

## **Appendix M: The FEI's Social Media Policy – An Analysis**

Few other Olympic sports regulate the words of their participants as precisely as equestrianism does as of early 2025. The FEI's new Social Media Policy aims to safeguard respect – yet its boundaries may curb debate on horse welfare and transparency more than anticipated.

What may be said publicly about one's sport – and what is better left unsaid? Since 1 January 2025, the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI) has introduced a new framework for the digital sphere. Appendix M of the General Regulations sets out how all FEI stakeholders – athletes, officials, accredited persons and support staff – may speak online, and where the limits lie.

The FEI justifies the policy as a way to curb hate speech and personal attacks and to foster respectful discourse – a legitimate goal. The difficulty lies where protection shades into restriction. Appendix M is no harmless guideline: it reaches deeply into questions of communication, transparency and power. It is also a test of the sport's future – of credibility, public acceptance, and its place at the Olympic Games.

The policy spells out in detail what is expected of riders, officials, trainers and organisers: responsible use of language, respect, protection of privacy, and careful handling of facts. "Derogatory, offensive or inflammatory comments" are prohibited; breaches may lead to warnings, fines or suspensions, with serious cases referred to the FEI Tribunal. Social media thus becomes part of the official playing field – a space whose rules are set by the federation's headquarters.

Particularly revealing is point 10, "Reporting Violations." Anyone who witnesses a breach is urged to report it to the FEI; maintaining a respectful online environment is described as the "collective responsibility" of all stakeholders. The idea of shared responsibility, however, turns everyone into an observer. At first reading, it may remind some of systems in which social control formed part of the order – an uneasy note, even if the context is entirely different. It also raises the question of whether legitimate voices might fall silent because the risk seems too great.

Equally unclear is how far an athlete's responsibility extends for the digital behaviour of those around them. Appendix M lists not only riders but also "support personnel" – trainers, owners, grooms – as addressees. In theory, even a comment from a close associate could put a rider under scrutiny. The very thought that a careless post by an owner or social media manager might trigger sanctions shows how deeply the rules could reach into private spheres. The danger that caution might slide into silence is obvious.

As precise as Appendix M is in regulating tone between people, what is missing is striking: the horse. Images and videos from training grounds, warm-up arenas or competition rings often raise the most pressing questions: How are horses treated? Where does ethics begin or end? For a sport fighting for credibility and its Olympic future, horse welfare should stand at the centre – even in a policy that governs communication. That Appendix M omits this aspect reveals a crucial gap.

Other major bodies take a different tack. The IOC's Social & Digital Media Guidelines for Paris 2024 protect trademark rights and call for respect, yet they do not forbid criticism of organisations or competitions as long as it remains factual. FIFA, too, focuses on curbing hate speech and abuse; it even runs a "Social Media Protection Service" to shield players and officials from online harassment – without suppressing debate about rules or governance.

Whereas the IOC and FIFA handle social media breaches under general disciplinary rules, without a fixed catalogue of penalties, the FEI explicitly classifies them as "minor offences," carrying warnings, fines or suspensions. In serious cases, matters may reach the FEI Tribunal. By comparison, Appendix M seems less a shield against abuse than a rulebook defining how far debate may go.

In democracies, freedom of expression is a cornerstone – and that applies to sport as well. It does not protect every utterance, but it does safeguard the ability to voice uncomfortable criticism. When a policy effectively narrows that freedom, because no one knows exactly when a post might count as "inflammatory," a climate of caution emerges. This is not a trivial matter: it is about transparency, power and the public legitimacy of an Olympic sport.

Will riders or trainers soon hesitate to share even carefully researched but critical articles on their own profiles, for fear of sanctions? And just as importantly: if everyone accredited falls under the same rules – does that include journalists? How does that square with press freedom? Who remains free to speak?

A search of the General Regulations found no special provision for the media. Supplementary documents – such as the *Non-Rights Holders' Guidelines* or *Media Operations Guide* – deal mainly with photo and video rights. There is no clear clause exempting journalistic work from potential sanctions under Appendix M. Even accredited reporters thus appear – at least theoretically – to belong to the circle bound by the Social Media Policy, and to risk penalties for violations.

Equestrian sport is under particular scrutiny. In public debates on horse welfare, transparency and fairness, its place in the Olympic programme depends on whether disciplines like dressage, jumping and eventing credibly uphold the Olympic Charter's

values – ethical standards as well as respect for fundamental rights like freedom of speech and of the press. Against this backdrop, the Social Media Policy is no side issue: it shapes how visible misconduct becomes, how openly stakeholders can speak – and thus how credible the sport appears when its legitimacy on the Olympic stage is at stake.

After all the research, key questions remain. Can it really be that among all riders and officials no one sees that not everything runs perfectly, that structures may need reform? It seems scarcely plausible that one hundred per cent of stakeholders wholly share the FEI's view – while at the same time, images and videos repeatedly documented in specialist circles and the media show blue tongues, tense expressions, scenes from warm-up arenas that provoke questions about ethics and responsibility. Does criticism fall silent because no one dares voice it?

Equestrian sport needs clear standards against abuse and disrespect – but equally, spaces where responsibility may speak aloud. Only if criticism is possible and horse welfare placed at the heart can the federation show that values like fairness and transparency are more than slogans. Trust is not born of silence, but of the courage to ask questions – and of organisations willing to answer them. Only then will equestrianism prove it takes its principles seriously, and deserves the place it claims at the Olympics and in society.

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### Sources and further reading

- Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI): *General Regulations*, 24th Edition, Appendix M – FEI Social Media Policy (effective 1 January 2025).
- *FEI Social Media Policy – FAQ*:  
[https://inside.fei.org/sites/default/files/FEI%20Social%20Media%20Policy%20-%20FAQ\\_0.pdf](https://inside.fei.org/sites/default/files/FEI%20Social%20Media%20Policy%20-%20FAQ_0.pdf)
- International Olympic Committee (IOC): *Social & Digital Media Guidelines*, Paris 2024.
- FIFA: *Social Media Protection Service and Disciplinary Code*, 2024 edition.
- Dyson, S. et al. (2018–2023): *Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram*.
- IOC – Olympic Programme Commission: *Evaluation Criteria*.
- FEI: *Non-Rights Holders' Guidelines for Publishing on Social Media at FEI Named Events* (2024).

- FEI: *Media Operations Guide for Event Organisers* (current version via the Knowledge Base).