

Elegant Riding Ladies or Fearless Amazons? Women in Equestrian Sport in Germany and Switzerland. A Comparative Study.

Project and Research Question

- Dissertation project based at the Institute of History (WSU Department)
- Timeframe: mid-19th to mid-20th century
- Comparative approach between Switzerland and Germany
- Switzerland: Focus on German-speaking part
- Focus on horse-riding in the spheres of the bourgeoisie and nobility
- Focus on riding in a recreational setting: hunting, hacking, promenading
- Competition sport: focus on show jumping
- Research questions: (1) What was the cultural framework of women's equestrianism? (2) What was the nature of the discourse around women riders? (3) How did women's equestrianism evolve in Germany and Switzerland? (4) Which networks existed in this sport and how did transformative notions disseminate within them?



Sources

- Contemporary advice literature aimed at gentlemen riders and training manuals of the cavalry
- Swiss and German equestrian magazines (e.g. Der Schweizer Kavallerist, Der Schweizerische Pflender-Freund, St. Georg, Sport im Bild)
- Statutes, regulations, meeting reports and minutes of equestrian organizations such as the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) or the German and Swiss equestrian federations
- Self-testimonies of women riders (letters, diaries etc.)
- Photographs: Schwarzenbach collection (Switzerland), Menzendorf collection (Germany)



Methods and Theories

- historical discourse analysis (Michel Foucault, Siegfried Jäger, Achim Landwehr)
- social field theory, concept of habitus (Pierre Bourdieu)
- Network theory (Jürgen Mittag, Berthold Uffried)
- Visual history (Paul Gerhard, Ulrike Pilarczyk, Ulrike Maltzner)
- Approaches from gender studies/gender history (Joan Scott, Karin Hausen, Anne-Charlotte Trepp, Judith Butler)
- Approaches from animal-human studies (Linda Kalof, Kathlene Kate, Karin Schadhinger)



Relevance

The physicality of the horse is more decisive for the performance than that of the rider. The correlation between gender and performance, in other disciplines perceived as unambiguous, is not applicable to equestrian sport. A gender-segregated staging of competitions can therefore not be justified with the different physicality of men and women. The exclusion of female riders or the different conditions of participation can consequently only be attributed to discriminatory strategies based on gender. Thus, historical gender norms, expectations or hierarchies can be identified much more explicit in equestrian sport than in many other disciplines. The findings of the PhD project will thus offer insights that reach beyond equestrianism.



1. Women Saddle Up

Unlike other disciplines, discussions in equestrianism never revolved around the question of whether, but rather how women should take up the sport. Until the beginning of the 20th century, it was considered inappropriate for »amazonas« to ride astride. When riding changed from a mode of locomotion to a sport and leisure activity in the middle of the 19th century, the modern side-saddle was developed. There, riders sat with both legs on one side of the horse and put the right leg over a pommel to secure their hold in the saddle (see picture below). For pseudo-medical, moral but also fashion reasons, this style became the only adequate way for women to ride.

Female riders could now exert control over their horses, had a good hold in the saddle and at the same time did not endanger the norms of modesty through their chaste, closed legs. This saddle thus made it technically but also morally possible for female equestrians to follow fast hunting rides with obstacles – and thus to burst into a hitherto male-only preserve.



2. Short Reins: Norms of Women's Equestrianism

Despite the mixed-gender framework of equestrian sport, female riders were subject to different sporting, medical and aesthetic standards than men. Apart from riding in a different – and, from the rider's point of view, also disadvantageous saddle – than men, they were expected to practice the sport in a restrained manner and not to expose themselves to great exertion. Physicians argued that women who did not follow these principles of women's sports would jeopardize their ability for childbearing – and thus a woman's most important asset at that time. Female riders should convey femininity, also in the way they handled their horses. For male riders, discipline, strictness and absolute control were the principles that guided their relationship towards the animal. Women had to master their horses through empathy, kindness, and sensitivity – and thus through stereotypically female character traits.

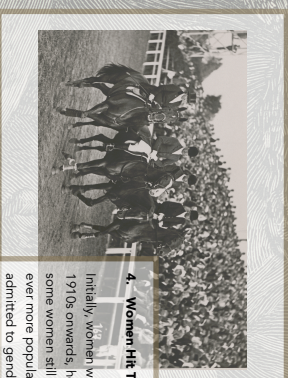
The norms for women's equestrianism reveal expectations on gender performance deeply engraved in equestrian sport. These conventions led to a sporting practice where women were indeed allowed to ride with men. However, female riders could not compete with them on equal terms as the norms of women's riding systematically prevented them from doing so.



3. Getting a Leg Up

In practice, these norms were perceived as recommendations rather than an imperative set of rules. In fact, there were many female riders who defied the standards of women's equestrianism. They rode astride in breeches, broke their horses themselves, followed hunts in the same manner as men and trained themselves and their horses to mastery. How was this level of non-conformity possible without provoking an outcry? The answer is simple: Because men were okay with it.

Pioneering horsewomen in Germany and Switzerland all had one thing in common: They were wives, sisters, mothers or daughters of cavalry officers, sportsmen or gentlemen riders. These men had resources such as money, high-quality gear, horses, know-how and sporting facilities at their disposal. A woman successfully participating in equestrianism thus had to have men at her back consenting or even encouraging her engagement by giving her access to these assets. Wilma von Sponneck, for example, was appointed by her father to be the Maser of Hounds of the Tralehen hunt. She was also entrusted by her husband with the management of the prestigious hunting stable of the Tralehen stud.



4. Women Hit Their Stride and Earn Their Spurs

Initially, women were not allowed to participate in competitions at all. From the 1910s onwards, however, they could compete in women-only courses. Although some women still participated in the side-saddle, the cross-saddle became ever more popular during this period. From the 1920s on, female riders were admitted to gender-mixed competitions as well. There, their performances were directly comparable to those of male riders, and they were by no means lagging behind them, quite the contrary. In demanding show jumping competitions, women riders won brilliant victories over cavalry officers and gentlemen riders. With their achievements they concretely, measurably and therefore unmistakably refuted the notion of the weaker sex. This led the sporting press to the conclusion that in certain sports, ladies have to be put on an equal footing with gentlemen.

Despite these notes struck by sporting journalists, female riders were formally not subjected to the same conditions of participation as men. It was not until 1952 that women were allowed to participate in the Nations Cups and in the Olympic Games – initially, however, only in dressage. In show jumping, they were admitted in 1956 and in eventing, it was in 1964 that the first woman rode in an Olympic competition.

