



Accomplished African American equestrian speaks up.

Young dressage professional Genay Vaughn shares her perspective on Black Lives Matter and how it relates to equestrian sports and individual responsibilities and opportunities. Genay is the assistant trainer at her family's Starr Vaughn Equestrian Center in the Sacramento area's Elk Grove. USDF Gold, Silver and Bronze medals are among her accomplishments.

Q: In the overall Black Lives Matter movement, how important is diversity in equestrian sport? Why does it matter? How do the two connect?

I consider myself fortunate to be a member of the international community of dressage. I've heard criticism lately about how elitist equestrian sport is, because of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and racial injustices and prejudice in the United States. These conversations are happening all around the world right now, with 20 countries taking to the streets to show their support for black people. Equestrian sports should welcome conversations like these, because we have an opportunity to distinguish ourselves in the sports world as a community that embraces diversity and provides opportunity to experience all that equine culture has to offer. Equestrian sport is about the high-performance connection between humans and animals, and, like our horses, that connection knows no color.

Q: Compared to the general world, how much systemic racism have you experienced in the horse world?

In my experience, and I can only speak for myself, I have not personally experienced overt racism in my sport. However, we must acknowledge that racial bias is an unfortunate part of the history of equestrian sport.



For example, when horse racing saw its height in America at the end of the 19th century, 13 out of 15 of the top jockeys were African American. The ability to make a significant earning as a jockey led more white athletes to enter the sport. Around this time, at the dawn of the Jim Crow era, institutionalized racism crept into the world of horse racing. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled with the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision that segregation was legal. Due to that ruling, white jockeys during the 1900 racing season used intimidation tactics to keep black jockeys from competing. Even though the Supreme Court overturned the 1896 decision in 1954 with Brown v. Board of Education, the U.S. did not see another black jockey in the top level of competitors until 2000.

It is hard to discuss issues of race without discussing the intersection of race and class. As a biracial African American athlete, I was fortunate to be exposed to the sport and to have the opportunity to participate. Equestrian sport is expensive, by its very nature, and so it is inherently exclusive and predominantly accessible to those who can afford to participate. An athlete who doesn't own a horse needs to have access to one, and to have the opportunity to be near a place where one can train, usually some place that has land.

Although I personally have not experienced overt racism, I have witnessed looks of surprise when others come to find that I am a rider and not a groom at competitions. In other similar sports, athletes at the height of their career have spoken publicly about more overt forms of racism. In tennis, black athletes such as Serena Williams have experienced mistreatment by fellow athletes, fans, and commentators for their race and have spoken about it in interviews. And such stories are commonplace in other exclusive sports. Lewis Hamilton has spoken about

his disappointment that the Formula One community did not condemn racial inequality at a time when so many other sports organizations like the NFL and NASCAR have.



The truth is, as a person of color, when you walk into the room, even if you walk in wearing the uniform that communicates that you're there to compete, people will see you differently. This is even more so if you're black and you're really good, because you are defying expectations of what black people can do. We are an affront to some people's limited world view. Such a sentiment has no place in an international sport, where the goal should always be to respect one another, no matter our color, our culture, or what country we call home.

Q: What can equestrians of all colors do better?

I think it's great we're having these kinds of conversations, because it is a necessary first step to taking action. This is what BLM is all about. Dressage is an international community, and we have a particular interest in valuing social equity and fairness. Two words that come to mind are exposure and opportunity.

Exposure means knowing what the sport is. Opportunity means having the chance to pursue the sport, something my family afforded me. In other words, if you never encounter the ocean, or pond, or pool, how would you ever learn how to swim? There are opportunities out there that provide exposure and equitable access to horse riding, but there could be more. Things like scholarships, after school programs, and equine-assisted therapy, are ways in which equestrian organizations have already worked to create a more inclusive community.

One premier example is the equestrian leader Lezlie Hiner, who founded the polo organization Work to Ride in 1994. Work to Ride exposes inner city kids of West Philadelphia to polo. These are kids who have never previously had the opportunity to ride a horse, let alone compete in polo. What's even more incredible is that they have turned out stars, simply by providing the exposure and opportunity to learn and enjoy the sport.

The BLM movement is a call to action for individuals as well as organizations. It challenges us all to be better. Now is the time for the equestrian community to seize the opportunity to distinguish ourselves, by working harder to provide more exposure for those who would not otherwise be able to enjoy horses. Inclusion is an important value on its face, but if people are unclear why it is not only the right thing to do but also the smart thing to do, one need only look to the work of economist Scott E. Page, or all the moves Fortune 500 companies and educational institutions are making on this front. Our most profitable corporations and brightest universities have recognized the value in enacting institutional change. This is not just because of BLM, as research shows organizations perform better with a more diverse makeup. BLM is a catalyst to necessary progress.

The sky is really the limit for what we can do when we put our minds to it and commit to inclusion as a common value.