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About the weight of a rider

Icelandic horses have been bred for centuries for agricultural use and riding over long distances. Despite their relatively low height at the withers and the resulting lower weight compared to other horse breeds, Icelandic horses have been used as a riding and working horse for centuries and are considered a strong, resilient, and sturdy breed.

Recently, the Veterinary Association for Animal Welfare in Germany has updated its leaflet on rider weights to the latest scientific findings. As there is no simple answer to the question of how much weight a horse can carry without damage, the Veterinary Association tries to examine this difficult topic from several points of view, and to give horse owners reasonable criteria for dealing with this in practice. Based on latest studies, the height at withers is not the only criterion for how heavy a rider the horse can carry. A more detailed evaluation of the actual load-bearing capacity of a horse can be obtained by looking at for example the width of the loin and the circumference of the cannon bone. Research from Germany has shown that the general weight bearing index of the Icelandic horse may be somewhat higher compared to that of comparable breeds. This needs to be studied further.

The FEIF breeding goals for Icelandic horses continues to put a clear emphasis on a strong, broad, and well-muscled back with strong and broad loins and with robust legs with well-developed joints and bones. Moreover, the actual weight bearing capacity of the horse is included in the breeding goal. It is also interesting to note here that the Icelandic horse has become taller in recent years. The average horse that came to a breeding assessment in 1990 was 133 cm at the withers but is now around 142 cm.

The answer to the question about the resilience of a horse is as individual as the horses are themselves and depends on many different factors. As emphasized also by the scientific papers that were published in the European journal *Animal*, authored by staff of the Equine Science Department at Hólar University College in cooperation with the Swedish Agricultural University Uppsala (SLU), in addition to body weight and size of the horse, these factors include age, level of training and muscular condition, gaits, the ridden speed and conformation of the horse. Not least the balance and riding style of the rider play a decisive role. But also factors apart from the horse itself, such as type of use, duration and intensity of the riding activity, the riding ability of the rider or even seemingly unimportant factors such as weather, season and soil conditions, have an influence on the weight bearing capacity of the horse.

The Hólar University College in co-operation with further partners in and outside Iceland has currently started a new scientifically based study on this topic and the findings of which will be incorporated into the considerations and regulations as soon as the results are published.

Thus, the assessment of the resilience of a horse is an individual matter influenced by many factors. If in doubt, the appropriate experts (e.g. veterinarians, trainer, farriers, or physiotherapists) should be consulted. Of greatest importance are the sympathetic approach in dealing with the horse, proper training methods for both horse and rider, and the use of common sense.

Further literature

- Tierärztliche Vereinigung für Tierschutz e.V, Merkblatt Nr. 185: „Reitergewicht“: Beurteilung der Gewichtsbelastung von Pferden unter Tierschutzgesichtspunkten. https://www.tierschutz-tvt.de/alle-merkblaetter-und-stellungnahmen/?no_cache=1&download=TVT-MB_185_Reitergewicht_01.09.2019.pdf&did=312
- Stefánsdóttir, G., Gunnarsson, V., Roepstorff, L., Ragnarsson, S., & Jansson, A. (2017). The effect of rider weight and additional weight in Icelandic horses in tölt: Part I. Physiological responses. *Animal*, 11(9), 1558-1566. doi:10.1017/S1751731117000556, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/animal/article/effect-of-rider-weight-and-additional-weight-in-icelandic-horses-in-tolt-part-i-physiological-responses/0234FDFE916E8FB9849119BC33E7FB78>
- Gunnarsson, V., Stefánsdóttir, G., Jansson, A., & Roepstorff, L. (2017). The effect of rider weight and additional weight in Icelandic horses in tölt: Part II. Stride parameters responses. *Animal*, 11(9), 1567-1572. doi:10.1017/S1751731117000568, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/animal/article/effect-of-rider-weight-and-additional-weight-in-icelandic-horses-in-tolt-part-ii-stride-parameters-responses/203B598E7E6B4B83D1ECCF32C762689C>