

## **BEYOND STEREOTYPES** **FERAL BEAUTY OF HOBBYHORISING**

A short film shot in the Sipoon Monitoimihalli arena features highlights from an interview with Alisa Aarniomäki, a Finnish dressage champion and renowned hobbyhorsist. It unveils the unique character of hobbyhorsing, challenging stereotypes and societal norms.

Immersing myself in the hobbyhorse world through a feral sense-making lens, I observed Alisa's training and engaged in a revealing conversation with her. Approaching it as a horseback rider with assumptions, my goal was to genuinely understand this phenomenon.

As discovered, hobbyhorsing has transcended being a mere introduction to horseback riding or a children's pastime; it defies conventional hobby categories. It's a bit of a rebel in the hobby world, akin to horseback riding gone feral.

Alisa's interview offers a holistic view of the challenges tied to hobbyhorsing, urging a reevaluation of what defines a meaningful hobby or lifestyle. It also prompts reflection on my role as a designer in this context.

— HANA REHORČÍKOVÁ

## PASSION FOR HORSES

Horses, with their majestic presence and the act of riding, have been my passion since the age of 12. This connection led me to explore the equine world of Helsinki as a starting point for my project.

However, my journey took an unexpected turn, unveiling a captivating discovery: the phenomenon of hobbyhorsing. Initially approached with skepticism, this unconventional sport caused a shift in my thinking from a humorous standpoint to genuine fascination.

During my research, I read a lot about Alisa. Intrigued by her experiences, I reached out for an interview and the opportunity to witness her training. The feral data then took shape through dialogue, capturing the spontaneity and passion that transcend human control.

## HOBBYHORSE VS. HORSEBACK RIDING

Alisa introduces hobbyhorsing to me through a captivating performance, seamlessly blending dance, cardio, and gymnastics, all synchronized with music. I observe the subtle movements and rhythmic footfalls of a hobbyhorsist.

After her training, she begins talking about a growing trend in which horse stables aim to integrate hobbyhorsing into their events. This aligns with my research on young girls crafting imaginary horses when real ones or riding lessons are (financially) out of reach. Similarly, stables perceive hobbyhorsing as a bridge to real horses. Alisa engages in both hobbyhorsing and horseback riding simultaneously, just like most of the hobbyhorsists.

When wondering how it turned into an officially recognized sport so quickly, Alisa reveals:

*"Social media allows us to share our skills and progress, contributing to the recognition of hobbyhorsing as a sport" (A. Aarniomäki, personal communication, November 13, 2023).*

When I ask about her personal identity while participating in hobbyhorsing, Alisa explains:

*"I don't identify as either the rider or the horse; I'm simply myself engaging in hobbyhorsing. When teaching others about using their bodies in hobbyhorsing and dressage, I suggest imagining the upper body as the rider and the legs as the horse. It helps to find a balance where the upper body remains stable while the legs provide power and movement."*

She highlights that mastering hobbyhorsing requires a unique skill set, drawing inspiration from horses without attempting to replace them. Alisa underscores a crucial difference: hobbyhorsing doesn't involve living animals. It's a performance where practitioners must handle everything themselves, using their bodies. The absence of a living animal body in hobbyhorsing emphasizes a unique aspect: a human's body as the medium for expression, not a collaboration with a horse.

## IMAGINATION AND INDIVIDUALITY

Alisa says that imagination in hobbyhorsing is a highly individual aspect of this hobby. Some perceive the hobbyhorse merely as sports equipment, while others delve deeply into the imaginative aspects, creating personalities.

While the hobbyhorsing community welcomes creative diversity in the shapes or species of hobbyhorses, Alisa mentions that she leans towards a more realistic approach when it comes to the shape and appearance of a hobbyhorse. She also notes that, although not everyone may attribute personalities to their creations, naming one's hobbyhorse is a common practice within the hobby.

There are no strict rules; people create them according to personal preferences, as long as they meet basic requirements such as having a stick and reins.

Alisa shares her approach, noting that she typically purchases nostalgic horses that were significant during her childhood. She also participates in collective ownership with friends, adding a communal dimension to the hobby.

## **CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCE**

However, the feral beauty of hobbyhorsing comes with its own set of challenges. Alisa's revelation about facing criticism, physical violence, and societal misconceptions brings attention to the struggle between the freedom of creative expression and societal norms.

Alisa acknowledges encountering inappropriate comments and being sexualized, especially on social media platforms. She mentions that after the release of the Hobbyhorse Revolution movie, her inbox was flooded with disgusting messages from men. She points out that even in conversations with journalists, there were jokes about how she handles the hobbyhorse stick. Online forums have

discussed her since she was 14, consistently focusing on inappropriate topics. She also remembers:

*"I lost all my friends during elementary school due to hobbyhorsing."*

Alisa still has to face numerous negative comments, especially online, where the criticism can be particularly harsh. She interprets these experiences as people's confusion and resistance to understanding something different, deviating from their expectations of how someone her age should behave.

To cultivate a positive environment for those feeling insecure about the hobby, she actively deletes such negative comments and also adds:

*"I've learned to ignore misconceptions and focus on my passion. Just like someone might find football fascinating, the same happened with hobbyhorsing for me. It's about finding an interest, a community, and sometimes losing one along the way."*

## **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

Watching how Alisa seamlessly integrates elements of horse movements into her performance leaves me impressed and fascinated. Using a horse's head on a stick evokes in me an appreciation and inspiration derived from animals' motion, raising questions about the evolving bonds between humans and non-humans.

A fusion of human and animal characteristics also leads to deeper reflections on personal identities. As mentioned, Alisa doesn't pretend to be a rider or a horse; rather, she shapes a unique form of expression through this hobby, sport, or even lifestyle. By using her body and the hobbyhorse itself, she engages in something that may be hard for many to understand or experience.

Hobbyhorsing also encourages us to reconsider the meaning of leisure and sport today. In this case, who and how determines "the right hobby" and its age or gender appropriateness? It makes me question the conventional view of hobbies for specific groups: is there such a thing as a hobby that "makes no sense" or a hobby that suits one and doesn't suit another? Regarding gender, Alisa explains:

*"In Finland, riding horses is considered a very feminine hobby. And doing hobbyhorsing, which is more creative, it kind of then leans towards the same feminine ideology of your pastime."*

I perceive hobbyhorsing as a feral hobby that has transformed from a childhood pastime into a sophisticated form of performance art or sport. Driven by a passionate community, it challenges conventional expectations and has evolved into a cultural phenomenon, highlighting a commitment to unique self-expression that is not attainable through traditional horseback riding.

As a design student with a focus on problem-solving, I was initially seeking challenges to tackle. However, this journey led me to realize the importance of not only solving

problems but also questioning their origins and whether they truly align with the needs of a specific group I am focusing on. I kept asking questions like, "Is this even a problem, and if so, whose problem is it?"

Considering the design of a non-controversial hobbyhorse, I soon realized the nonsensicality of such an approach because hobbyhorsists might also be viewed as queer figures who are perfectly fine with their hobbyhorses and their looks - neither the hobbyhorses nor the hobbyhorsists pose an issue in this situation; rather, it is the assumptions that do. My journey reflects the realization that addressing societal unreadiness for change is about taking meaningful actions, even small ones.

Through a short film and a personal essay, I aim to foster a willingness to listen and ask. As a horseback rider, I also found hobbyhorsing bizarre at first. However, taking a closer look completely shifted my perspective. I believe others can try it too, for example, just by watching the mentioned short film. Embracing understanding opens us up to diverse viewpoints, fostering closeness and sensitivity. And although I personally don't share Alisa's passion for hobbyhorses because I have my own passions, I now respect and appreciate her authenticity. Small changes like this aren't utopian; they can contribute to creating inclusive environments for non-traditional hobbies or even individuals.

*"It's not about becoming a horse or rider; it's about being a hobbyhorsist" (A. Aarniomäki, personal communication, November 13, 2023).*