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'I'd rather wear out than rust out': autobiologies of ageing equestriennes

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ABSTRACT

Horse–human relationships expressed as a kind of co-embodied engagement or mutual physicality between horse and rider receive note in emerging literatures on equine sports and multi-species ethnography. Less attention focuses on the impacts of equestrienne activities on ageing female bodies. This study is based on analysis of narrative data collected from open-ended qualitative interviews with 36 women, aged 40–70, who participate in a variety of equestrian activities and sports in the North American Midwest and Arctic Norway. Although ageing informants associate animal partnerships with the maintenance of health, and although informants' narratives show some accord with master narratives of ageing athletes identified by sports sociologists, the natures of horse–human relationships invite more explicit, horse- specific contexts of analysis. The phrase 'autobiologies of ageing' denotes how women's narratives of equestrienne ageing privilege and centre a subjective sense of physical identity or embodied self where the rider's experience of her body becomes entangled with and impartible from that of the horse or horses she rides.

KEY WORDS – equestrian sports, multispecies ethnography, ageing female body, sports and ageing.

Introduction

For me, it [riding] keeps me active. I don't know that it keeps me any younger, but it keeps me busy enough that I think it helps me keep myself feeling younger, not necessarily looking so. . . (HotShoe Sue, seventies)

I take HotShoeSue's perspective on life that you can either wear out or rust out and I think we're both gonna wear out. (Black Bear, fifties)

To me, being an ageing female – it keeps me young . . . If you can still ride the horse and do the jumping, the inside of your body is still young. (Hester, sixties)

I'm 62, give me a break. (Skye, sixties)

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These four quotes typify how, among older women equestrians, sport participation acts as a medium for physical and cultural expression (*cf.* Dyck 2010: 150). In this paper we focus on 'autobiologies' of ageing experienced and expressed among a sample of women who participate in different types of equestrian sports. Our presentation features an analysis of narrative data as situated within and informed by a combination of literature that includes the anthropology of sport (Blanchard 2002; Bourdieu 1978; Dyck 2004; Dyck and Archetti 2003; McGarry 2010; Palmer 2002), and the more sociological literatures on women and sports (Larsson 2013; McDermott 1996), as well as ageing and sports participation (Dionigi 2006; Grant 2001; Partington *et al.* 2005; Pfister 2012; Phoenix and Sparkes 2007; Tulle 2008; Vertinsky and Cousins 2007). As the term autobiologies of ageing suggests, our study of women's narratives of equestrian ageing not only privileges informants' subjective experience and sense of physical identity or an embodied ageing self, but also adds a new dimension to the study of ageing athletes.[1] This is because in the case of equestrian sports the rider's experience of her body becomes entangled with and impartible from her own life history as a rider and that of the horse or horses she rides. Thus, we also draw from the literatures on multi-species ethnography (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmich 2010). More specifically, our concern is with equine sports where horse–human relationships or partnerships, ontologically, as forms of being or becoming are expressed as a kind of co-embodied engagement or mutual physicality between horse and rider (Armstrong Oma 2010; Argent 2012; Birke and Brandt 2009; Birke, Bryld and Lykke 2004; Davis, Maurstad and Cowles 2013; Despret 2004; Game 2001; Maurstad, Davis and Cowles 2013).

Anthropology of sport

In its broadest sense, the anthropology of sport involves the application of the perspectives of anthropology to the study of sport (Blanchard 2002; Sands 1999).[2] Although sport occupies a rather tenuous position in anthropology (Bolin and Granskog 2003*a*; Dyck 2004; King 2004; McGarry 2010; Sands 1999), sport may be viewed as a window into culture (Blanchard 2002: 149), a mirror of society (Dyck and Archetti 2003: 3, 18), a blueprint for valued behaviours (Sands 1999: 3), as well as a situated, distinctive, ubiquitous presence on everyday life (Dyck and Archetti 2003: 3) or feature of culture (Blanchard 2002: 145; Harris and Park 1983) of interest in its own right (Lithman 2004). Sport is of interest in terms of meaning systems (Palmer 2002), identity negotiation – as in the formation or fashioning of individual and collective selves (Dyck and Archetti 2003; McGarry 2010) – and as a form of physical exertion (Blanchard 2002),

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as embodiment or techniques and aesthetics of the body (Bolin and Granskog 2003*a*; Dyck and Archetti 2003; Eichberg 1995; Lithman 2004). Not only is sport implicated in culture change (Giuliannotti and Robertson 2007) and the reworking of national, class, ethnic, gender and personal identities (Dyck and Archetti 2003), but it is also amenable to the study of shifts in modes of representation on behalf of both populations studied (McGarry 2010) and those studying them (Dyck 2010; Lithman 2004; Palmer 2001).

Other social scientists are also interested in sport as a topic of study. Although Burstyn (1999: 7) critiques sports studies for its 'athletocentric' paradigm, as Lithman (2004: 19) notes, in most studies of sports, sports 'itself' is hardly the major topic. Most studies deal with how sports intersect with some other feature or dimension of culture and society. With our focus on older women, we emphasise how bodily practices and continuities and shifts in body representations and experiences variously expressed by our equestrian informants, let – as Lithman (2004: 17) states – 'small matters speak loudly to larger issues'. In this case, it is gender and ageing. By way of caveat, however, Bourdieu (1978: 836) notes, the relationship between sports and age is a complex one.[3] We would add that Lithman's (2004: 19) 'small matters' are of interest in and of themselves. Here we focus on autobiologies as (a) how the techniques or use of the body and regimes of training that centre on riding as horse–human partnerships inscribe themselves on the body, and (b) how our informants create their own particular body aesthetics and realities. Through their autobiologies or depictions of lifetime careers of engagement with horses, our informants challenge, shift or reshape existing notions of gendered and athletic ageing. Our informants' own words or autobiologies of older athletes show how personhood in sports has a biographical dimension that is based on actual experiences and what actual people find important. By techniques of the rider body, we emphasise the lived body or the physical materiality of the body and sensorial experience as well as subjectivity or how people know how to use their bodies. We aim to show how identities are inscribed on bodies, how bodily imagery is articulated and to what effect. In so doing, we allow our informants to write 'new scripts' (*cf.* Pfister 2012: 381) which add sport and sporting performance to the normal biographies of older women.

Sports and the older woman

Among sports feminists (McDermott 1996: 13), 'physicality' stands out as a term useful for problematising the relationships between women, their bodies and physical activity. Feminist writers, noting that we live in a fitness culture,[4] positively describe sports as sites for renegotiation,

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transgression and normalisation of gendered subjectivities, identities and bodies (Adelman and Moraes 2008; Bolin and Granskog 2003*b*; Burstyn 1999; Heywood and Dworkin 2003) wherein sports and exercise participants can actively reconstruct and resist dominant societal images of women (Bolin and Granskog 2003*b*). According to Pfister (1993, 2012), although they face a double barrier that favours men and youth, among middle-class Western women the participation of older women in competitive sports has become a socio-cultural phenomenon. Focusing on women 50 years and above in the performance sport of competitive running, Pfister (2012: 380) argues that one can be fit, old, retired and an athlete at the same time. Among her sampling of runners, their sport is embedded in their identities and integral to their pride, self-esteem and respect. Not only is their running a highlight of everyday life; it provides a kind of socio-cultural capital of experiencing success, 'authentic moments beyond gender and age', provides fun and adventure, maintains health, and defies or resists stereotypes of ageing. On the negative side, until recently, participation in serious sports (that entail rigorous training and competition) had been viewed as inappropriate or dangerous for women or old people and age is associated with an inevitable decline in sports ability (Bergquist 2009; Pfister 2012; Phoenix and Sparkes 2007). Older people were expected to rest when they got older (Grant 2001). Athletic careers are held to be of short duration. Premature retirement ages are described early onset midlife crises (Partington *et al.* 2005). In late modern society, Tulle (2008: 4) describes the frail, 'spoiled' ageing body in terms of the 'erosion' of social and cultural capital, or loss as a 'productive anchor of identity'. In a more nuanced perspective, rather than equating their sports physicality with that of men (*e.g.* power, domination, force and aggression) or dominant views of female beauty, sports women are viewed as subjectively experiencing their physicality more in terms of self-mastery, physical presence and bodily satisfaction (McDermott 1996). Bolin and Granskog (2003*b*) argue that, despite restrictions,[5] sports confer agency as an individual's ability to negotiate creatively and processually her own roles and identities in dynamic interaction with others.

Equestrian sports

Here, we introduce a new 'other' – the horse – into the mix. Horses, too, are trained athletes with varying sport-related talents and capacities (Davis, Maurstad and Cowles 2013). As Armstrong Oma (2010: 180) notes, the human–horse relationship is founded on interconnections where a joint participation in the world leads to a state of human and horses being mixed. Multi-species ethnography advocates a movement away from regarding

animals as symbols or passive reflections of human intentions to focus on human–animal relationships as an ongoing process of deep engagement, 'becoming with' (Haraway 2008: 16) or mutual becoming (Birke, Bryld and Lykke 2004). Humans and animals become 'full partners in worlding' (Haraway 2008: 301). Much has been written of how the actual physical act of riding is a co-embodied, centaur-like activity that joins two bodies, where horse and human, together, come to inhabit the physicality of riding (Game 2001; *see also* Argent 2012;Armstrong Oma 2010; Birke and Brandt 2009; Birke, Bryld and Lykke 2004; Cowles and Davis 2013; Despret 2004; Davis, Maurstad and Cowles 2013; Maurstad, Davis and Cowles 2013). In this sense, then, contrary to assumptions that older people avoid contact sports (Vertinsky and Cousins 2007), riding is the ultimate 'contact sport' as horse and rider are in constant contact with each other.

Essential to and distinguishing it from other sports is that in equestrian sports acquisition of skills is developed with the other. Horse and human conjointly make up each other. Most novice riders start out with a trained horse and learn from this other sentient being how to use both physical and mental capacities. Becoming more experienced, the rider can learn from even more experienced horses or the roles can shift and the rider trains the novice horse. Becoming skilled always involves being with a particular individual who has a personality and capacity that riders learn to acknowledge and attune to as the relationship develops and the skills grow. It should be noted that these experiences are intrinsic to everyday practices and experiences of both human and horse (Maurstad, Davis and Cowles 2013).

Gilbert and Gillett (2011) describe equine sports as empowering and appealing along gender lines because girls and women are in control and in the majority.[6] Dressage, eventing and show jumping are Olympic sports that allow men and women to compete in the same events. Star eventing competitors, like Karen O'Connor, are in their mid-fifties or older. Although horses, as large and powerful, sometimes unpredictable partners, can bring an element of danger into the sport, the skilled rider co-opts the power, speed and athleticism of the horse's body.

The riders in this sample participate in equine sports such as dressage, eventing and endurance riding that at the lower levels are stereotypically dominated by (older, white) women. As we have seen, horse and rider mutually constitute each other through the practice of riding, training and competing (Game 2001; Gilbert and Gillett 2011). Here we look at the encounter value (Haraway 2008) of the horse as a kind of social capital. According to Gilbert and Gillett (2011), social capital is embedded in the character, personality and demeanour of the horse. This includes a physical capital or the physical characteristics of the animal and a cultural capital

or disposition of the animal.[7] The encounter value increases with the horse's willingness to interact with people over time, as mutual negotiation take place and bonds are formed (Gilbert and Gillett 2011). Gilbert and Gillett underscore encounter value in terms of what the horse offers the human. We like to refocus the concept to deal with the partner-horse as he or she becomes implicated in renegotiating stereotypes of old age. Here we look at encounter value, literally and figuratively, in terms of a shared life space – in both a physical and temporal sense.[8]

Sample and methods

This study is based on analysis of narrative data collected from open-ended qualitative interviews with 36 women, with ages ranging from their forties to their seventies,[9] who participate in endurance riding, dressage, eventing and gaming in the Midwestern United States of America (USA), and gaited Icelandic horse riding in Arctic Norway.[10] Our ethnographic understandings are enhanced by the fact that each of us is a participant observer who has a long-term, direct embodied engagement with one or more of these equestrian sports. Anita rides Icelandic gaited horses, Dona is a dressage and eventing rider, and Sarah does endurance riding. Anita is in her fifties and Dona in her sixties. Our own backgrounds as equestrians allows us access to or entry to the 'back stages' of equestrian practices (De Munck 2009: 184), as well as a firsthand and situated experiential knowledge of horse–human relationships and of the complex intersections of ageing, gender and sports. Because of our backgrounds, we were able to recruit an opportunity sample of informants from our own local riding groups, at training facilities and clinics, and at competitions. Interviews were collected, outside and indoors, in homes, at libraries, in riding facilities and at competitions.

Aiming to elicit discourse that both enacts and produces culture, and inspired by Naomi Quinn's (2005: 2) 'culture in talk', we interviewed our sample of riders, from the summer of 2011 to the spring of 2012, using a set of open-ended questions. These questions are: (a) Why do you ride? (b) Tell me about your life as a rider. (c) How does this relate to the kind of person you are? (d) How does riding relate to other aspects of your life? (e) How is your experience the same or different from the experiences of other people? These questions took our informants in a variety of directions, explaining their individual horse–human experiences through discourse.[11] Transcribed interviews range from five to 20 pages in length. Anita translated her interviews from Norwegian to English.[12] Analytic tasks included content analysis and focused on the identification and depiction of tacit understandings and patterns in signal experiences that find common expression throughout informant narratives. By presenting

a series of narratives or scenarios, our aim is to demonstrate how informants think and feel as they make connections between ageing and the joys and challenges of continued participation in equestrian activities (De Munck 2009; Quinn 2005).

Our intent in this paper is to engage a variety of interdisciplinary literatures. Although human–animal interactions are generally regarded as an important aspect of the lives of people of all ages, and although animal companions can be said to promote healthy ageing by bringing social, psychological and physical health benefits to older people, the ageing and pets literature tends to focus on service or therapy animals and clients in institutional settings (*e.g.* Baun and Johnson 2010; Wells 2009). Except for discussions of positive aspects of dog walking or more negative ones of tripping over cats (Pluijm *et al.* 2006), the animal–human interactions are depicted as largely passive on the part of the human. The age of those being studied also tends to focus on what Dionigi (2006) terms the fourth age – or deep old age as a time of life associated with sickness and frailty – rather the third age – associated with midlife and retirement. By focusing on women of the third age, on horse–human partnerships in terms of the physicality of riding, and within equestrian sports where older women continue to compete successfully, we hope to offer some more dynamic and nuanced insights both into human–animal interactions and the ageing woman athlete. Our interest is not in these sports *per se* but in how participation in equine sports discursively produces new forms of identity and new scripts for gendered ageing. As such, following Tulle (2008), who associates the erosion of the ageing body with a loss of social capital, we emphasise how the horse and riding in older equestrians, like HotShoeSue and Black Bear's wearing out bodies, can actually become a form of social capital to counter the medicalisation of ageing and be repositioned as a programme for physically active and successful ageing. The case study that follows helps to set the scene for the discussion that follows.

A case study

A recent series of papers in sociology journals on the ageing athlete have identified and basically agreed upon what they put forth as a number contradictory master narratives or athletic self-stylings for midlife and later life in sports (Dionigi 2006; Grant 2001; Partington *et al.* 2005; Phoenix and Sparkes 2007). For simplicity, we use Partington's terminology of resistance, rejuvenation and acceptance (Partington *et al.* 2005). All three have a temporal or life-span aspect to them. Resistance signifies a battle with future ageing and the medicalised association of ageing with declines in health, frailty, disengagement and dependency. One resists or retains control over

the ageing process through physical activity, as in 'ageing is a state of mind' or 'use it or lose it'. Rejuvenation means finding favour in previous lifestyles. It is a return to youth as a way of side stepping or negating ageing or obtaining successes unrealised earlier in life, as in 'life begins at 40'/'I'm younger than I look'. In both resistance and rejuvenation, accommodation or adjustments to the ageing process (stiffness, reflex action, stamina and participation in age-graded competitions, *etc.*) are made. The acceptance self-narrative is extremely rare. Phrased as 'growing old gracefully', it involves resorting to milder forms of exercise or age-appropriate behaviours. Acceptance too is temporal in the sense of bowing out when the time is right.

As the paper's title and introductory quotes indicate, these themes are reflected in our informant's narratives. As for the mid-life self-stylings cited above, although older informants commonly planned to ride as long their bodies held out,[13] only one informant brought graceful ageing to her narrative and this was seen as far off in the future. Bonnie's narrative does illustrate how all three themes are interwoven into a single narrative:

> At my age when we first get on I'm a little 'arrgh' but then it's okay . . . When I was younger . . . I just rode them – anybody let me ride their horse, I would. Now I'm a little bit more particular, because I'm older. I don't ride any new horses. Any new horses and we just put my granddaughter on it . . . Now, because of my age, I ride just for the fun of it. I go into a few shows – mostly games – because my pony is a good gamer. It's just therapy for me to be around them. I can't imagine. I even told my daughter a while ago, 'listen, if I get in a wheelchair or have Alzheimer's, BRING ME OUT TO THE BARN. I might not even remember my horse!' Really, I'm serious. If I can't get around, if I can't clean stalls, bring me out there. Wheel me into the barn. Oh yeah, wheel me out there in a wheelchair. I can't imagine my life without being around horses. That's just the way I am. That's my make-up. I love to groom them. As you get older you have a little more time to spend on grooming and stuff like that. (Bonnie, sixties)

Bonnie resists the ageing process by carrying on despite aches and pains, but she also accommodates at this stage of her riding career by choosing safe horse partners. Always a timid rider, she has given in to and accommodated her fears by not demanding so much of herself and in her choice of horse partners and activities. Riding and being with horses, however, remain central to her identity and sense of self. She might wear out (wheelchair) but gracefully accepts old age impairment if she can still be around horses, if just to groom, smell them and hear them eating. But much more is happening here. Bonnie's entire interview also includes a longer ontological or biographical accounting of her attraction to horses. Bonnie describes herself as born 'horse crazy'. By this she means an innate attraction to horses (others, like Halla, call this the 'horse or riding gene'), which in the family stories she tells was first manifested in her toddler years. Ontologically preceding reason or memory, this sense of being drawn towards horses

is not only lifelong in Bonnie but has been, in Bonnie's view, inherited by her daughter and granddaughters. Bonnie's rejuvenation comes in the guise of her grandchildren. Bonnie's life space and life history is filled with horses and family. Bonnie's history of riding and love of horses generates not only a kind of social capital that can be invested in successful, satisfying-if-graceful ageing, but horses as social capital in this case have also provided a solidity and continuity in family relations. Here we also find soma implicated rather than implied by the terms 'sports physicality' in ways that go beyond issues of performance or athletic prowess to a sensorial satisfaction and sense of wellbeing that features an embodied pleasure of being near to her horses or co-embodied contentment of being among them.

Although Bonnie's narrative best embodies all of the so-called 'contradictory' (*cf.* Partington *et al.* 2005) narratives of ageing athletes currently in vogue in the sociology literature, it offers much more. Bonnie cannot talk about riding now without also including riding in the past and ruminations on the future. Horses and family fill up her life space. Her autobiology of ageing includes not only her current physical states of wear and tear but also a very sense of physical being in the world that has passed on to her children and grandchildren. Among all of our informants, their autobiologies of ageing are embedded in their life histories as riders. The physicality of their sports participation is conjointly embodied – literally and figuratively – with or on the horse.

We now turn to focus on the older riders and the themes that emerge from their narratives. Although the themes suggested by sociologists certainly are woven through the narratives, they would fail to reflect the self-stylings or scripts that emerge in our sample of older equestrian athletes. Concepts like resistance, rejuvenation, adjustment and acceptance are too abstract, too divorced from the immediate experiential worlds, not to mention an implied single species bias. They fail to capture the gist of what Bonnie is saying. The following analysis of women's depictions of the challenges, costs and benefits of riding for the ageing female body identifies four major themes that implicate or centre horses in their narratives. First, women reflect on how their own personal histories as riders mark and shape their bodies. Second, they relate the ageing process to skill sets, riding techniques, and choice of equine partners and activities. Third, they describe strategies for coping with traumatic bodily injuries, and chronic aches and pains incurred through lifetimes of riding, as well as more general bodily concerns like nerves, quickness and strength. Fourth, they present their rider/body/selves as exemplars of successful ageing attributable to their histories and co-embodied practices of riding with horses. Each is considered below.

Personal histories mark and shape bodies

When Sarah interviews Lara, Lara draws her hand proudly and sensuously over her body, slowly moving it from foot to shoulder, remarking that 'riding my horses has given me this body'. By anyone's standards, Lara's 50 plus-year-old body is beautiful, athletic and youthful. Others, like HotShoeSue, who in her late seventies is considerably older than Lara, is less sure about the looking younger aspect, but like Hester in the introductory quotes, settles for feeling younger on the inside of the body and in the mind.

> For me, it [riding] keeps me active, I don't know that it keeps me any younger but it keeps me busy enough that I think that it helps me keep myself feeling younger, not necessarily looking so, and the activity of taking care of horses and animals and riding, generally. It's good for the body and the mind. (HotShoeSue, seventies)

Skye, acknowledging age and asthma as liabilities, goes on to express with satisfaction and pride that she is still an athlete whose well-conditioned body can continue to endure long rides without negative effects.

> I would be a marathon runner if I could do that because that's the kind of thing I like. I could not do it because I'm physically not able. I have asthma. I know, excuses, I'm 62, give me a break. But endurance goes on for a long time and I like doing things that go on and I don't find it that difficult. Other people that are maybe way better athletes could not do 100 milers but I can do 100 milers and at the end of it I'm walking around just fine no problems. (Skye, sixties)

In their discussion of ageing's effect on their bodies, Nell and Hester ontologically juxtapose earlier and mid- or later-life stages of riding. Here riding has more intermittently occupied their life spaces. Nell and Urdur (fifties) are quite conscious of age-related embodied changes or adjustments they have made. In a somewhat different vein, Hester continues to benefit from the embodied practices and memories of riding and training experiences that for decades were not used:

> I was in my upper forties when we got a horse again. I find that I'm much more cautious, so than I was. When you were younger you just hop on and go. I'm just lots more cautious about what I'm doing because [if I fell off] I don't think the body would heal as quickly. (Nell, fifties)

> It's something that I did as a child and a young adult; it was a daily activity for me growing up. It's is something that I chose to come back to when my career was established; it is something that I have had a significant amount of training and accomplishments in, in my past. It is something, that at my age, I can still continue to do. I am proud of myself for being able to do this, at my age and return to it. (Hester, sixties)

Black Bear and HotShoeSue, both endurance riders, make sense when they state that in life 'you can either wear out or rust out, and I think we're both gonna wear out'. One hundred-mile rides over challenging terrain

(Davis, Maurstad and Cowles 2013) creates wear and tear on well-conditioned bodies entrained over a lifetime. Although adapting to ageing or impaired bodies (asthma), this set of informants is committed to keeping their bodies engaged in their respective equine sports for as long as possible. Preferring activity over graceful retirement and its incapacitating threat of rusting out, Halla, as yet only in her forties, is anticipating this contingency and already preparing her body for a long-term future of riding.

I definitely have the feeling that as I get older I'm definitely going to keep riding. I have that motivation to keep moving. As I age I work out to be in condition to ride. When you're younger you ride and it just fits in with everything else, every other sport you're doing. As we get older if you want to be an active rider we want to be in shape for those rides. (Halla, 40 s)

Encounter values of horses inform the ageing narratives above. Personal histories presented as autobiologies, where embodied forms of learning (as in the case of Hester) or a more general aesthetic appreciation of a rider's body (as in the case of Lara), implicate the horse. Lara states that her horses have given her her body. Because her endurance horse endures as well as she, Skye's horse continues to carry her in the sport despite the limitations of her age and asthma. Horses who taught Hester and Nell to ride have provided them with embodied memories to be reactivated by other horses later in their lives. A kind of lifetime embodied affinity emerges as horses and riders mutually come to constitute each other.

Relating the ageing process to skill sets, riding techniques, and choice of equine partners and activities

While Ajay (fifties) remarks that horses are good for you because they do not know or care if you are ugly or old, riders denote that to continue successful ageing in the sport, adjustments in addition to dogged perseverance must be made. Urdur (fifties), returning to riding at 48, has transitioned from riding the big Warmbloods that she rode at 18 to the much smaller Icelandic horses. She feels that she is no longer tough and determined enough to ride the big horses. Aurora (in her forties) admits that she has always been a safe rider but that 'age matters, after I had kids I see that this is different. One has others to think about, not only oneself'. Katie (sixties) will no longer adjust to any equine partner and now sells horses that do not suit her.

When I was younger, I could hardly wait to get on my horse. My horse had two speeds – walk and fast. That's not the way it is anymore. I guess I go about things a bit more slowly. When I was younger, I loved any horse. As I got older, I got maybe wiser. Some horses are just easier to deal with and to love than other horses. (Katie, sixties)

Hester (sixties), who says 'If I'm going to pay to have this nice horse, God dammit I'm going to ride', might not agree with Katie. Hester does,

however, complain about having to overcome embodied memories, after a return to riding. She now has to deal with old-fashioned or out-dated 1950s skill sets in a sport that had left her behind.

> There are a number of challenges that are involved. It is challenging because the sport always changes. I'm a lot lower on the totem pole than I once was. The way that I was taught to ride is not the way that you're taught to ride now, and so there are a lot of bodily things that I have to overcome. I was raised in a sport where you pinched with the knees. I was raised in a whole different system of dressage so that a lot of it requires a lot of retraining of the body and new ways of training the horse. (Hester, sixties)

Like Hester, Skye has, despite her dedication, come down in terms of competition levels in the world of her sport. But this has also opened her up to new experiences such as competing with her granddaughter.

> I worked really hard, I'm a driven person, I want to see my horses do the best that they can, and I do not want to get hurt or worse so I'm over-prepared if anything, most of the time. Because I'm a very competitive person and I like doing things really well and I worked really hard at it, I sort of excelled and I became a very elite rider and I rode on the Canadian equestrian team. When I turned 50 I was in Dubai at the world championships. Now I'm getting too old to compete at that level and have to back off. And now I'm finding joy in riding with my granddaughter and 25 milers instead of doing 100. But now 25 just seems to be fine with me. So it's been full circle. (Skye, sixties)

Unlike Skye, Judy has actually, in changing sports from eventing to dressage, upped the ante in her riding.

> I owned my first horse when I was 14 and I've had a horse ever since. I'm now 64. Being 64, in the last three or four years I feel older. I don't feel older but I feel older physically. I see the end of my riding career. I see it looming in the future. I'm now into it more than I was at 50 or 60. I'm more into the learning of it, and than I was even when I was 30. It's changed. Now at age 64 I know I will never do any more eventing so I'm leaning more to dressage. Not that I'm afraid but I can do dressage longer. So I'm putting a priority more on dressage than eventing. With dressage I can learn more. I can see myself learning into my seventies. I can easily see ten more years of riding if I switch to dressage I can become better than I am now. Being 64 even life itself seems shorter than it used to be. When I was 57, I had a horse who I evented very successfully though the novice level until she turned 14 and had an accident at the barn and went permanently lame. I truly thought she would be my final horse. That we would go into the sunset together. I was 57 years old and thought this would be my last horse. That was three horses ago . . . (Judy, sixties)

This quote came from Judy's interview three years ago. Judy certainly continued to achieve at dressage on a budget with a horse that was not bred for the sport. Recently, Judy experienced a reversal of fortune and purchased her dream horse – a highly bred, minimally trained three-year-old dressage horse. Although she wanted a horse with talent and superior movement, she was also careful to shop for a horse with an 'old soul' – an expression she uses

to refer to a safe horse with a mild, non-spooky temperament – to suit her 'old bones'. It appears her dream came true and Judy now looks forward to riding through her seventies with her new partner.

It is important to note that although our informants report making age-related adjustments by acquiring a new horse, they also make adjustments to older or ageing horses that they continue to care for, even when the riding days are over. For example, Morgan and Sophia both mention a lifetime commitment to their ageing equine partners.

> And so for me it's really important to know that he's [25-year-old horse] got a lifetime home with me... (Sophia, fifties)

> To me, in my world, once you have a horse you accept a certain responsibility so now I have two old horses and I'm spending an extra hundred dollars on feed, and supplements just to kind of help them hold their own. But I've had them forever and they've earned it. (Morgan, fifties)

The quotes in this section demonstrate how important horses and continued participation in equine sports are to one's identity as an ageing woman. Skye, an endurance rider, is a self-described 'driven woman'. Judy, who identifies as a lifetime rider, is in the process of switching her identity from the dangerous sport of eventing to the safer sport of dressage. These informants plan to fill present and future life spaces actively riding with horses. Hester, Katie and Skye admit coming to terms with declining skills sets. Judy expects continued advancement in dressage. While Hester, Skye and Judy are becoming more sensitive to performance or the more particular characters and capacities of their equine partners as trained athletes, Sophia and Morgan position the horses who have shared their lives as partners in sickness and health to be parted from only at death.

Strategies for coping with traumatic bodily injuries, chronic aches and pains, nerves incurred and more general bodily concerns like nerves, quickness and strength

When Dona was coming off a cross-country course last autumn, the rider in front of her calls to a woman giving massages at a nearby booth, 'You guys are great! Without my chiropractor, I would not be on this horse.' Temporary and chronic aches and pains are common topics of conversation among older riders. Nell admits that riding today makes her feel stiff. On the other hand, Judy says that riding provides her with the only freedom she gets from chronic pain. Hester, wondering how long her body will stand up to riding, comments she knows how good riding is for her body because she gets so sore if she leaves off for a week or so. Hester (like Bernadette, Nell, Katie and Bonnie) reports that she is more timid or cautious than she used to be, but the purchase of a new jumping horse has significantly emboldened Hester.

Both Hester and Black Bear report not only having to do extra workouts but also having to take medications or buy special equipment to continue riding:

Once I hit 50 I began to realise that you have to do extra exercise to keep the fitness that you bring to riding, so I started lifting weights and doing more aerobic stuff. I have asthma. To be able to ride, I have to take the drugs and stuff like that, and they have negative things that they do to your body, so it's just that it's very, very important to me to have that relationship with the horse. It is important to me and my sense of self. I just really, really like doing. It feels so good to do it. (Hester, sixties)

I guess as I have gotten older and more injured, the objects that have become more important to me are the objects that keep my body able to go again: so good drugs … I have a 500 dollar pair of riding boots, without which I could not ride because my ankles are in such bad shape. The saddle is absolutely critical with whether I could ride or not, what with my body decomposing. (Black Bear, fifties)

Karen, Katie and DeeDee are not the only riders in the sample who had had serious accidents, but they did talk about it in the interviews. Karen (fifties), who had a bad accident and calls herself a 'recovering equestrian', never returned to riding but leaves the option open as 'a maybe some day'. Katie did return but as a changed rider. The tone of DeeDee's injury tale is different as is Eve's hypothetical injury.

Like when I broke my leg and ankle. That changed me. I don't, won't, ride alone anymore. I'm much more cautious. Part of it is because I did break my leg, and I think that you get wiser as you get older. (Katie, sixties)

I've had injuries also. I broke my back with one of my horses – he was just a young guy – and it was eight weeks – the doctor said you can't ride for eight weeks – and the day the eight weeks were up, I was back on a horse. But not riding would be a really hard thing for me … really hard. I'm 59. I'll be 60 this fall. Oh god, I can't believe I'm that old already, but I tell him 'I hope I'll do this until I'm like 75 and then maybe I'll just trail ride'. And there are older women that do this [endurance]. I have arthritis problems, but most of these people that do this are like, oh my knees hurt. I did 60 miles in two days, this knee's going 'ooh, I'm sore too'. But I'm doing it again tomorrow. I'm not as strong as I was. I can have a sore back vacuuming my house or I can have a sore back riding 25 miles. You know which one I'm gonna do. It's a no-brainer. (DeeDee, fifties)

I want to do endurance, I want to be a [the name of the oldest rider in the group – HotShoeSue], I want to ride in my seventies. As long as my body will let me ride, I think I would find a way, even if something happened and I was paralysed from the waist down, I hope I would have a way, would work to where I could get a horse to lay down, and I could crawl up and get up and go. Somehow, I cannot imagine a life without a horse. I work for a smaller company, and I have had the owners tell me that they're jealous, because they're close to retirement, and they say 'I wish I had something that I'm as obsessed about as you are'. 'Cause I have no doubt what I'm going to do when I retire. I'm going to ride more. (Eve, fifties)

It is significant that when talking of injury or impairment, informants also speak of using a horse to get better. The two very first women Anita interviewed in Norway had taken up riding because being on disability leave from work, they had time for riding. At a dressage show this summer, Dona met a woman in her sixties who having survived breast cancer rewarded herself with a well-trained Lipizzaner mare.

It is of interest that when it comes to strategies for coping with aches and pains, nerves and/or injuries, the horse itself becomes less implicated in the narratives. The horse does not cause the pain; it is the product of the riders' ageing bodies. In this section, autobiologies feature having to adapt to ageing bodies subject to asthma, arthritis and even chronic pain with objects or equipment, good drugs, chiropractors or other forms of physical therapy. What is important to the informants is, as Hester states, to maintain 'that relationship with the horse' or, as Eve states, even with a hypothetical broken back, 'I can't imagine life without a horse'. When it comes to decomposing bodies, the horse is depicted in terms of cure rather than cause. For the horse as agent, being safe, or an 'old soul', becomes a kind of social capital that appeals to the older rider and her goal to keep riding.

Presenting the rider/body/selves as exemplars of successful ageing attributable to their histories and co-embodied practices of riding with horses

Like Eve and DeeDee, the informants express a desire to stay in the saddle as long as possible. It is important to their sense of self and embodied happiness. Moreover, it is offered as a vehicle of successful ageing. Lee (fifties) plans to ride as long as she can: 'I'm never getting tired of this'. Lara (fifties) says, 'I've made the decision that I'm going to be a little old lady and if I need a ladder to get up, I will, and I'll have a little kid help me get up'. Hester, in competition with her own body, sees riding as a link to youth. Skye thinks more in terms of maintenance and accommodation and Judy plans to leap forward.

> To me, being an ageing female – it keeps me young, and . . . you know, you can see all these changes that are happening on the outside of your body. I was talking about this with one of my friends . . . that if you can still ride the horse and do the jumping, that the inside of your body is still young. (Hester, sixties)

> You're going to get old so I just have to learn how to back off and not be so competitive and in endurance it's a personal thing if not who won the race it's how you did compare to the last one so you have to get to doing it for the sense of accomplishment against yourself, against the trail and about the bond with their horse, instead of being an elite rider and it's a challenge sometimes to realise that you can't compete at the level that you used to compete at but I don't think I want to quit, no . . . well, endurance relates to the kind of person I am because I'm really independent, I like a challenge, I like doing things, not quick speed things. (Skye, sixties)

So now I see myself doing things I couldn't do three years ago. It's really satisfying to me – to keep going to a higher level with the horse. (Judy, sixties)

Others, like Bonnie, take pleasure in the senses that will continue to attune them somatically to their horses and will settle for less as long as horses are still a part of their lives.

I guess I'm kind of worried about getting old, . . . I know when I get older, and I'm not able to, I still want to be able to have that connection whether it's brushing, petting, feeding, and all that. (DeeDee, fifties)

How long will I do it? I would always have a horse, if nothing but to smell it. You know? There's something about that horse smell. (Eve, fifties)

When it comes to successful ageing, our self-reflective and philosophical rider, Krusty, doubts that two lifetimes are enough to truly appreciate horses. Krusty's quote represents not a graceful surrender but a graceful going on.

I still love to ride out. I can get on my horse and ride out now. I like being in the natural environment riding across country. It's in my heart. When I don't ride, I sometimes wonder what the meaning of life is. Riding, I understand the philosophy of the meaning of life. It's all that you know – kindness and all that. It feeds me, you know, it really feeds me. If you remember Clint ___, he says it takes two lifetimes to be a good rider. It takes a lot of experience and knowledge to be able to be authoritative yet generous with your horse. You know I've reached a point in my riding, where every time I ride my, it's almost like riding a new horse. Every time you get on a new horse you have to experiment how rewarding and how restrictive do you have to be. It's an all-rewarding gift when you were riding when you get all those buttons right. I treasure my own horse. I want him to last as long as he can. I think it's very much the same for everybody if they stay in it long enough. (Krusty, sixties)

Horses and human's conjointly make up each other. As a kind of encounter value or capital for successful ageing, continued horse–human relationships and participation in equine sports bring continuity to identity: as Skye states, 'I am really independent and like challenges', or Hester states, 'it keeps me young'. It also, as in Judy's case, supplies satisfaction and a continued sense of feelings of accomplishment. For Krusty, riding is a philosophical activity that helps her to understand the meaning of life. It is so fulfilling that one lifetime is not enough to realise its value. But physically inhabiting a shared worlding of horses, as DeeDee, Eve and Bonnie suggest, goes beyond the physicality of riding to a more passive, sensorial reflection of just being with or in the company of horses.

Discussion and conclusion

The narratives we have presented are open to many avenues of analysis. We have focused here on issues raised in the gender, ageing and sports

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literature. At this point, however, it is important to remark that to keep our informants anonymous we do not include the names of their horses in their narratives, but they flow through the narratives as spoken if not recorded. For example, Krusty, reflecting on her life with horses remarks that 'I've had three horses, ___ was too fast, ____ was too slow and ____ was just right'. What is important to remember is that horse as a category does not gloss on to horse as individual or *vice versa* (*cf.* Birke, Bryld and Lykke 2004).

When Moore (2004: 39) states that the more we move away from a commitment to the ethnographic ways of making knowledge about sports, the more danger we are in of losing our anthropological identity, the author was probably not thinking in terms of multi-species ethnography. Yet a multi-species approach is key to understanding any equestrian sport and any athlete-centred approach to equestrian sports must take into account horse athletes as well as human ones. As Pfister (2012: 371) notes in her discussion of older women runners, gender and age are intertwined with identities and inscribed on bodies and displayed and negotiated in interactions. As our data demonstrate, these interactions in equestrian sports involve various kinds of encounter values, not just of interactions with, but as co-being and becoming with the horse. These in turn become expressed as a kind of social or cultural capital that is used to assert a number of possible selves, create new alternative, more positive scripts or self-stylings to challenge dominant stereotypes of ageing in the gender/sport/ageing literature. For example, an old and ageing horse, as in the cases of Morgan and Sophia, can slow you down, but a new, young horse, as in the case of Judy and Hester, gives you a new lease on life. Or most importantly, as Ajay states, 'My horse does not know or care how ugly or old I am.'

In the subjective and inter-subjective accounts of their ageing bodies, among our informants we see old, familiar and new scripts for ageing in general and for ageing within sports. First, traditional images of decline and degeneration of the physical body certainly exist in the narratives. Informants like Nell and Katie speak of being stiff, prone to aches and pains, and not as brave or quick as they used to be. Others, like DeeDee, Eve and Bonnie, admit they probably cannot do this forever. Judy states that when she can no longer ride her horse years are over, but Bonnie and Skye, for example, offer an intergenerational contingency plan for keeping horses in their lives. Judy, with her new horse, however, plans to ride competitively at least until she is 78; Bonnie in contrast has already backed off and views 78 as her wheelchair years. Second, Bonnie's account that ends in acceptance also shows us that the themes of resistance, rejuvenation and acceptance, already documented among ageing athletes, run through the narratives of our informants. Certainly Black Bear and HotShoeSue's statements that they would 'rather wear out than rust out' reflects a theme

of resistance. Even at ages 58 and 75 they will endurance ride as long as they can. For informants like Hester, returning to riding in middle age gave her more time and assets to re-enter and compete in the sport. Although contradictory (Partington *et al.* 2005), these themes flow through the narratives and yet their ambivalence goes unremarked. As scripts for the ageing athlete, the important message is that you can compete successfully in equestrian sports and in doing so defy stereotypes of an aged, post-athletic body. What is interesting is that, unlike Halla's statement about preparing for old age riding with exercise, the challenges of ageing are not mentioned by informants until they are well into their fifties, well beyond the age where sports declines are supposed to become manifest. Third, new scripts emerge and though we have placed them in three analytic categories, instead of containing internal contradictions they tend to flow into each other in a rather seamless fashion.

In this paper we have also shown that body images expressed by the older horse women are indeed multi-dimensional and multi-faceted, being based in process and practice, and individual experience both personalised and subjective, dynamic and changeable, and intimately related to self-concept (*cf.* sports body images noted by Bolin and Granskog 2003*b*). However, unlike Tulle's (2008) runners or Vertinsky and Cousin's (2007) Masters Athletes, rider's stories are not single actor stories. Their stories cannot be told without the horse as co-actor. The autobiologies told by our sample of riders are athletocentric but also implicate two bodies – for starters, a really big one with four hooves and a comparatively tinier one with two feet. We have used the phrase 'autobiologies of ageing' to denote how horses dominate the temporal life spaces of riders, whether time is seen as in Judy's case lineal with an end-point, or in Black Bear's and Bonnie's cases as cyclical, or as in the cases of Eve as never ending, and Hester as in the moment. Women's narratives of equestrienne ageing privilege and centre a subjective sense of physical identity or embodied self where the rider's experience of her body becomes entangled with and impartible from that of the horse or horses she rides. The autobiologies we have presented are certainly small matters speaking to larger issues (*cf.* Lithman 2004). Our informants resist, reinvent and accept cultural stereotypes of ageing as well as lack of gender parity in competitive sports. But the physicality of their sport is impartible from the horses they ride and speak loudly to Lithman's smaller matters. Because of the horse, an older rider can compete successfully or ride, like HotShoeSue at 77, until her later years. Despite the wide variety of equine sports in which our informants participate, their comments resonate with each other. The aches and pains, injuries and recoveries all revolve around the experiences of human–horse partnerships, as do techniques of two bodies and skills of the sports. Mining the narratives, we come up with

four scripts for the ageing equine sports woman. First, women reflect on how their own personal histories as riders mark and shape their bodies. Second, they relate the ageing process to skill sets, riding techniques, and choice of equine partners and activities. Third, they describe strategies for coping with traumatic bodily injuries, and chronic aches and pains incurred through lifetimes of riding, as well as more general bodily concerns like nerves, quickness and strength. Fourth, they present their rider/body/selves as exemplars of successful ageing attributable to their histories and co-embodied practices of riding with horses.

Among our informants, encounter values realised in riding and horse–human interactions and relationships become a kind of cultural capital for successful and satisfying ageing. Modelling ageing athletes in terms of resistance, rejuvenation and acceptance certainly finds resonance among the sample of informants, but are too generic to capture the essence and horsiness of the narratives. Likewise, a multi-species focus on animals as they benefit ageing humans that features walking your dog as healthy and elderly women tripping over cats as not (Pluijim *et al.* 2006) hardly describes 77-year-old HotShoeSue'S characterisation of wearing out on 100-mile endurance rides. The narratives are athlete-centred in that they focus on both horse and rider as athletes in sports that are dominated by older women. They are co-embodied autobiologies of horse and human that reach through time, comparing bodies present to bodies past and even future bodies, and continually intersect in life narratives that are horse-informed. They form a social capital in terms of providing place within the barn, at competitions and within the equestrian sports communities. A lifetime of riding inscribed on the body, as Lara demonstrates in terms of beauty, or as HotSueShoe witnesses in terms of wear and tear, or as Hester states 'keeping her young on the inside' if not the outside, presents an alternative body aesthetic where the body that rides, like the practice of riding, becomes not only an anchor of identity but a thing of beauty or value in and of itself.

Ethics review

Dona Davis and Sarah Dean (formally Cowles) received approval for research from the University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board as Exempt Level 2 in 2001. Anita Maurstad received approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services in 2011.

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NOTES

1 Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007: 115) write eloquently about the 'corporeal realities' or 'sensory elements' associated with the practice of sports. Since we write, at length, elsewhere about the sensorium of equestrian activities in terms of emplacement, somatic modes of attention, and emotion as they affect the pairings of horse and rider, we do not go into them here (Davis, Maurstad and Cowles 2013; Davis, Maurstad and Dean 2015; Maurstad, Davis and Cowles 2013; Maurstad, Davis and Dean 2015). Suffice it to say that aside from issues describe in this paper, sensory elements are similarly expressed in the narratives of riders of all ages.

2 Broadly defined, sport is a form of organised play – a game-like activity, having rules and a competitive element. It involves competition of two or more sides and criteria for determining a winner based on rules. Sports include elements of physical skill, strategy and chance (Blanchard 1995, 2002; Sands 1999).

3 Bourdieu (1978) would term riding as a sport of the privileged classes. In such sports the age limits extend far beyond youth. Although we do not deny the elitism of equestrian sports (Latimer and Birke 2009; Rose 1990), our sampling of informants draws from a largely middle-class and working-class population.

4 According to Blanchard (2002), modern people use sport for pleasure and to perfect the human body, whereas in pre-state societies it is adapted for survival and defence.

5 Contributors to their volume approach the body in a post-structural sense of meaning and body image, but also engage issues of how differential power relations may mould or constrain various women's sporting experiences (Bolin and Granskog 2003*a*, 2003*b*).

6 Discrimination against women's participation in equine sports has been a topic of analysis in a small number of studies that tend to feature a particular co-ed sport, like women jockeys in Sweden (Hedenborg 2007) and Brazil (Adelman and Moraes 2008), harness racers in the USA (Larsen 2011) and elite show jumpers from Brazil (Adelman and Moraes 2008).

7 Gilbert and Gillett (2011) write about the breeding of sports ponies for riders who want a companionable relationship with their horse.

8 An archaeologist, Kristen Armstrong Oma (2010: 82), uses the phrase 'shared life space' to refer to the intimate physical proximity of Bronze Age Scandinavian farmers with their livestock. With apologies to Kristen, we use the term in a more temporal sense, as shared lifetimes.

9 Overall, we recorded more than 60 interviews, 12 from Norway and the rest from the Midwestern USA. Although we also interviewed men – eight men and 16 women younger than 40, older women are the focus of this paper. Participation of women aged 50 and older in these sports is not uncommon and rates are growing. Included here from this sample are two in the forties age group (Halla and Aurora), eight in their fifties (Lara, Eve, DeeDee, Urdur, Black Bear, Nell, Sophia and Lee), six in their sixties (Skye, Hester, Krusty, Bonnie, Judy and Katie) and one woman in her seventies (HotShoeSue). Ageing begins to enter as a theme in the narrative of two of the ten women in our sample who are in their fourth decade. At age 50 and above, ageing becomes a central theme of all narratives.

10 Dressage riders perform a series of prescribed movements, including gait transitions, in a fenced arena. In this sport, participants and judges highly value the appearance of an effort-free rider with a horse willingly performing the requested movements. In eventing, horse and rider perform with stamina and

toughness in three disciplines: dressage, show-jumping and cross country, the latter being the segment that defines the sport. Endurance riding is travelling long-distance on horseback over diverse terrains, where enduring distance, ground and weather is what defines both horse and rider. Gaited riding is a particular sport for Icelandic horses and their riders; in addition to the walk, trot and canter, the Icelandic horse also does *tölt* and pace. Gaming includes barrel racing, pole bending and keyholes, all timed events, making speed important.

11 In this paper, apart from the largely overlapping themes of resistance, rejuvenation and acceptance, we focus on patterns and commonalities among equestrian women. Elsewhere, we explore how types of equestrian sport, terrains ridden over and nationalities (Norwegian and American) effect differences in the experience of horse–human relationships (*see* Note 1).

12 Our informants chose pseudonyms for anonymity, and keeping with this privacy we have not included their horses' names.

13 Similarly, Edie in her sixties, 'Absolutely, without a doubt' plans to ride for the next decade or more. She says that the only thing that would stop her would be a crippling accident. Lee says it this way, 'It's been a great sport to be involved in, and I can't imagine not being involved. Even to the point where I can't ride. I can't imagine not still coming to these rides and just being there and doing something.'

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