

Against the odds – a jockeys ‘lot’

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Of the many sports requiring professional athletes to meet specific weight limits as a prerequisite for competition, horseracing stands alone in the strict weight limitations and repeated ‘weigh in’ requirements of jockeys. A significant characteristic of thoroughbred racing is the handicap system, which imposes weight penalties to all runners in the anticipation of rendering an even field in the race. In competition the jockey’s body weight is the main contributor of the specified weight allowance (typically around 50–58 kg). Therefore, maintaining a low body weight for competition becomes an integral feature for jockeys.

The weigh-in procedure for jockeys differs from other weight-category sports such as boxing, wrestling, and rowing. A competitor in these fields typically weigh-in well before the event, allowing the athlete an opportunity to eat and drink before competition (1). However, jockeys are weighed before and after every race they compete in. Compounding the situation is the absence of a distinct competition period. Horseracing in Australia takes place year round, providing limited respite periods from race riding and a chance to maintain periodic relaxed weight control.

The term ‘wasting’ is often used in horseracing circles to describe acute weight loss methods engaged in prior to race riding. Wasting includes fasting, fluid restriction, fluid loss from saunas, abuse of diuretics and laxatives, self-induced vomiting and excessive exercise. Survey data of registered Victorian jockeys demonstrates the prevalent use of wasting strategies. To restrict energy intake, 75% of all jockeys routinely skipped meals. Forty one percent of jockeys induced fluid loss through sweating in saunas and 39% of jockeys reported using diuretics. Of the jockeys using the sauna within 24 hours of race day, 26.5% also used diuretics and 14% also used laxatives to lose weight (2). These findings support anecdotal suggestions that many jockeys rely on extreme weight loss strategies to make weight for race riding (3).

Jockeys who engage in wasting practices may place their performance and health in jeopardy. Of particular concern is the widespread reliance on severe dehydrating strategies prior to competition, further exacerbated by habitual restricted eating and drinking practices. Future research needs to consider the impact of these extreme weight loss methods on both riding performance and long-term health outcomes for this population group.

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2. Moore JM, Timperio AF, Crawford DA, Burns CM, Cameron-Smith D. Weight management and weight loss strategies of professional jockeys. *Int J Sport Nutr Ex Metab* (In press).
3. DeBenedette V. For jockeys injuries are not a long shot. *Phys Sportsmed* 1987; 15: 237–45.