

FARRIERS REGISTRATION COUNCIL
DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE
HELD AT THE FARRIERS REGISTRATION COUNCIL, 14 SWAN COURT, FORDER WAY,
CYGNET PARK, HAMPTON, PETERBOROUGH, PE7 8GX

INQUIRY RE:

MR PAUL FREDERICK COOMBES RSS

1. THE CHARGE

1.1 *“That, being registered under the Farriers (Registration) Act 1975 (as amended) (“the Act”), you:*

1. *On or around a date in February or March 2024 at Alvediston Stud, Manor Farm, Alvediston, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP5 5 JY, while a horse was being tended to by another farrier (Mr SY), you used unnecessary force towards the horse by striking it to its face with your hand:*

And that in relation to the facts alleged above, whether individually or in any combination, you are guilty of serious misconduct in a professional respect.”

Representation

- 1.2 Mr Michael Collis, instructed by Capsticks, appeared on behalf of the Council; Ms Trudy Austreng appeared on behalf of the Respondent.

Response to the Charge

- 1.3 The Respondent denied the charge.

Background

1.4 In October 2024 the Council received a complaint from Ms NB and her daughter, Ms KB, that the Respondent was guilty of cruelty by *“punching horses in the face”*. The complaint was accompanied by a video which was said to relate to an incident that occurred on 13 March 2024. The video footage showed the Respondent intervening as a yearling was being trimmed by another farrier.

1.5 In his response to the complaint, dated 6 November 2024, the Respondent said that he intervened because the yearling was out of control. He thought the situation could become unsafe and selected a head collar which he considered would enable better control of the horse. He provided this head collar to one of the handlers and then used his right hand initially to block the eyes of the horse *“as it uses sight when attempting to kick. I attempted to try and keep pressure on the horse as it was fighting.”* He accepted that he struck the horse *“with little force to maintain its position like they would in the wild”*. He said that *“the contact of the strike was knowingly minimal”* due to his own medical condition, which impaired his strength.

Procedural Applications

- 1.6 The Respondent suffers from a medical condition which made it advisable for him to give evidence in the morning. Both parties agreed to this and the Committee also directed that any reference to the detail of the Respondent's medical condition be marked as Private on the transcript of these proceedings. The Council had intended to call Ms NB to give evidence first but she could not be contacted. In those circumstances, and with the agreement of the parties, the Respondent gave his evidence first, immediately after Mr Collis had opened the case on behalf of the Council.

The Evidence

- 1.7 The Committee was provided with a bundle of documents which included two pieces of video footage, the longer lasting one minute 39 seconds and the shorter lasting one minute and seven seconds of the episode in question. The footage had been taken by Ms KB on her mobile phone. The documents included Ms NB's complaint form, typed by Ms NB on the basis of what she had been told by her daughter Ms KB, and the Respondent's email response dated 6 November 2024. In addition, and at the request of the Respondent, the Committee received in evidence a written witness statement from Mr SY, the farrier who was attending to the yearling at the time, and a witness statement from Mr AW, the owner of the stud farm, who was also present as the trimming was being carried out.
- 1.8 The Respondent gave oral evidence to the Committee. He said that he had previously trimmed this yearling and saw that the animal was beginning to get wound up as Mr SY began to work. So he went to get an alternative head collar, a type of halter which he described as an "Indian head collar", which he thought would enable better control of the animal and gave that to the handler who was at the yearling's head. He said that he took hold of the collar with one hand and put his right hand between the horse's ears and then over the horse's eyes. He admitted to swinging his arms around during this process but denied that he made contact with the horse. He emphasised that the middle finger of his right hand was infected at the time, and subsequently amputated, so that this finger was extended. He said that he was not angry but would use a deeper voice to help control the animal. He said that the yearling responded well to him. Contrary to what was stated in the complaint form, he had never been banned from practising farriery and had not been the subject of any previous disciplinary proceedings.
- 1.9 In cross-examination, he said that he had not at any point held a rasp in his hand and had only rubbed the ears of the horse. He said that in waving his arm he had not struck the horse but had hit himself in the stomach as his arm came round. He said that the reference to striking the horse in his email response of 6 November 2024 was explained by the fact that at that time he thought that the available footage showed that he had struck the horse but now, having looked at it again, he did not believe he had. He was in any event not good with words. He accepted that he had made the horse jump and also accepted that the words that could be heard on the video "stop pissing about" and "stop it" were probably said by him. He didn't remember hurting his hand, as would have been the case if he had struck the horse, and said that it was not up to him to suggest that it would be better to postpone the trimming until the animal was calmer. He did tell the Committee that he was a farrier of great experience and used to working with all types of horses.
- 1.10 In answer to the Committee the Respondent also accepted that it was he who had said "*I will*" immediately before the words "*stop pissing about*" though he could not now remember if or why he had said these words. He emphasised that if he had hit the horse his infected finger would have been painful and he could not remember that. He said there was no point in hitting foals as it did not work, though he had hit a stallion as a means of exerting control.

- 1.11 Ms KB gave oral evidence to the Committee. She said that she had delayed making a complaint to the Council because she feared that she would lose her job at Alvediston Stud. She told the Committee that she began to film the episode because she was so shocked at what she was seeing. She said she was two to three metres away from the horse. She said that she saw the Respondent use a rasp to hit the horse on its stomach area by way of warning. That made her take out her phone because she thought the situation was going to escalate. She considered the Respondent was getting more and more angry as he spoke to the horse and his striking of the horse was quite forceful and meant to hurt the animal.
- 1.12 In cross-examination she said that the Respondent struck the horse because he was angry. She accepted the video footage did not show the actual point of contact but maintained that the video showed what the Respondent intended to do and the evidence of what actually happened was in the video. She knew nothing about the allegation in the complaint form that the Respondent had previously been banned and assumed her mother had inserted this without telling her.
- 1.13 In answer to Committee questions, Ms KB said that the Respondent had held the rasp before the video began and there was a lot of anger and unnecessary behaviour during the episode. She said the video showed the horse pulling its head back and this caused her to believe that the Respondent had hit the horse.
- 1.14 Following the evidence of Ms KB, Mr Collis informed the Committee that the Council had not been able to contact Ms NB and invited the Committee to receive her witness statement and associated emails in evidence. Ms Austreng agreed to this course and the Committee considered that it was fair to admit this evidence in the same way as that of Mr SY and Mr AW.
- 1.15 The Committee read the witness statements provided by Mr SY and Mr AW. Mr SY was attending to the horse and was unaware of what was going on behind him. Mr AW concluded that the Respondent had hit the horse but this conclusion was based solely on his viewing of the video and not on any independent recollection of the episode.
- 1.16 The witness statement and emails of Ms NB did not take matters any further. She had not been present at the time of the episode and was therefore reliant on what her daughter had told her and what she had seen in the video footage. The Council had also confirmed that her suggestion in the complaint form that the Respondent "*has already received a ban*" was inaccurate.

2. DECISION OF THE DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE ON THE FACTS

- 2.1 The Committee accepted the advice of the legal assessor, who reminded the Committee of the burden and standard of proof and of the significance of the Respondent's previous good character.
- 2.2 The Committee considered the video footage of the incident carefully and several times. The Committee concluded that the video footage clearly showed the Respondent attempting to strike the horse. All the fingers of his right hand were curled into his palm and the movement of his body was entirely consistent with the delivery of a punch, using his right hand, to the head of the horse. It was noticeable too that the horse flinched immediately after the delivery of the Respondent's punch.
- 2.3 The Committee accepted that the video footage did not actually show contact between the Respondent's right hand and the head of the horse, as, at the critical moment, the Respondent's body obscured his right hand and the horse's head. Equally, the Committee bore

in mind the possibility that the horse may have flinched due to the proximity of the Respondent's right hand, even if it had not actually been struck.

- 2.4 The Committee therefore went on to consider the significance and weight to be attached to the Respondent's response to the complaint when received by him. In his response the Respondent had dictated the following:

"I did strike the horse with little force to maintain its position like they would in the wild. The contact of the strike was knowingly minimal due to my recent loss in strength."

The Committee considered that this was an unequivocal admission, on the part of the Respondent, that he had struck the horse. It was made in the course of a formal and detailed response to a complaint of *"Blacksmiths cruelty punching horses in the face"*. The Committee concluded that such an admission would not have been made if the Respondent had failed to make contact with the horse's head.

- 2.5 The evidence of the video footage, when combined with this admission, satisfied the Committee that, on the balance of probabilities, the Respondent had in fact struck this horse, as he clearly intended to do.
- 2.6 The Committee went on to consider whether in striking the horse the Respondent had used unnecessary force. The Respondent was not being threatened by the horse. He was not in a position of imminent danger. He had chosen, on his own account, to become directly involved so as to control a yearling who was plainly becoming agitated. Striking a horse in the face as a means of exerting control over a frightened animal is not acceptable. The Committee therefore concluded that in striking the horse the Respondent had used unnecessary force.
- 2.7 The Committee therefore finds the factual element of the Charge Proved.

3. SUBMISSIONS OF THE PARTIES ON SERIOUS MISCONDUCT IN A PROFESSIONAL RESPECT

- 3.1 Mr Collis produced written submissions. He referred the Committee to a number of paragraphs of the *Farrier, Approved Training Farrier & Apprentice Code of Professional Conduct 2024* *["the Code"]* which, he submitted, were of particular relevance. These included the Guiding Principles that Registered Farriers are expected *to make horse welfare their first consideration* and:

- *To ensure that all horses under [their] care are treated humanely and with respect; and*
- *To uphold the good reputation of the farriery profession.*

These Guiding Principles, submitted Mr. Collis, were reiterated in Paragraphs 12 a, 16a and 16 c. of the Code

- 3.2 Mr Collis also reminded the Committee of paragraph 24 of the Code which provides that:

"Farriers are advised not to commence or continue working with an animal if it is felt that the present temperament of the horse,,,,, [is] unfavourable to a successful outcome and/or that the health and safety of the farrier and others, including the horse may be compromised by proceeding".

- 3.3 Mr Collis submitted that the Respondent's conduct was a serious departure from these principles.
- 3.4 Ms Austreng told the Committee that she and the Respondent were very surprised by the Committee's findings. She reminded the Committee that the Respondent had had a long and previously unblemished career. The Respondent also told the Committee that he profoundly disagreed with its decision.

4. DECISION OF THE DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE ON SERIOUS MISCONDUCT IN A PROFESSIONAL RESPECT

- 4.1 The legal assessor reminded the Committee that serious misconduct in a professional respect was a matter for its judgment, taking into account the standards required by the Code and the extent to which the Respondent's behaviour departed from those standards.
- 4.2 The Committee accepted that the Guiding Principles and paragraphs of the Code referred to by Mr Collis were applicable in this case. The Respondent had struck a horse in the face when there was no need to do so and other options were available which would have allowed the situation to de-escalate. In fact, his activity in striking the horse risked escalating the situation.
- 4.3 In the Committee's judgement the Respondent acted without regard to the Guiding Principles of the Code referred to above. In so doing he was guilty of serious misconduct in a professional respect.

5. DECISION OF THE DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE AS TO SANCTION

- 5.1 Mr Collis told the Committee that the Respondent had been registered since July 1976 and that there were no previous regulatory findings against him. He submitted that the aggravating factors in the case were the risk of injury to the horse and the absence of insight on the part of the Respondent. In relation to mitigating factors, Mr Collis reminded the Committee that the Respondent had had a long and previously unblemished career and that this was a single, isolated incident.
- 5.2 Ms Austreng added that the Respondent had had a splendid career.
- 5.3 The legal assessor reminded the Committee of the *Indicative Sanctions Guidance* and of the need for proportionality when considering sanction.
- 5.4 The Committee first considered aggravating factors. The Respondent's conduct created a risk of injury to the horse and to those in the immediate vicinity of the horse. His conduct was reckless. The Committee was also concerned by the Respondent's apparent lack of regard for the principles set out in the Code. His attitude appeared to be that, as a very experienced farrier used to dealing with a wide variety of horses, he was entitled to adopt whatever he thought was the most appropriate way of dealing with a difficult situation. Although the Committee did not consider that the Respondent had set out with the intention of hitting the horse, this attitude made such an action liable to occur. The incident was intentional in the sense that the Respondent made a deliberate choice to behave in the way that he did. This was evident from the language he used at the time. The Respondent needed to understand that standards in the profession had evolved over the fifty years that he had been in practice and that what might once have occasioned no comment was now liable to attract severe criticism.

- 5.5 So far as mitigating factors were concerned, the Committee accepted that the Respondent was trying to deal with a fractious horse and believed that he was helping to bring a difficult situation under control. There was no evidence that the yearling had been physically harmed. It was a single, isolated incident in a long career during which the Respondent had practised at a high level.
- 5.6 The Committee considered the available sanctions in ascending order.
- 5.7 The case was much too serious for the Committee to take no further action and no purpose would be served by postponing sanction.
- 5.8 The Committee went on to consider whether a reprimand or warning would be a sufficient response to the Respondent's misconduct. The Committee did not consider that this misconduct was at the lower end of the spectrum of seriousness and was not confident that this sanction would be sufficient to bring home to the Respondent that his professional standards needed to evolve in line with the requirements of the Code.
- 5.9 The Committee next considered a suspension order. The Committee concluded that this was a sanction which properly reflected the seriousness of what had occurred and was also a sanction which would bring home to the Respondent the need for a more appropriate approach to situations of the kind with which he was faced in this particular case. The Committee considered that a period of suspension of three months would be sufficient to enable the Respondent to reflect properly on what had occurred and on the need to avoid any repetition of this type of conduct in future.
- 5.10 The Committee also considered that this period of suspension would be sufficient to meet the public interest in safeguarding the reputation of the profession. In the Committee's judgement a reasonable and fully informed member of the public would consider this outcome to be proportionate. It also considered that this period of suspension would send a clear message to the profession that current standards require a sharp focus upon the proper ethical treatment of horses on the part of those in a position of authority and trust such as registered farriers.
- 5.11 In accordance with its usual practice the Committee also considered whether a removal order was required. It concluded that it was not. The Committee recognised that the Respondent was a highly experienced and skilled farrier. A removal order on the basis of this particular single incident would in the Committee's view be a punitive and not a proportionate response to what had occurred. The Respondent should be in no doubt however that any repetition of this type of misconduct would be liable to attract the most severe sanction.
- 5.12 The Committee therefore directs that the Respondent's registration is to be subject to a period of suspension for a period of three months.

Disciplinary Committee

22 July 2025