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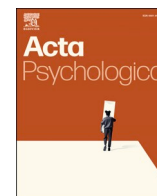
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# The next hurdle – Female jockeys, motherhood and the horse racing industry

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist sport researchers examine the unique experiences of female athletes as crucial in promoting women's sport participation and parity in opportunities (Lebel et al., 2021). Insight into the unique stressors encountered by female jockeys in Ireland (Irl) and the United Kingdom (UK) may provide sport scientists, practitioners and policy makers with a greater awareness of the specific supports they need (Losty & Sreenivas, 2023). Deeply personal and complex decisions for female athletes, such as starting a family, can be shaped by various professional performance factors. The impact of becoming a mother while competing in sport and horseracing has had limited consideration, when sport psychologists and relevant governing bodies are required to assist athletes with personal, performance and transition issues. So, it is crucial that the field is responsive to the needs of jockeys who either have children or are contemplating pregnancy and parenthood (Losty & Sreenivas, 2023; Lebel et al., 2021). Using a constructivist-interpretivist approach, the current research explored the thoughts of 10 female jockeys in Irl and the UK about their prospect of combining motherhood and horseracing. Analysing their responses to a semi-structured interview using a reflexive thematic analysis identified three major themes: Racing and motherhood, Injury and motherhood, and Lacking role models. These themes project the concerns of female jockeys in Irl and the UK, and the complexities of navigating their career and starting a family, highlighting the need for robust safeguarding frameworks from relevant governing bodies and a more nuanced support for female jockeys.

## 1. Introduction

Horseracing is a sport that can be challenging psychologically and physically (Cullen et al., 2015). King et al. (2021) examined psychological distress including depression, generalised anxiety, and harmful alcohol use, and found that nearly 80 % of jockeys in Ireland met the level for at least one mental health disorder (MHD). The physical challenges linked to professional performance can influence jockey's life and career choices (Dolan et al., 2011; Landolt et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2014). Such professional pressures are specifically noted by female athletes. Wilkins et al. (2024) reported themes of *Pressure of expectations* and *Comparative disadvantages*, revealing the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by elite, student-athlete women in Ireland (Irl) and the United Kingdom (UK). The *Lack of representation in sport* for women athletes was also a singular theme from this study.

Female voices are underrepresented in sport literature and athlete-mothers constitute a fraction of that research (Anderson et al., 2023;

Tekavc et al., 2020; Zahl Marken et al., 2025). More female athletes are combining their elite careers with motherhood, however for many, pregnancy and motherhood is often cited as one of the main reasons for leaving their sport (McGregor et al., 2023). Female athletes have expressed a societal narrative that women must decide between being an elite athlete or a parent (Davenport et al., 2023; Pascoe et al., 2022). Studies on pregnancy and motherhood in elite athletes are under-researched yet gaining traction. McGregor et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review of experiences of elite female athletes concerning pregnancy and motherhood, which identified, 13 papers between 2001 and 2014 that increased to 27 between 2014 and 2022. There were no papers identified prior to 2001, according to McGregor et al. (2023). Similar findings were corroborated in a review which found 17 out of 22 studies on the barriers and enablers influencing female athletes returning to sport were published after 2011 (Tighe et al., 2023).

The emerging evidence, albeit limited, is portraying a picture of complexities unique to women in sports. Massey and Whitehead (2022)

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presented case studies of two elite athletes transitioning through pregnancy into motherhood highlighting change in athlete identity relating to physical and mental capacity. Changing perceptions of identity as an athlete may be influenced by the masculine model of work, where men's work trajectories and bodies are implicitly regarded as the norm (Clayton-Hathway & Stumbitz, 2020; Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022). Therefore, the impact of having children is a topic that women in sport are reluctant to discuss because of the fear of adverse effects of others' perceptions of them (Clayton-Hathway & Stumbitz, 2020). Similarly, having a child while being a jockey is often a topic which is avoided in horse racing or viewed as a 'feminine' issue (Clayton-Hathway & Stumbitz, 2020). There is a need for more research exploring Irish and United Kingdom based female jockeys and parenthood, and the above research highlighted the niche but critical area of the intersection of motherhood and full-time female athletes, with female jockeys as the focal point.

## 2. Female jockey specific challenges

### 2.1. Gender based barriers for female jockeys

Limited research exists which examines female jockeys' opportunities to ride compared to male jockeys, however Velija and Flynn (2010) identified that female jockeys are generally accepting of their inferior position within horseracing, as industry perceives male jockeys as superior and endure stereotypes of gender. Hedenborg (2015) highlighted that men and masculinity is historically connected to horseracing and equestrian sports and noted that females or female gender performance issues are absent within these traditional narratives reinforcing gender order within the equine sector. Even though structural and organisational changes have allowed women to be approved for licenses to ride, train, and compete along with males (Velija & Flynn, 2010), this does not appear to have changed the general outlooks or opportunities for female jockeys (Binder et al., 2021). Horseracing is an industry which has been male domineered historically and continues to be reluctant in providing equal opportunities for female jockeys (Cashmore et al., 2022; Losty & Sreenivas, 2023). Wagering literature such as Cashmore et al. (2022) explored racing data over 20 years to estimate the effect of jockey gender on fixed price betting odds and found that there was a continuous underestimation of female jockeys in both wins and placing in races. These findings suggest a strong and continuing prevalence of masculine model within horseracing industry. Despite entering the male dominated industry, female jockeys lack parity in support, opportunities, representation and provisions in comparison to their male counterparts (Clayton-Hathway & Manfredi, 2017). Feminist discourse highlights that the notion of women possessing the ability to be 'as men' is clearly inadequate (Bjork-Billings, 2012). The equal opportunity strategy UK (see British Horse Racing (BHA) Diversity and Inclusion Plan, 2018) which identified supporting and promoting opportunities for female jockeys strive to enable and promote female jockeys but not effectively enabling their equal participation in horseracing opportunities (Bjork-Billings, 2012; Losty & Sreenivas, 2023).

### 2.2. Perceived weakness in female jockeys

The preference for male jockeys over female jockeys appears to be maintained by the perception of weakness (physical and mental) in females (Butler & Charles, 2012; Clayton-Hathway & Manfredi, 2017). Roberts and MacLean (2012) interviewed six UK based women within the horseracing industry and Losty and Sreenivas (2023) interviewed 10 jockeys located in both Irl and the UK. Both studies highlighted themes that woman faced prejudice in horseracing in relation to three main factors, their physical power, body shape, and the masculine gender tradition rooted within the horseracing industry. Bjork-Billings (2012) discussed that existence of women as jockeys poses a challenge to the

well-established and entrenched culturally determined ideas of 'maleness' and 'femininity' which perpetuates criticism and resistance to women's involvement in horseracing. For female jockeys, this is a dilemma as they are often perceived as less capable workers through the persistence of modernist binary division that link males with higher levels of physical hardness and mental resilience, and females' as physically weaker and more mentally fragile (Bjork-Billings, 2012; Butler & Charles, 2012). Gender-based stereotyping continues to be prevalent in society and this builds barriers for female jockeys in planning their lives alongside their career. The barriers within the industry that may have originated from long-standing policies and practices catered for a male-domineering industry as well as those driven by social perceptions of gender-based roles continues to limit accessibility and support for female jockeys, which in turn limits their representation in practice and research. This is especially pertinent when it comes to empirical evidence on the support for female jockeys in considering motherhood.

## 3. Cultural and environment barriers to parenting for women

### 3.1. Barriers for females in sports

Sundgot-Borgen et al. (2019) studied elite national and international athletes and Forstmann et al. (2022) researched elite female marathon runners and found that the athletes described their performance level as improved or was the same, after becoming mothers. Both studies highlighted that the participants did not receive adequate support and physiological information regarding returning to training post pregnancy. This was specifically identified by Sundgot-Borgen et al. (2019) showcasing elite athletes who had given birth were able to return to training 0–6 weeks after giving birth, but they were not happy with the post-partum specific training/exercise advice received. Even non-pregnant elite athletes aged 28 and older perceived challenges to becoming a parent to be multifaceted; comprising personal, physical, financial, and organisational challenges related to planning a pregnancy (Dietz et al., 2022). Davenport et al. (2024) noted that the perspectives of athletes who wish to have children but are resigned to not trying due to the perceived challenges faced as elite athletes is due to an under-represented voice. Reflecting this concern, a narrative review highlighted female athletes as more likely to end their careers due to family-related matters than male athletes (Pascoe et al., 2022). This evidence base clearly demonstrates a lack of appropriate support for female athletes for maternity and returning to work.

Forstmann et al. (2023) noted that maternity leave does not have significant impact on performance development of female marathon runners, and that some of the world's most competitive marathoners can still perform at their highest level after pregnancy. There is also evidence to suggest athletes being better disciplined with training conditions, and emotional states post pregnancy (Martinez-Pascual et al., 2014). The planning management implied by motherhood could contribute to better performance when it consists of optimisation of their training time in quantity and quality. Pascoe et al. (2022) highlighted that the information for athletes who return to sport following childbirth is sparse and requires further research. Slovene elite female athletes (all who competed at world championships) compared the re-entry process to their sport post childbirth to the re-entry following an injury, with both requiring a high level of mental strength (Tekavc et al., 2020). This demonstrates the process of returning to work is especially arduous for women in sport, clearly highlighting inadequate support provided within the industry, which may be sustained with a lack of female athletes who combines motherhood with professional sport. Pascoe et al. (2022) identified the importance of national sporting organisations to champion role models who became pregnant and returned to elite sport, parallel to developing supportive networks including teammates and coaches.

### 3.2. Barriers for females in horseracing

Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) discussed the widespread perception within the horseracing industry that some positions in the horseracing business do not accommodate or permit women to have both a family and a horseracing profession. They noted a lack of workplace flexibility and long working hours contributing to stressors experienced by female jockeys. McConn-Palfreyman et al. (2019) examined the working hours of jockeys and staff in the horseracing industry and reported that 26 % of horseracing industry workers stated working 12 h+ per day. Interestingly, McConn-Palfreyman et al. (2019) also noted that when a staff member returned from maternity leave, they were often not supported with flexible work practices. Clayton-Hathway and Manfredi (2017) had also identified that long travel, lack of a stable income, long working hours and absences of maternity pay contributed to discouraging women in horseracing and female jockeys to not have a family.

### 4. Sports injuries

Regarding sports injuries, female athletes have been found to have lower rates of return to sports compared with male athletes (Lin et al., 2018). Twelve (5 men and 7 women) elite track- and field-athletes who represented the UK completed semi-structured interviews and reported concerns related to injury. Participants had been competing on average for 10 years and ranged in performance experience from Great British Junior level to World Championship and Olympic Games standard in athletics. The participants described concerns of being not capable to participate or perform due to injury, rumination regarding injury and fear of re-injury (McKay et al., 2008). McKay et al. (2008) also discussed that injured athletes reported worries around the failure to regain pre-injury fitness levels, concerns regarding loss of form, and internal and external pressures (Evans et al., 2012). Athletes who are injured are more prone to describe depressive indicators than those who are not injured (Wolanin et al., 2015).

Horseracing is often regarded as a perilous sport that reports a high percentage of falls and injuries (O'Connor et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2021). Internationally, in professional flat racing, there are a reported 1.6 to 4.4 falls and 0.5 to 1.8 injuries for every 1000 race rides (Hitchens et al., 2019). The number of falls and injuries is noticeably higher in national hunt racing (jumps racing), with 47.4 to 91.4 falls and 5.1 to 14.7 injuries per 1000 race rides (Hitchens et al., 2019). For jockeys, significant life changing injury is a genuine risk of their occupation (O'Connor et al., 2021) and therefore a significant competitive stressor (King et al., 2021).

The greater incidence of injury can also shorten the career length of jockeys. Legg et al. (2020, b) identified that the average longevity of a jockey's career is three years. In comparison, jockeys who have had more opportunity to ride in horse races (race ride), had on average longer careers (Legg, Cochrane, Gee, & Rogers, 2020). This is significant for female jockeys who have less opportunity to race ride compared to male jockeys (Cashmore et al., 2022). Legg, Cochrane, Bolwell, et al. (2020) discussed that national hunt jockeys in races, fall 50–100 times more than flat jockeys. Flat jockeys generally fall once every 10–20 races approximately (Legg, Cochrane, Bolwell, et al., 2020).

### 5. Exploring existing evidence of industry support for women in sport

Various barriers discussed above impact females within the respective sporting industries differently. Some aspects such as training, welfare support, and health and safety measures to mitigate injuries and related barriers may be available within the working environment, but these will need to be adapted for female specific needs including maternity and childcare support to ensure adequate support for them. So, there is a need to reconfigure the current policies and guidelines to offer

an inclusive work environment for women.

In comparison to the horseracing industry, some sports have developed specific pregnancy policies. Sport Ireland introduced a maternity policy for athletes on the International Carding Scheme in 2020 (Sport Ireland, 2020). This policy guarantees 12 months of financial support during pregnancy, with an additional six months post-partum (SportIreland, n.d.). Rugby Football Union (RFU) introduced a maternity policy in 2023, offering England women's rugby players 26 weeks of full-paid maternity leave (UK Sport, 2023). The RFU policy also accommodates bringing infants to training camps with a caregiver and covers associated travel and accommodation costs for both (UK Sport, 2023). These progressive policies reflect a developing recognition of the need to support female high-performance athletes through pregnancy and motherhood, ensuring they can continue to pursue their sporting careers without compromising their family aspirations.

Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) discussed that conversations in horseracing regarding family and parenting has been slower to change compared to other sports and industries. The horseracing industry has been described as 'overly traditional and conservative' (Clayton-Hathway & Manfredi, 2017, p5). They highlight the issues of parenting are not openly discussed as they are perceived as unmentionable and off-limits, and this can add to a narrow-mindedness towards normal life events such as pregnancy, maternity leave, and childcare. Of noteworthy, Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) also found that combining riding as a jockey and motherhood was seen as an impossible task, and that the lack of support to help female jockeys to return and stay in the industry following pregnancy and maternity was felt to be a disadvantage. It is clear that there is a need to focus on the issues faced by female jockeys with the aim to reimagine the support offered to female jockeys with a relevant framework to redesign current policies and guidelines to be inclusive. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to identify the experiences of female jockeys in relation to pregnancy and motherhood. By doing so, the findings from this study could raise awareness of the specific issues and concerns of female jockeys among practitioners and policymakers.

### 6. Methodology

The current research focus on the quality and meaning of knowledge produced through exploring the experience of female jockeys pursuing their career. The interpretations of those experiences were explored through a constructivist's lens. Constructivist ontology conceptualises that meaning is actively constructed through individual's own notions of reality through their cognition (Schwandt, 1994). This philosophical paradigm emphasis that meaning exists as multifaceted with multiple realities through a multilayered and diverse subjective life experiences of individual and recognises that simple rationalisations are inappropriate and insufficient to fully capture meaning of lived experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). On this basis, current research maintains an interpretivist epistemological position and use an inductive process to capture and construct meaning for the phenomenon of pursuing a career as a female jockey through their own narrations of lived experiences while also acknowledging that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants (Peggy, 2023; Tashakkori et al., 2021).

The philosophical underpinning of co-construction of knowledge is based on critical realism that distinguishes between the 'real' world and the 'observable' world. Critical realism proposes a transcendental reality that operates independently of individuals' awareness and seeks to explain observed phenomena through processes of inference (Stutchbury, 2021). Plurality of inferences through co-construction of knowledge juxtaposes interpretations of participants and the researcher (Eide, 2012). There is also the aspect of empathy for the jockeys and their experiences that posed a risk of bias through researcher's interpretation. The viewpoint of the researcher may infiltrate the results and damage the credibility of the study (Kyngäs et al., 2019). The use of "bracketing out" and "bracketing in" offered a framework to ensure that

the data was unprejudiced so that it can be precisely described and understood (Callary et al., 2015; Dowling, 2007; Winter & Collins, 2014). Martinez-Pascual et al. (2016) established bracketing to document the author's beliefs beforehand relative to the research question, their chosen participants and their beliefs regarding women in sport. The other bracketing condition is the unstructured interview, and the current study uses this approach. A reflexive journal kept throughout the process helped to document preconceived thoughts and highlight potential bias ensuring trustworthiness (Winter & Collins, 2014).

The approach undertaken in the current research involved a qualitative study which used semi-structured interviews to add to the limited knowledge about the experiences of female jockeys pursuing their careers and how that influences their perceptions on pregnancy and motherhood. The following research question explored within this study. What are Irish and United Kingdom based female jockey's thoughts on combining motherhood and horseracing? The semi-structured interview aimed to explore the study question and establish the conditions that allow for discussion and elicit the type of rich qualitative data to be described (Bearman, 2019).

7. Method

7.1. Participants

UK and Irish female national hunt and flat racing jockeys who were over 18 and held a racing licence for over one year were invited to take part in the research. Participants were recruited via text messages sent by the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB) and the British Horseracing Authority (BHA). Jockeys were asked to contact the researcher to volunteer for the research. Snowballing was endorsed by encouraging participants who had agreed to participate to recommend other jockeys who fitted the inclusion criteria (Robson, 2024). Female jockeys who held a licence for less than one year were deemed unsuitable due to their lack of experience within the racing industry. The interview process proceeded until data saturation was achieved, ensuring the comprehensiveness of the findings. Ten jockeys took part in the present study. Due to the small number of female jockeys who race ride, the exact riding background and experience of the jockeys has been withheld to protect identification of the individual participants. This study received full ethical approval from the university research ethics committee (Table 1).

7.2. Procedure

Interviews were deemed the most suitable and appropriate method of data collection. Due to ongoing Covid 19 restrictions jockeys were requested to take part in a semi-structured interview via Zoom. The interviews lasted approximately 30 min. Interviews were semi-structured in nature which gave the female jockeys openness to detail and elaborate their ideas and to accumulate rich data (Smith et al., 2014). Probing strategies were used throughout which resulted in more

detailed, rich descriptions from the participants. The researcher is an experienced interviewer and chartered psychologist and responded sensitively to participants experiences during the interview. The researcher also recognised when the participants avoided talking about certain issues, started to feel uncomfortable, became embarrassed, or become very emotive, and took necessary steps to ensure participant wellbeing. The participants were able to take as much time as they needed to answer each individual question and there was dialogue between both parties with the aim of gaining as much valuable information relating to each topic as was possible. Participants had the opportunity to stop the interview at any time, should they wish. Participants were also made aware of the option to withdraw their data from the study before the data was anonymised, this date for which was provided to each participant.

7.3. Interview guide development

Data was handled in accordance with the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) (2022) Guidelines for Confidentiality and Record Keeping. An adaptable and flexible style was employed to guarantee conversational flow. The interview guide was developed based on prior research into jockeys' mental health and lifestyle challenges (King et al., 2021; Noblet & Gifford, 2002). Initially, to establish connection, participants were asked to talk about how they became involved in horseracing and their career to date. Questions explored the jockey's thoughts on motherhood and combing it with being a jockey.

7.4. Data analysis

Following transcription of the interviews by the researcher, member checking was conducted by providing participants with a copy of their transcript to maintain rigor (Winter & Collins, 2014). No changes were made by the participants. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to deliver a comprehensive evaluation of the qualitative data and investigate the practices, meanings, and experience of the female jockeys (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2022b). The six-stages of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) were utilised to review the data. The stages discussed below describe a systematic attempt to analyse the data, however the analysis was creative and recursive, where different stages often intersected with another stage.

Each transcript was read several times to familiarise with the data. The researcher also listened back to the audio of the interviews to confirm that the transcripts were correct. During this time the researcher also noted any initial trends between the data sets. The researcher noted breaks and pauses and the tone of the participant and researcher during the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These pauses and gaps provided a richer understanding such as an emotional response to a question or a hesitation in discussing specific issues. Semantic coding of the transcripts was conducted by reviewing the transcripts line by line. Sections of text were highlighted with a marker, short word or a line written alongside it, and notes/post it notes were written alongside the text. This aided in generating initial codes. Generated codes were inputted into a Word document to gather, collect, organise and structure the data. Unlike other forms of thematic analysis, reflective thematic analysis there is no codebook, instead researchers develop codes as they work through the data. To initiate the search for themes, codes were then inputted into an Excel spreadsheet (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Repeating and broader themes were then explored. Exploring and generating themes was ascribed to "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The themes were reviewed and refined and revised again, with some original themes combined into broader themes or deleted. Themes were reviewed and re-read to make sure the theme depicted matched the nature of the coded data. The researcher utilised the read aloud function on Microsoft Word, while reviewing the transcripts with the notes and

**Table 1**  
Participant descriptions with licence type and number of years with racing experience.

	Licence held	Years in racing
Participant 1	Amateur	10+
Participant 2	Professional	10+
Participant 3	Amateur	10+
Participant 4	Amateur	10+
Participant 5	Amateur	10+
Participant 6	Amateur	5–10
Participant 7	Amateur	1–4
Participant 8	Professional	1–4
Participant 9	Amateur	5–10
Participant 10	Professional	5–10



themes at hand. An overarching thematic map was designed highlighting higher-order and lower-order themes. This aided the researcher to visualise and interpret the data. The researcher then took time and reflected away from the data and engaged with a critical friend to review the themes. Reflexive thematic analysis involves a more organic and iterative development of themes. The researcher continuously reflects on their role in the research process and how their own experiences and views may impact the analysis. A reflective journal was also used to promote persistent reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2022b) and notes were jotted into this journal and discussed with the research supervisor. Reflection was ongoing until the themes were finalised. Thematic analysis identified themes which were then defined and reflected on again.

## 8. Results and discussion

The thematic analysis showed three major themes and four sub-themes relating to motherhood, as noted in Fig. 1. Overall, the themes identified by the participants included racing and motherhood (cannot mix racing with motherhood, only consider motherhood when career was finished), injury and motherhood (being pregnant is like being injured, risks are too high), and lacking role models are discussed below. The results and discussion are structured following the theme and sub-themes outlined in Fig. 1.

### 8.1. Racing and motherhood

Female athletes are often reluctant to discuss having children or reflecting on motherhood, which appears to be sensitive topic (McGannon et al., 2018). Of the 10 jockeys interviewed, only one jockey was a mother. Despite only one participant having a first-hand experience of motherhood as well as managing work-life balance, the cohort reflected on their thoughts on planning motherhood and horseracing career. The safe space within the research context, assurance of confidentiality, and the female interviewer potentially perceived as empathic to the topic, may have facilitated the open and honest discussion on this sensitive topic. Typically, there is a reluctance to discuss having children or motherhood within their work environment, as athletes and jockeys reported that having children would adversely affect their career and how they are perceived by others (Clayton-Hathway & Stumbitz, 2020). Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) also reported that there is a perceived reluctance within the horseracing community to change things and there is an ‘old school mind set’ in the broader racing community in relation to parenting.

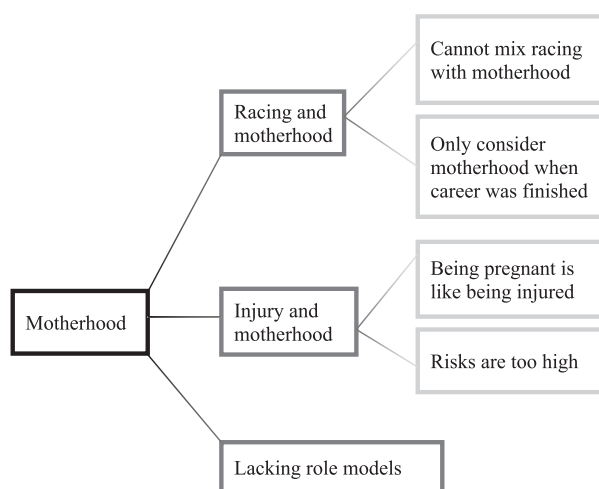


Fig. 1. Major- and sub-themes relating to female jockeys' experiences and perception of motherhood.

### 8.2. Cannot mix racing with motherhood

Overall, the attitude within the horseracing industry and the lack of supportive policy made it difficult for the female jockeys to contemplate starting a family. The participants identified that staying in the horseracing industry took precedence over having a family, as combining both was not possible. The participants emphasised that motherhood is incompatible with the high-performance expectations placed on jockeys, and it was simply a choice of a career in horseracing or being a mother, and they could not be combined. There is also an acknowledgement that the priorities can differ with different phases in life, such as career takes precedence when they may ‘have one of the best jobs’, which also alludes to changing priorities with different circumstances. These observations are consistent with the findings reported by Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) and the unfortunate persistence of environmental factors forcing a choice between motherhood or jockey career continues to the present.

*“I feel like it's a chapter in my life riding as a jockey and being a mother is another chapter. And I just can't see how the two would work. I can't see how you can be a mother. How are you going to take time off because you're pregnant and try and get back to where you were. And not at the level that I'm...I've one of best jobs in the country now. I can't expect to leave that because I'm pregnant and walk back into it again, it's not how it works in racing.”*

(Participant 2)

*“yeah you can't come back to be where you were. It's not like you leave an office job for 9 months.”*

(Participant 8)

This insight also indicates that this participant's dedication and time required to stay relevant and staying in horseracing are so intense that they cannot be reconciled with starting, planning for or combining with parenthood. At the time of conducting this research, participant seven was a mother, and she offered some unique insights into managing being a jockey, a mother and navigating motherhood alongside her professional identity. This quote from Participant 7 highlights the ongoing personal and professional adjustments faced by female jockeys returning to work after becoming mothers.

*“So, I can't be all in like I was, and that's ok too. She's only 15 months, so I'm still trying to find that balance...So it's an adjustment. I did struggle, especially after I first had her. Just the transition into motherhood. I'm still working on it to be honest.”*

(Participant 7)

The above quote demonstrates the need for support for female jockeys who are transitioning from being a mother to returning to racing. The phrase “I can't be all in like I was” suggests a shift in priorities and capacity — likely referring to the intense, all-consuming commitment often required in horse racing. Her acknowledgment of “still trying to find that balance” and “still working on it” underscores that this is not a one-time transition, but a continuous process of renegotiating personal and professional identity and responsibilities. This highlights the need for more structural and emotional support during the postnatal period for female athletes, particularly in male-dominated sports like horse racing. Massey and Whitehead (2022) highlighted the unique transitional experience of elite athletes into motherhood and back, and the need for support to renegotiate the coexistence of both, which rings true with the experience of Participant 7. Challenging experiences of the few female jockeys who decide to have children alongside their career, could influence other women in the field. Other jockeys interviewed in this study also clarified that they could not see how it would be possible to mix motherhood and racing and deferred making the decision about starting a family due to racing. As the racing industry is traditionally a masculine environment (Cashmore et al., 2022; Hedenborg, 2015; Losty & Sreenivas, 2023; Roberts & MacLean, 2012), motherhood and having a

family may even feel misplaced by the female jockeys themselves as evidenced in the quotes below.

*"I mean if you want a baby have a baby. It's just a long time to be gone for, isn't it, and you'd be worried that if you weren't valuable enough, you'd be missing out and someone else would come along and take your cake. So, you want to say yes because you can't stop someone from doing what they want to do, can you. But then obviously you've really got to think about what it's going to do to your career, like you might not come back and be able to ride all these horses that you usually ride. Because they'd be like, oh she's going to ride way more negatively because she doesn't want to hurt herself. I think that's a massive thing"*

(Participant, 8)

*"I suppose I probably would be more like, because it is such a hands-on job and you're like, the more you want to do well, like you're going to have to do more hours, put more work in. So that would be hard with a family, I suppose. I know this sounds bad, but for a lad is easier to get away from the family I think than a mother."*

(Participant, 1)

The perceived barriers to motherhood appear to be multifaceted. Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) discussed the 'motherhood penalty' in monetary terms when working hours are lost due to maternity and childcare post-partum. Additional to that, they also discuss the issues surrounding work-life balance when flexible working is offered as a 'panacea' but highlighted that mothers often 'buy flexibility' by working below their potential, and foregoing career opportunities, highlighting the complexity of this multifaceted matter. The above quote also reflects a fear of perceived change motherhood could bring about in the individual and their career-focus. Massey and Whitehead (2022) also reported the concerns of elite athletes about their changing identity from an athlete to mother. The fear of change noted in the present study and resultant decision to avoid or defer motherhood appears to portray fear avoidance behaviour (Tito et al., 2023). Although the fear avoidance model is typically in relation to physical pain, here the model relates to fear of perceived identity/career altering change as well as changing abilities relating to physical changes through pregnancy. Perceived fear and avoidance is based on participants' observations of others, rather than their own personal experiences. Since the experiences shared by participants relates to their observation of others' experiences that reflect on their perceptions of own potential risk to career or physical changes. Zahl Marken et al. (2025) also reports how previously having a child while competing in elite sports often meant retirement, as few women had successfully returned to sports afterward, which explains the concerns of participants in this study. The interesting aspect is that participants are anticipating changes to their own career through the observation of changing career-life trajectory of others and have clearly established fear-avoidance beliefs through this vicarious observational learning. Regardless of whether the experience of fear of change in identity/career is direct or vicarious, fear avoidance belief and the resultant behaviour to avoid or deter motherhood remain true to these participants.

### 8.3. Only consider motherhood when career was finished

The challenges of renegotiating the coexistence of motherhood and jockey career appear to be consistent with the highlights from Massey and Whitehead (2022). Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) also discussed motherhood vs career as a 'matter of choice' because mothers are often treated as non-ideal workers. The quote below reflects such conflicts and it is interesting to see the pragmatic solutions of aligning life plans against career timeline being made.

*"No, no, I would love to have a family in the future. But it's not something I will be doing when I'm still riding. When I have a child, I'll be finished. I know X came back and rode. But no, I feel like it's a different chapter for*

*me. And hopefully, it's obviously not ideal, because it's going to be in my late 30s. But yeah, my riding would be done."*

(Participant 2)

The choice of career over motherhood at a specific stage in life, could be reflecting the societal ideas of good parenting. Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) noted that working mothers are under constant pressure of having to comply with societal ideas of good parenting. They also point out the fact that even when women decide to be child-free, they must manage the societal marginalisation and stigma of being 'selfish' or 'less nurturing'.

Another concern appears to be the social construct of marriage as a premise to bearing children, which even triggers fear avoidance to marriage itself. Such perceived social pressures and related avoidance behaviours can be significant stressors for female jockeys at a personal and professional level. The below quote clearly relates to unspoken social contract within marriage to enter motherhood.

*"I really want kids, and I can't wait to be a mother. I hope I will be lucky enough to be a mother someday. But I will not even venture into it, or try not to venture into it, until I'm finished riding. And that's why I even say to (names partner) now, once we are married, he wants to have a baby. And I'm pushing out our wedding as far as I can. Because the minute we're married, it means a baby. And the minute I have a baby, I have to give up riding. And I'm not ready to do that. But I couldn't, there's no way I could have a baby at home and go out and ride on a 3-mile chase thinking about my baby at home. I couldn't do it."*

(Participant 3)

*"Maybe I will have a baby someday down the line, and finish riding and then decide, geez I'm actually not ready to finish riding I'm happy to go back racing. But right now I just couldn't see that happening."*

(Participant 2)

The quotes above echoes Pascoe et al. (2022) and Davenport et al. (2023) which highlighted that female athletes were more likely to end their careers or decided between their sport and becoming a parent. This disparity is often based in systemic issues within sport structures that fail to accommodate the realities of pregnancy, childcare, and the broader demands of motherhood. Findings from Pascoe et al. (2022) discussed that female athletes are not supported enough with regards to family planning and motherhood, and this is exacerbated by the lack of maternity policies within sport. Clayton-Hathway and Manfredi (2017) discussed that it was difficult for jockeys to re-enter horse-racing as there are no formal contracts for employment, and no structure to support female jockeys back to work. Their research also highlighted that potential employers are less likely to employ women with children in case they take further maternity leave in the future. Therefore, the introduction of clear, jockey-centred maternity policies like those now offered by Sport Ireland and the Rugby Football Union is essential for a change in addressing this imbalance. By providing both practical and financial support, these policies not only validate the dual identities of athlete and mother but also create a more equitable sporting environment that allows women to sustain longer, more fulfilling careers in elite sport as they choose.

### 8.4. Injury and motherhood

#### 8.4.1. Being pregnant is like being injured

The jockeys interviewed for this study identified many barriers to combining motherhood and being a jockey, and some felt the injury risk while being a parent was too high. Pregnancy was perceived as a risk of physical injury. In fact, this is a common theme noted by many of the jockeys comparing being pregnant as being out injured from racing. An extended absence from racing due to injury or pregnancy can make it challenging for jockeys to return to the sport and regain competitive The following quote highlights concerns regarding the physical demands of

pregnancy and motherhood, their impact on the female body, and the potential setbacks these may pose to a female jockey's relatively short career span. It also reflects the shifting priorities that can emerge at different life stages.

*"I can only imagine from what I do know, the changes that happen in your body are out of this world. And that would be worse, I would say, than having a bad injury."*

(Participant 8)

*Not possible, I believe that to an extent a short-lived career for a woman in the sense that you can't have a family life and be a mother doing what we do. Personally, for me, it's just so physically demanding that my body I don't think would play ball with all of that.*

(Participant, 7)

While participant 8 speaks hypothetically, their comparison positions pregnancy not only as physically taxing but as potentially more disruptive to a female jockey's body and career than a serious injury. In the context of horse racing, where injuries are common and typically understood within the framework of recovery, rehabilitation, and return to riding, equating pregnancy to an even more severe disruption reinforces how motherhood is viewed through a performance and injury lens. This comparison highlights a broader cultural perception in horse racing—where pregnancy is medicalised and problematised similarly to injury, rather than acknowledged as a natural life event. Furthermore, it underscores the implicit belief that pregnancy, like injury, removes the jockey from racing, and poses a threat to their career momentum, particularly given the physically demanding and time-sensitive nature of horse racing 'so physically demanding that my body I don't think would play ball with all of that.'

There are obvious concerns among female jockeys about the potential for physical injury and changes through pregnancy. Tekavc et al. (2020) also highlighted that the athletes interviewed described returning to sport post childbirth similarly to the re-entry following an injury. This is quite interesting because the sport itself can potentially cause injury, yet there is an interest to pursue career regardless. So, the fear about pregnancy related injury could be primarily because the risks are perceived as beyond the control of the individual. Whereas the potential risk of injury as a jockey appears within the control of the individual itself (confidence in their skills). So, the locus of control (relating to potential risk or changes) appears external for pregnancy, while those relating to the sport appear internal (controllable by the individual). Regardless, there is a sense of guilt if they were a parent and were to be injured when racing, which would mean they are unable to care for their children during recovery.

#### 8.4.2. Risks are too high - re-evaluating risk and responsibility post-motherhood

The decision to return to racing post-maternity is deeply influenced by changing perceptions of risk and responsibility. Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) reported similar concerns when jockeys returned after maternity. They noted that number of their participants described having a child as the point at which priorities changed, making women more risk-averse and being more concerned with health and safety issues. Such concerns reflect a complex conundrum of guilt relating to expectations and aspirations playing out in female jockeys' minds when considering combining motherhood and career. This shift is not merely practical but also emotional, as the implications of injury now extend beyond personal consequences to encompass parental responsibilities and caregiving roles. This tension is poignantly reflected in the words of Participant 3:

*"I just feel like it would be selfish of me because if I got an injury that I'm, you know I'm laid up in hospital for three or four days, that my babies are at home without me..."*

(Participant 3)

For participant 3, the fear of injury is no longer a horse racing risk—it becomes entangled with maternal guilt, duty of care, and the emotional burden of potentially being unable to fulfil parenting responsibilities. The framing of injury as "selfish" illustrates the internal conflict many mothers in high-risk sports may face: a perceived moral dilemma between pursuing personal and professional aspirations versus prioritising the needs of their children.

*'You're obviously you have someone relying on you at home you know and you don't need to be putting yourself in a vulnerable situation where you might not be coming home'*

(Participant, 7)

Participant 7 highlights such concerns which reflect a broader, complex conundrum—where societal and internalised expectations about motherhood intersect with the realities of horse racing. The physical and psychological demands of horse racing, combined with the unpredictable nature of injury, amplify these pressures and identity tensions. It is interesting how incurring injury through racing is considered selfish, which in extension relates to feeling of some guilt in pursuing a jockey's career, when they have children. This could be considered as the pressures of societal ideas of good parenting (Clayton-Hathway & Stumbitz, 2020) which is perceived by Participant 3 as expected of them. Similarly, jockeys in other studies also described an increase in risk aversion and the fear of a serious injury while being a parent, as the risk of injury is high (O'Connor et al., 2021; Hitchens et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2017; Cullen et al., 2015). However, not all female jockeys may feel or think along these lines, and these differences should be recognised and supported, creating a change in attitudes within the industry regarding supporting mothers. Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) highlighted that future parents were often not aware of the injury supports and statutory entitlements to them. Participant 9 discussed that there is no support or specific support structures for female jockeys who take maternity leave.

*"my career is going to have to take step back, but I want to come back and there's no safety net for you to come back and do what you were doing."*

(Participant 9)

*"...like nearly when you get injured as well it's quite hard to come back from something like that. It's tough that you kind of lose a lot of your income, when something like that happens, yeah, and no maternity leave."*

(Participant, 5)

The above quote closely aligns with the concept of 'motherhood penalty' in monetary terms (Clayton-Hathway & Stumbitz, 2020). The lack of support with maternity leave and childcare is evident through the present study and highlights the absence of inclusive policies and guidance governing the sector. Pascoe et al. (2022) suggested a future area to target within sport science support and research is psychophysiological research on returning to sport following a maternity leave, which is currently limited. Such research, specifically focused on female jockeys could help challenge the generalisation that giving birth is like an injury and provide reassurance that physically returning to race riding is possible.

#### 8.4.3. Lacking role models

Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) also reported that there are very few role models for female jockeys, of whom are mothers. The jockeys in this study also echoed the lack of role models within horseracing.

*"...we don't have a lot of role models; I don't think in the area either. Now to be honest I'd be only able to name a handful of girls that went back riding after having a baby."*

(Participant 2)



*“Especially because there's not that many female jockeys with kids. I can only think of one that has a baby and is still riding regularly. So, I suppose maybe the industry never had to be supportive to parents, because there's not many of us out there.”*

(Participant 7)

Lack of role models among female jockeys, who are also mothers, is likely to be sustained if there is continued lack of support for parents within this sport. Interestingly, this issue does not appear to be limiting male jockeys because many of them decide to have children while continuing with their career. Therefore, the lack of support for parents appears primarily for female jockeys. These findings are reflective of Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) research and Pascoe et al. (2022) review of elite athletes, where both studies discussed that having more jockeys and athletes who are mothers and in more senior training and leadership roles would impact the industry positively and possibly encourage more mothers to stay in racing.

*“And we just need someone there who's in quite a higher spotlight to be, you know you can do it. But you obviously see a lot of female jockeys push back, push back to have a kid. And sometimes probably run out of time.”*

(Participant 8)

Lebel et al. (2021) identified that research into the unique experiences of females within their sport will support female performances and future participation in their sport. It is vital that the horseracing industry develop sensitivity to the needs of jockeys who either have children or are contemplating pregnancy and parenthood (Lebel et al., 2021) to retain and support jockeys in the industry. Clayton-Hathway and Stumbitz (2020) refers to the large number of capable young women in the industry who are leaving prematurely as the ‘leaky pipeline’ which is linked to a general lack of support, isolation, and the unspoken understanding that motherhood and racing were simply incompatible. They also noted the discriminatory employment practice of refusing a role following maternity leave. Maternity leave is a challenge for many female high-performance athletes, however numerous elite level performances have highlighted that a return to high level performance is possible post pregnancy (Forstmann et al., 2022).

## 9. Conclusions and recommendations

Support needs for jockeys who are mothers or are planning on parenthood will vary from jockey to jockey. The findings provide an overview of the barriers towards combining horseracing and motherhood. It was evidenced within this research that female jockeys would leave horseracing prematurely if they became pregnant. This finding raises concern about sustainability and inclusion within the industry. If talented jockeys feel forced to choose between career and family, the racing industry risks losing experienced jockeys and may struggle to attract women into the horseracing industry. Many of the jockeys felt the risks of injury were too high to combine with parenting. Having a career break to have a child was equated to being out injured, and it was widely agreed that it would be incredibly difficult to regain work and momentum, if a jockey took maternity leave. One prevalent theme was that when female jockeys start a family, their opportunity for race-riding or even just staying in the racing industry are small or none. It appears that female jockeys furthering their careers focus on improving their competence and hope to be rewarded as valued members within their sport. This research also identified a dearth of sport science information or guidance for female jockeys on the impact of birth and returning to full time racing. There are opportunities for the horseracing industry to educate and support female jockeys who wish to return to racing.

The development of jockey-centred maternity policies akin to those now offered by various international governing bodies of sport, highlight a positive change in supporting female athletes to stay in sport. This is a progressive shift that horseracing governing bodies should consider with the aim to improve the retention of females within horseracing.

Such a change may also support to develop a culture where motherhood is no longer viewed as a reason to leave horseracing. Encouraging and supporting jockeys who are mothers to remain in horseracing and to progress into leadership roles, would help to challenge horseracing norms and provide role models for next generations. Their visibility could drive further policy and practice reform and send an influential message that a career in horseracing is compatible with having a family. It is noteworthy that these results are limited to the experiences of female jockeys within the UK and Irish horseracing industries, and future research should explore the unique barriers and stressors of other horseracing nations. Our results highlight the importance of recognising the challenges faced by female jockeys. Contrary to the current media representation that females are now considered equal to males in horseracing, the present study highlights the unique challenges that female jockeys face when combining motherhood and horseracing.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Cíara Losty:** Writing – original draft. **Shubha Sreenivas:** Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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