What unique risks do horse owners and equestrians face, and how can they best protect themselves and their assets?

By Ed Gumbrecht

Beyond the risk of injury to riders and horses, equestrians bear increased personal and commercial liability exposures that need to be individually considered in their personal and family-risk management plans. The London Olympics gave U.S. spectators a chance to peer into the unique world of horses and the equine arts. Racing, show jumping, dressage, eventing and polo were long ago dubbed the “sports of kings” because of their majesty and grandeur, and because of the perceived affluence required to pursue competitive excellence, but also because of the royal scale of the risks athletes, horses and their owners face. Equestrians and horse owners uniquely must contend with:

- Potentially catastrophic sports injuries
- Death or disability of their horses
- Exposure to unique, high-valued properties that include paddocks, barns and stables, as well as horse tack and ranch equipment
- Workman’s compensation claims for injuries to trainers, stable hands, and hired staff
- Commercial farm/ranch exposures, including employment-practices liability, farm-auto, truck and trailer protection
- Personal excess liability claims for serious injury to guests and other third parties

Experienced equestrians understand the scope of these exposures, yet the evolving demographics of horse ownership reveal a broadening range of enthusiasts who may not perceive the risks of their sport. The more than two million individuals who own horses in the U.S. (source: the U.S. Equestrian Federation) are responsible for the care of over nine million horses. Many of these horses are completely uninsured, and many of their owners carry only standard homeowner’s insurance policies. Too many have never consulted with an insurance professional about horse ownership. Moreover, there are a limited number of equine insurance specialists in the country who provide resources in each of the category’s three disciplines: personal property and casualty, horse mortality/disability and commercial farm/ranch insurance.

Here are the key questions horse owners can ask to assess their exposures to risk and the adequacy of their current risk management plan.

1. Does my homeowner’s protection extend to coverage for my horses?
2. Have I identified any commercial activities, such as boarding or riding lessons, that should be considered in my insurance program?
3. Are my horses valued and protected through equine mortality and disability insurance policies?
4. Has there been a recent valuation on my property, including buildings, barns, outbuildings, hardscape, and personal property, including collections, art, and valuable articles?
5. Are hired hands and maintenance staff considered to be employees or independent contractors under local statutes?
6. Does my insurance broker represent “A-rated” insurance companies that provide coverage for: horse mortality and disability; high-value home, auto and personal excess; and farm/ranch options, including workman’s compensation?

As high-profile events like the Olympics continue to raise interest and enthusiasm for the equine sports, people who pursue their passions for horse ownership should consider the risks involved and work with qualified specialists to ensure their interests are appropriately protected.
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