



BACKGROUND

- Rabbit agility, or 'show jumping', started in Sweden in the late 1970's.
- Rabbits are trained, via clicker training techniques, to jump over hurdles.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF RABBIT SHOW JUMPING

- Rabbits are likely to benefit from the opportunity to exercise and from the mental and physical stimulation provided by show jumping.
- Training for the sport should increase rabbits' fitness and improve their health.
- Training for the sport, if done using appropriate positive reward-based methods, should improve and enhance the rabbit-owner bond, providing the rabbit with more companionship and stimulation.
- Rabbits are judged on their athletic ability, which is preferable to being judged primarily on their appearance. Many of the welfare issues seen due to selective breeding in dogs are also seen in rabbits. The RSPCA believes pets should be bred for and judged on their health, welfare, quality of life and temperament rather than primarily on their appearance.

AFFECT ON WELFARE

If the welfare concerns listed below (and on pages 2-3) are addressed and the needs of each individual rabbit are met, this sport can provide good physical and mental stimulation for rabbits.

*Please note; some rabbits may not be suited to the sport for a variety of reasons. For example:

- Temperament - shy, un-socialised rabbits are likely to be stressed by the event & are unlikely to be easy to train. It would not be appropriate to show jump such animals due to the unnecessary stress and fear it is likely to cause. Make sure the rabbit is not afraid of the sort of stimuli he/she will be exposed to at the event, such as noise, camera flashes and crowds of people.
- Athletic ability - rabbits previously kept in small accommodation may be more prone to leg injuries, and more rarely, fractures, due to muscle wastage. It would not be appropriate to show jump such animals due to the risk of physical injury.
- Age - Juvenile rabbits will not be able to participate until their bones and joints are well developed and strong, to avoid the risk of injury.
- Breed - Certain breeds cannot take part due to their exaggerated physical features. For example: Long-haired rabbits are often excluded because of the difficulties their long coats cause with agility, vision and overheating. Lop-eared rabbits may also be unable to participate due to the risk of injury to their ears.
- Receptive (entire) females - Situations where male rabbits (bucks) would be in sensory contact with receptive females (does) should be avoided by keeping entire male and female rabbits separated at the show. This is to avoid accidental matings and also to ensure bucks are not frustrated by the presence of receptive does. If a rabbit appears to be becoming frustrated, a vet should be consulted and the rabbit may need to be moved or withdrawn from the show. The vet present at the show should be available to advise on this issue.

The decision to train a rabbit to show jump should only be made after very careful consideration of whether it is appropriate for the individual rabbit concerned to take part, whether his/her welfare would be negatively or positively affected by taking part. A vet will be able to offer advice to anyone considering training their rabbit to show jump or perform other types of activity.



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The welfare needs* of each rabbit involved must be met at all times. [*As stated under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, for more information on rabbits' welfare needs please visit www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits.]

Potential welfare issues:

In addition to the above considerations, potential welfare issues and how to avoid or minimise them are explained below. Please note these points are not in order of priority.

Training:

- Training method - rabbits should be trained using positive reward-based training (e.g. clicker training) *only*. Punishment (e.g. shouting, physical coercion) must *never* be used.
- Training a rabbit to use a harness should also be done using positive reward-based training, and a rabbit should be comfortable wearing a harness before agility training begins. Harnesses should fit correctly with no potential for injury or discomfort. Leads should be of a suitable design and long enough to allow rabbits to jump easily.
- Inexperienced owners should learn how to do more basic positive-reward based training (such as encouraging a rabbit to come when called and rewarding him/her with a healthy treat) and see whether their rabbit responds to this positively, before attempting more complex activities like agility courses. Owners should seek expert advice (from a vet or clinical animal behaviourist) before attempting to train a rabbit to show jump.
- Rabbits should be trained well in advance of any events.

Preventing injury:

- If rabbits are not physically fit they could be injured (e.g. rabbits kept in inadequate environments may have spinal problems and could injure themselves if unused to exercising). Such rabbits should not be allowed to participate. In addition, young rabbits will not be able to participate until their bones and joints are well developed and strong. A vet will be able to ensure a rabbit is physically fit enough to take part, of a suitable age and likely to benefit from the activity.
- There is some potential for injury to the rabbits (e.g. through poorly made jumps, landing badly). Every effort should be made to minimise potential risks to rabbits (e.g. by ensuring jump equipment and landing areas are safe). A vet should be present at shows to ensure that the rabbits that will participate in show jumping are physically fit to do so, and in case of an emergency so that any injured rabbits receive appropriate veterinary treatment immediately.

Transportation:

- Travel to and from shows could be very stressful for rabbits, particularly if they are travelling long distances and/or are travelling by air. Rabbits should be comfortable and safe at all times during transportation. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier and new environment can help rabbits to feel at ease.
- Rabbits should be allowed sufficient time to rest before taking part in the event.
- The size and temperature of the transport vehicle(s) must be appropriate.

The show environment:

- Rabbits, even those used to the show environment may experience stress due to the noise, unfamiliar environment, open spaces (being unable to hide), camera flashes, etc. Rabbits should be monitored before, during and after the show





jumping event by someone trained in understanding and interpreting rabbit behaviour (e.g. a clinical animal behaviourist) to ensure that any signs of stress are recognised early. Any rabbits showing signs of stress should be allowed to have some 'time out' in a quiet, undisturbed area where they can hide. At this point, a decision should be made with experts regarding whether it is in the rabbit's best interests to make the rabbit perform again.

- Bringing rabbits together in a show environment does pose the potential for the spread of disease. All rabbits attending the show should be up-to-date with their vaccinations (for VHD and myxomatosis).

Housing at the show:

- Housing at the show should have no potential for injury and be large enough that rabbits are able to hide from view, stretch out fully, sit up on their hind legs without their ears touching the top of the housing, turn around easily and perform a series of continuous hops.
- Rabbits are territorial animals, so forcing rabbits into close proximity with one another could be stressful. Suitable hiding places should be provided within the enclosure to allow each rabbit to escape if he/she feels afraid and to avoid social contact with other rabbits or humans if he/she wants to. There should be at least one hiding place for each rabbit.
- As rabbits are prey animals they should not be housed near predators, such as dogs, cats or ferrets, which could frighten them. Rabbits must be able to hide in a secure place, away from the sight and smell of predators (e.g. cats, dogs, ferrets and birds of prey).
- When not taking part in the event, rabbits should be housed at all times in a suitable quiet, shady area.
- The size and temperature of the show hall rabbit enclosures must be appropriate.
- Rabbits can suffer from heat stress, so should always be able to seek shade and have constant access to fresh clean water. Water should be provided in the manner they are familiar with (i.e. water bottle or bowl). Rabbits should be given regular breaks from agility activities, to allow them to rest and cool down.

Rest between shows:

- Rabbits should be allowed sufficient time to rest between shows.

Handling:

- Handling can be stressful, particularly if handlers are not experienced. Only experienced handlers should handle rabbits at shows, ideally only people with whom the rabbit is familiar with (e.g. the owner and/or trainer).

Companion rabbits:

- There is a welfare concern about the potential for familiar group/paired rabbits to be separated in order for one rabbit/some rabbits to attend a show. This could lead to potential problems when re-introducing rabbits. Owners may want to consider taking a non-participating companion rabbit along to keep the show rabbit company, as bonded (companion) rabbits should ideally not be separated. However, this could cause the companion animal unnecessary stress and so the costs and benefits to both animals should be considered when making such a decision; taking the companion rabbit along is only appropriate if the rabbits' attachment to each other and the risk of disrupting the social group outweighs the stresses of travel and the show environment. A vet or clinical animal behaviourist should be consulted for advice prior to the show if owners are unsure. If bonded rabbits are separated, every effort should be made to re-introduce them in a





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positive way to ensure that their companionship is continued as rabbits are social animals and should live with another rabbit wherever possible. Reintroduction methods include transferring scents by rubbing a cloth over the rabbit that has attended the show and then rubbing that cloth over the other rabbit(s) he/she normally lives with to reintroduce the absentee rabbit's scent. Rabbits can be gradually re-introduced by allowing them to meet under owner supervision in a neutral environment with lots of hiding places and enrichment (e.g. toys, healthy treats). Expert advice (from a vet or clinical animal behaviourist) should be sought if owners are unsure how to re-introduce their rabbits or have problems.



Therefore the decision to train a rabbit to show jump should only be made after very careful consideration of whether it is in the best interests of the individual rabbit concerned. Owners are encouraged to seek expert advice, from a vet or qualified animal behaviourist, before attempting to train their rabbits to show jump.



OTHER USEFUL LINKS:

- Rabbits' welfare needs: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits
- Animal Welfare Act: www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/changingthelaw/whatwechanged/animalwelfareact
- Performing Animal Guidelines: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/wildlife/captivity/performinganimals
- Find a vet: www.rspca.org.uk/findavet
- Find a clinical animal behaviourist: www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist

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