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**BEST OF
THE BLOG**

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Have You Ever Wondered Why Horses Snort? The Scientists Can Now Explain

“Horses don’t snort in fear or astonishment but with pleasure, and the frequency of snorts rises as an environment becomes more pleasant and decreases as it becomes more stressful. Be pleased when your horse is snorting at you.”

I'm sure I've mentioned in the blog before that Margaret Thatcher's husband Denis often needed some Dutch courage from a stiff drink, depending on the Blessed Margaret's mood. He prepared himself either a pre-prandial G&T snifter or a much larger one that he called a snorter – or if absolutely needed, a huge snorteroony. So you can tell from this intro that the theme of today's short blog has to be snorting (but of the equine variety).

Often when I've been in yards looking at our horses they have come across for a chat and a cuddle, and at the very moment you're patting them on the neck they let out a big snort. I've often wondered why, and had always assumed that they were just trying to expel dust, straw, insects or whatever. While they obviously do do this, a piece of research by Mathilde Stomp (I know, this is beginning to sound like an April Fool blog) of the University of Rennes found that snorting actually corresponds to a horse's welfare at a particular point in time. Most interestingly, she found that horses don't snort with fear or astonishment, but with pleasure, and that the frequency of snorts rises as an environment becomes more pleasant and decreases as it becomes more stressful (and you are probably already saying that this is the opposite to what used to happen in the Thatcher household).

They also found that horses in natural pastures snorted more than those in stalls; horses facing a wall never snorted, and when horses were moved to a pasture with plenty of grass, snorting levels increased tenfold. Dr. Stomp was quoted in *The Times* report by their Science Editor Tom Whipple and she concluded that: "These results provide a potentially important tool as snorts appear as a possible reliable indicator of positive emotions, which could help identify situations appreciated by horses".

For evermore, when a horse snorts in my presence I'm going to assume it is because he or she is a happy horse. It's a wonderful thing, science, isn't it?

I read about this at the same time that I met up with two researchers, Dr Siobhan Mullan and Dr Deborah Butler, from the University of Bristol's Veterinary School, and we're going to work with them on a study funded by The Racing Foundation entitled *Measuring Racehorse Welfare: Development and Implementation of a Racehorse Specific Welfare Assessment*. Over the next year they are going to come and visit our racehorses and do a structured assessment of their behaviour and wellbeing so that they can highlight the best practices in equine welfare that produce the most healthy and happy horses. Their intention is to draw their research together into a "welfare assessment protocol" that can then be used by the racing industry. I'm very much in favour of more research in racing so that conclusions on best practices in training and horse welfare are grounded in facts and data rather than just intuition, experience and doing things in the same way they have always been done.

Not surprisingly when I met the researchers I shared with them the conclusions on snorting. It's an interesting life I lead!?! I can feel a snort coming on

