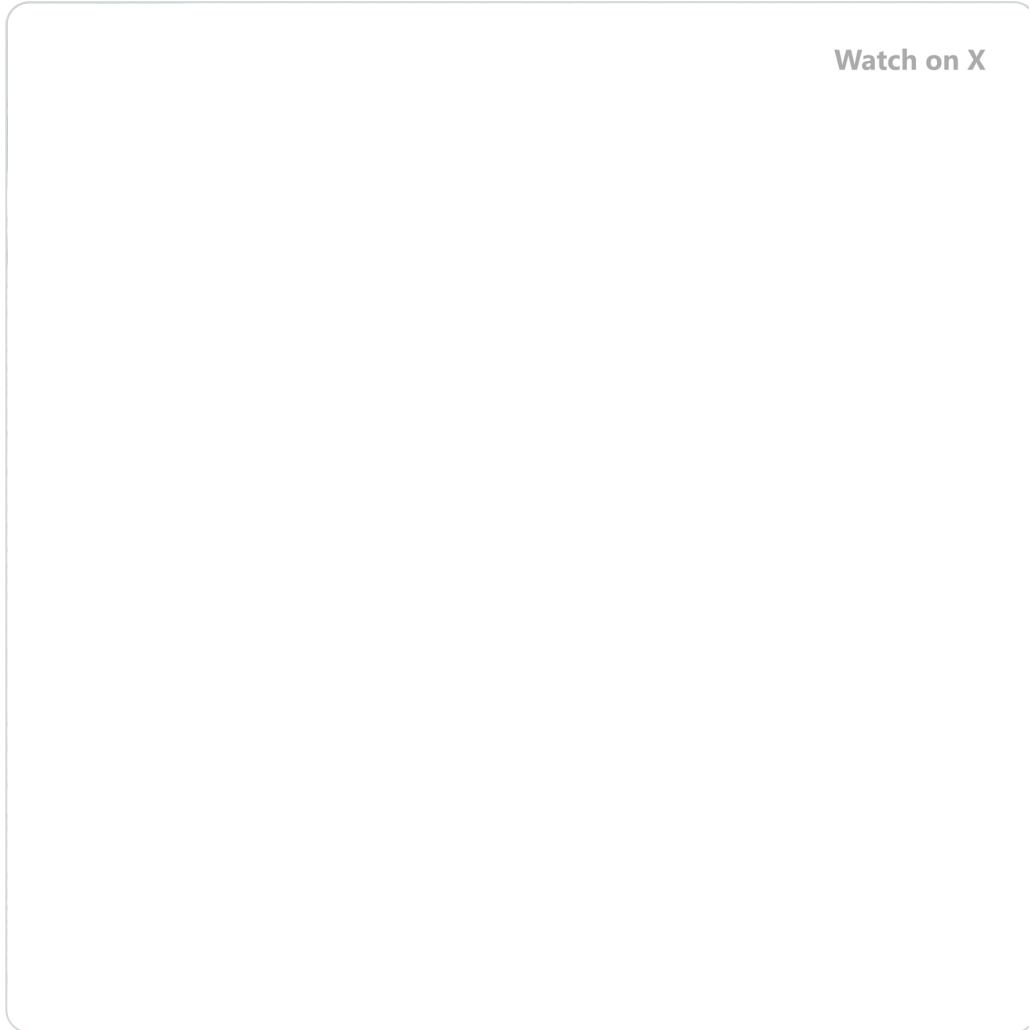
The horse she rode so elegantly, Valegro, also looked like he had stepped out of a fairytale.

The Olympic Games 

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Could this be the most British thing ever? Charlotte Dujardin and horse Valegro perform to 'Land of Hope & Glory' with the Royal Naval College in the background, from London 2012. Enjoy! 🐎🎩🇬🇧 @CSJDujardin [#StrongerTogether](#)



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The dangers of 'Disneyfication'

Everyone in horse sports says they want to improve welfare standards and put horses first.

Those raised on Disney images of anthropomorphised horses might like to imagine these majestic creatures naturally choose to “dance” with their beloved owners to music in the dressage arena. But horses have to be trained to “dance” in this way, usually through the application of artificial aids and pressure.

Ironically, Dujardin herself had previously profited significantly from the wider “Disneyfication” of horses in our culture. In happier times, that collective fantasy fed into her narrative and celebrity brand as “The Girl on the Dancing Horse”.

Both social media and the mainstream media have long invested in stereotypical misrepresentations of female athletes as either magical princesses or ghastly villains.

A compassionate, multispecies approach to welfare would not treat horses as tools or trophies. Nor would it put human emotions and desires at the centre of horse welfare issues.

All of this is a stark reminder that it is humans, not horses, who dream of Olympic gold and glory.