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Constructing Equestrian Elites: Resource Inequality, Symbolic Capital, and Symbolic Closure

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Abstract

This paper investigates how elite status is constructed, legitimated, and reproduced within the field of endurance horse-riding, a culturally prestigious and resource-intensive sport. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, field, and symbolic power, the study examines the dynamic interactions between riders and stable owners in shaping reputational hierarchies. Using mixed-methods data—including a survey of 59 riders and interviews with stable owners and staff at four European equestrian facilities—the study reveals how access to elite status is contingent not only on performance, but on ownership of horses, informal networks, and alignment with industry-specific tastes and norms. Findings show that stable owners selectively allocate resources and visibility to riders who reinforce their brand, while riders convert symbolic endorsements into opportunities for competition and social capital. Lower-ranked riders frequently report being excluded from these networks, often lacking the cultural fluency and social connections required to advance. These processes produce a form of symbolic closure, whereby prestige is naturalized through informal mechanisms rather than formal criteria. By highlighting the co-production of symbolic capital and the reproduction of inequality through non-meritocratic channels, the paper contributes to broader sociological debates on elite formation, cultural distinction, and the legitimization of privilege in contemporary sporting fields.

Keywords: Elite Reproduction; Informal Networks; Symbolic Capital; Symbolic Closure