

# **“Dear International Guests and Friends of the Icelandic Horse”: Experience, Meaning and Belonging at a Niche Sporting Event**

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**'Dear International guests and friends of the Icelandic horse': Experience, meaning and belonging at a niche sporting event**

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**Abstract**

Landsmót hestamanna is the national championships for the Icelandic horse and a major festival for the special interest group addressed by the event organisers as *'Friends of the Icelandic horse'*. As the designated country of origin for this particular equine breed, Iceland has a special place in the discursive practices of the communities involved with the Icelandic horse worldwide, while the Icelandic horse plays an important role in the tourism marketing of Iceland as a destination. Participant observation was conducted at the 2012 Landsmót in Reykjavík by two independent observers; one was an international visitor while the other was a native of Iceland. The data collected raise interesting questions about belonging to a niche market and attending associated events, the social construction of event experiences, about being an insider and an outsider, and how these positions are contingent and changeable across spatial and temporal boundaries within the flow of an event.

**Keywords:** Event management, visitor experience, international visitors, nationality, horse, participant observation

## Introduction

Events are complex social settings in which different groups and individuals come together in a shared space and time, usually around a common interest or purpose. Evaluations of what makes an event 'successful' are complex, and vary dependant on the measures and perspectives from which success is judged. Evaluations of success usually include two key elements: operational and administrative efficiency, and the creation of unique and memorable experiences (Morgan, 2008). Event-related literature has been critiqued for being overly focused on the first of these aspects of 'success', leading to concentration on technocratic elements of events management and a neglect of questions of power, representation and understanding the nuances of event experiences (Jago, 2012; Rojek, 2013; Dashper, et al., 2014). A growing body of event management literature is beginning to consider events as meaningful experiences, utilizing ethnographic methods to understand events from the perspectives of different stakeholders, such as spectators, organizers and participants (Holloway et al., 2010; Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Davies et al., 2014).

In this paper, we introduce the case study of Landsmót 2012, a biannual equestrian sports event held in Iceland that offers an interesting site for exploring ideas of identity, meaning, community and unity. It is an event focused around a specialised activity both international in reach and stated aims, yet very local/Icelandic in relation to aspects of organisation, practice, programme and focus. As we demonstrate below, this event highlights many of the paradoxical elements of events and festivals encompassing feelings of belonging and otherness, inclusion and exclusion; feelings that show variation across demographic, temporal and spatial lines within an event.

The paper begins by introducing ideas surrounding the concepts of 'insider' and 'outsider' in relation to event experiences. Key elements that characterise the festival Landsmót and its star – the Icelandic horse – are presented to frame the case study. We then discuss the research method - participant observation – that led us to focus specifically on how this event represents a complex and paradoxical mix of inclusivity and exclusivity, prompting feelings of both belonging and otherness. We use our observations of the event combined with reflections on our own experiences represented in field note data to explore these issues within the context of this event and relate our

findings to wider debates about the role of events both in fostering community cohesion and in exacerbating divisions. Conclusions pertain to events in general, and we consider the use of national symbols and language in shaping the insider/outsider event experience.

### Insider – outsider experiences at events

Events and festivals are increasingly popular within both urban and rural settings and have been shown to make many positive economic, social and cultural contributions to local and national communities (Wood, 2005; Moscardo, 2007). As communal social experiences, events and festivals can unite individuals with others around a shared activity, which helps create a sense of togetherness (Hannam & Halewood, 2006). Events may offer opportunities for social bonding and community development, as groups of participants (including organisers and spectators) come together in a communal space and time that is somehow separate from everyday life (Ziakas & Costa, 2010). There have been numerous studies which have explored ways in which events and festivals can be markers of identity for individuals, fostering a sense of inclusivity and belongingness as part of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991), brought together in time and space at an event site (e.g. Green & Chalip, 1998; Filo et al., 2009). Participants have a shared focus and usually a shared interest in the event and this can promote increased camaraderie, understanding and friendship (Filo et al., 2009).

Sports events have been found to be powerful catalysts for intercommunity engagement, even within divided societies (Schulenkorf, 2010; Schulenkorf et al., 2011). In discussing sport as public celebration Faure (1996) states that sport competitions unify the attending crowd into what he describes as “one people” (p. 88), what we prefer here to speak of as community, reflective of the complex relationships between national and global aspects of sporting worlds. Bairner (2001) claims that contrary to beliefs that globalisation would weaken the links between national identity, nationalism and sport, this relationship remains strong. National symbolism, ritual and traditions are central to the creation of community experiences at sporting events, as we illustrate through our case study example below. Opening ceremonies are used as ‘rites of separation’ that signify the special significance of the event as separate from everyday life (MacAloon, 1982; Toohey & Veal, 2000). For participants and spectators, attendance at ceremonies and ritualistic aspects of the programme are important elements of the event experience (Dashper, 2012). Events can foster feelings of inclusion as participants feel part of an imagined collective group, such as the Icelandic horse world.

While event participation can be an expression of identity and belonging, events and festivals can also be sites of exclusion. Some groups and individuals are included in the event space as insiders – be that as organiser, participant, spectator, sponsor, local community member – and others remain

outsiders, for social, economic, cultural or even political reasons (Clarke & Jepson, 2011). Identity claims always involve an inside *and* an outside, a 'who we are not' as much as 'who we are', and consequently "the logic of identity becomes a logic of a boundary" (Sykes, 2006, p. 20). If events are to be recognised as markers of identity they therefore also must be acknowledged as sites through which boundary lines are drawn between insiders and outsiders. Events and festivals can thus be contradictory spaces that problematize notions of togetherness and highlight tensions implicit in concepts of 'community', 'inclusion' and 'belonging' (Roberts et al., 2014).

One common way in which identity and group membership is performed is through visual markers such as clothing and use of specialist equipment (Goodrum & Hunt, 2011). This is a strong feature of various sporting worlds (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). Specially designed clothing is increasingly an important aspect of practicing sport, be it hiking boots, golf gloves, cycling pants or riding breeches. Clothing and equipment are important elements of sporting participation yet they also act as visual markers of belonging, indicating to others within (and sometimes outside) of the subworld (see Crosset & Beal, 1997) an individual's insider knowledge and commitment to the norms of that group. Within equestrian subworlds riding apparel differs depending on what type of equestrianism is being practiced. For example in dressage clothing is formal and traditional (Dashper & St John, In press), in the cross country section of eventing apparel is brightly coloured and functional, and in the Icelandic horse world the trend is for low boots, wide legged breeches and an Icelandic sweater, hand knitted from Icelandic wool with a typical pattern around the shoulders (Helgadóttir, 2011). While this is the working and leisure outfit for Icelandic riding, there are different requirements for shows and competitions. Members of riding associations and national teams wear team uniforms; in the case of Iceland the uniform is also that of the Trainers' association - a blue blazer, white shirt and red tie (the colours of the Icelandic flag) with white breeches and black knee high riding boots. Competition attire thus has similarities with that seen in other equestrian subworlds (Dashper & St John, In press). In breeding shows the riders usually wear jackets showing the logo of the breeding farm they represent. Equestrian clothing is thus an important visual marker of identity – as an equestrian or 'horsey' person in general, and also as a member of a specific sub-group within the horse world.

A further aspect of identity marking is the display of knowledge. Jaimangal-Jones (2014, p.39) argues that events are often steeped in ritual and symbolism "which are highly significant and vested with meaning for those possessing the cultural knowledge and versed in the discourses associated with such groupings." In the case of Landsmót there is knowledge about the event, the horses and the riders, and the broader Icelandic horse world. Knowledge about the bloodlines of champion horses is valuable social capital. As in other horse worlds, such as that based around Thoroughbred racing,

ideas of 'purity' and 'good' bloodlines and knowledge of these highly specialised issues, distinguishes full 'insiders' from less committed group members (Cassidy, 2002).

Socially acceptable use of terms and specialized vocabulary is important in any subworld. In sports research attention has been focussed on the use of language to include or exclude in relation to gender (Adams et al., 2010) and 'race' (Sanderson, 2010), or within so-called 'alternative' or 'lifestyle' sports, where language acts as a clear sign of differentiation (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). The use of language to include and exclude and to connote origin and authenticity in sports is of interest for this study. Large scale international sporting events recognise the importance of language, setting language policy for the event covering aspects such as translation of documents, interpretation at ceremonies, greetings to visitors, signage, information materials and the provision of services (Djité, 2009). Language is never apolitical, and while international events such as the Olympic Games have a legacy of world powers vying for language supremacy, in the case of Landsmót the native language of the host nation and land of origin of the horse that is the key attraction is spoken by only about 400,000 people. It is thus a rather exclusive code of communication and translation services are necessary for international events hosted in Iceland. In the case of Landsmót it may be argued that an understanding of key terms - in Icelandic - relating to the horse is part of the insider knowledge valued in the subworld and community associated with the event.

Questions of insiderness and belonging are thus complex within sporting subworlds and operate on a number of levels. As several researchers have noted, the 'insider/outsider' phenomenon should not be conceptualised as a static dichotomy (Labaree, 2002; Moran, 2007). Insiderness is situational; a position that needs to be constantly (re)negotiated and is dependent on a multitude of factors (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). We all have multiple positions and identities, each more salient in certain situations and contexts than others (Srivastava, 2006). Events represent collective gatherings within sports communities and are opportunities for participants to display their group membership through attendance, dress, knowledge, language and many other subtle markers. Although events may contribute to feelings of belonging and togetherness for many participants at many times throughout the programme, such a sense of insiderness is rarely consistent and varies across temporal, spatial and individual boundaries. Understandings of event meanings and experiences need to capture these inconsistencies and variations, as we illustrate through our analysis of our case study event, Landsmót.

## The Icelandic horse

Horses were originally brought to Iceland at human settlement by people from Scandinavia and the British Isles around 900 AD, and have been used in transport, agriculture and leisure ever since. The Icelandic horse is the only breed of horse in the country and no records exist of imported horses since around 1100. As Iceland is an island, this isolation can be maintained. This is done both for quarantine reasons and to ensure the purebred status of the Icelandic horse (Reglugerð um uppruna og ræktun íslenska hestsins nr. 442/2011).

The main distinctive feature of the Icelandic horse today is that it has five gaits; pace (skeið) and tölt in addition to walk, trot and gallop/canter that all other breeds have (Björnsson & Sveinsson, 2006). The training, shows and competitions in the Icelandic horse world revolve around the gaits (Stefánsdóttir, Ragnarsson, Gunnarsson & Janson, 2014). Breeding objectives support the breed's versatility, temperament and looks where the horse's multiple colours and full mane are selling points (Reglugerð um uppruna og ræktun íslenska hestsins 442/2011). The gaits are also important in befitting the Icelandic horse for use in tourism as the breed is suited to "changing gaits according to terrain and to vary the pace and rhythm for travelling horse and rider" (Sigurðardóttir, & Helgadóttir, 2015).

There is considerable organisation around the Icelandic horse nationally and internationally in relation to breeding, training, exhibitions and sports events. This includes an official decree on the origin and breeding of the Icelandic horse (Reglugerð um uppruna og ræktun íslenska hestsins 442/2011), an international stud book, events, educational programmes and horse tourism. The International Federation for Associations of the Icelandic Horse (FEIF) has about 50,000 members in 19 countries on three continents (FEIF, 2014a).

In the discourse on the culture around the Icelandic horse, the community engaged with the breed is often called "the Icelandic horse world/community", "Íslandshestaheimurinn" in Icelandic. These terms are used by FEIF in their description of the target market they serve (2015). This group is a defined target market not only for equestrian services and events but also as a loyal niche market for Iceland as a travel destination, both for domestic tourists and international arrivals.

## Horse tourism in Iceland

Researchers have focused on tourism as an arena where nationalism is commodified. “Tourism sights, like censuses, maps, and museums, may contain a discourse of nationalism, allowing hegemonic cultural producers to project their values of national identity and national inclusivity” (Pretes, 2003, p. 139). Iceland has experienced rapid growth in tourism over recent years (Jóhannesson et al., 2010). The destination marketing of Iceland has been framed around concepts of ‘pristine nature’, ‘purity’, and ‘wildness’ (Sæþórsdóttir, 2010; Ólafsdóttir & Runnström, 2011).

In the marketing discourse for the Icelandic horse, the official country of origin (Iceland) is central and conversely the Icelandic horse is an icon used in destination marketing of the whole country (Helgadóttir, 2006; Sigurðardóttir, 2004). Riding is a popular activity and results from visitor surveys show that between 15-20% of international visitors go horse riding in Iceland (Óladóttir, 2004; Óladóttir, 2005; Helgadóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2008). There has been an increase in numbers; in 2014, about 160,000 foreign guests went riding compared to 2002 when the estimated number was 42,000 (Sigurðardóttir, 2005; Sigurðardóttir & Helgadóttir 2015).

Horses and riding have cultural significance in a number of different countries, albeit with local differences and specificities (Buchmann, 2014). Iceland is central to the world of the Icelandic horse, as the designated country of origin for the breed. Unique aspects of the subworld of horsemanship in Iceland pertain both to the characteristics of the breed and to cultural premises for the equestrian arts (Tómas Ingi Olrich, 2001). Equestrianism is one of the most popular sports in Iceland and horse riding is perceived as a family sport, suitable for both men and women, and popular with children (Sólveig Gísladóttir, 2004; Álfgeir Logi Kristjánsson, et al., 2008).

Events are important aspects of horse tourism and can attract visitors to rural areas to sample local equestrian practices, cultures and traditions (Evans & Pickel Chevalier, 2015). The main horse event in Iceland is our case study, the biannual Landsmót, which attracts local, national and international guests.

## Landsmót

Landsmót is the national championships of the Icelandic horse and has been held in Iceland since 1950 (Landsmót, n.d.a). The Landsmót has a counterpart in the World Championships of the Icelandic horse, held on the alternate year outside Iceland. Attendance at Landsmót has risen slightly from

10,000 in 1950 to 11,000-14,000 in the period 2008-2011, and the number of horses registered for breeding shows and competitions rose from 133 in 1950 to 928 in 2008 (Landsmótsnefnd LH, 2011).

Landsmót consists of seven days of competition and shows on two tracks; breeding track and main track. Breeding track hosts assessment shows of stallions and mares and main track hosts the sport competitions and entertainment (Landsmót, n.d. c). The programme for Landsmót is available in a printed book called Mótaskrá; in 2012 this was 351 pages with content in Icelandic and English. It included information on the equestrian sports associations, the Landsmót programme, the venues, the competition programme and competition regulations, information on the horses competing, as well as a map of the venue, local bus schedule and advertisements.

About 100 of the 351 pages are listings of the breeding horses. The listings include PIC (personal identification code), microchip number, name, colour, place of birth, breeder, owners, lineage two generations back, last assessment/competition scores, rider and the associated equestrian club (Landsmót 2012, p. 197-314). The sport competitions at Landsmót include the Gæðingakeppni A and B, Young riders (18-20 years), youth (14-17) and children's (13 years or younger) classes, a tölt competition and a race. The Icelandic word 'gæðingur' refers to an excellent riding horse and this word is used both in the Icelandic and English text of the Mótaskrá. It explains that the goal of the A competition is "to find the best 5 gaited horse" (Landsmót 2012, p. 60) and the B competition is "to find the best 4 gaited horse" (Landsmót 2012, p. 87).

Trials for entering Landsmót competitions are held by local equestrian sports clubs and horse breeding clubs around Iceland and these are important local events leading up to Landsmót. The Icelandic federation of equestrian associations provides the regulatory framework for the trials (Landsmótsnefnd LH, 2011).

On the 2014 event website Landsmót was introduced with this statement and invitation to the reader: "The Icelandic Horse is the national treasure of the Icelanders, come and take part in this country festival called Landsmót where Icelanders celebrate the wonderful and amazing Icelandic Horse" (Landsmót n.d., b). The website emphasised that the horses are the core attraction, describing the event as 'a country village' with something for everyone, especially children, with camping and entertainment. At the opening ceremony of Landsmót 2012, our case study event, spectators were welcomed with the greeting "Dear international guests and friends of the Icelandic horse", emphasizing that this was an international event for those who share a passion for this breed of animal.

Landsmót was the subject of a thorough case study of event management where six consecutive Landsmóts were analysed through documents, interviews, focus groups and a visitor survey conducted at the 2008 event (Snorradóttir, 2011). The Landsmót committee of the Icelandic Association of Equestrians took up the main findings from this study from 2012 onwards. The key findings were that the target group for the event is loyal, happy with the event, recognise the horse as the key attraction and that other entertainment such as evening programmes should be “low key” while entertainment for children was seen as important (Landsmótsnefnd LH, 2011).

Snorradóttir’s (2011) survey among visitors at the World Championships of the Icelandic horse in Switzerland in 2009 measured their experience of and attitudes to Landsmót. About half of the respondents had attended Landsmót, and of those, again about half had attended more than once. On a Likert scale, 83% were either satisfied or very satisfied with their stay at Landsmót. When asked more specifically about the organisation of the event satisfaction dropped to 78%. Information provided during Landsmót was satisfactory for 60% of respondents and dissatisfaction was reported by 14%. Respondents were asked how satisfied /unsatisfied they were with the information provided for foreigners by the commentators over the sound system at Landsmót and only 35% were satisfied while 30% were not satisfied. These results suggest that provision of information and issues of language are areas that require attention and improvement in the management of Landsmót, which resonates with our findings reported below.

Events such as Landsmót are a vital part of the ongoing invention and construction of equestrian heritage based on the Icelandic breed of horse (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). The denomination of origin (Iceland) is now a construct that is used as a brand in the equestrian sector and the horse has become a symbol in the branding of Iceland as a destination (Helgadoóttir, 2006; Helgadoóttir, 2015; Helgadoóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2008). So the ‘international friends’ are not only friends of the horse, but also of the construct ‘Iceland’ as well. Part of an affiliation with the Icelandic horse for enthusiasts from other countries is visiting Iceland and taking part in the Icelandic horse scene, which prides itself on being international and friendly. National branding of Iceland as a destination that is ‘pure’ and ‘wild’ is a key element in the construction of the Icelandic horse scene internationally. The festival of Landsmót can be seen as the pinnacle of this international/Icelandic horse subworld.

### Research methods

While event management literature often focuses on the social, economic, cultural, political and environmental ‘impacts’ of events, research focusing on event experiences and meanings is relatively

recent and emerging (e.g. Holloway et al., 2010; Mackellar, 2013; Ziakas & Boukas, 2013). Following calls from scholars advocating a more phenomenological perspective for research on events (Getz et al., 2001; Pettersson & Getz, 2009; Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Davies et al., 2014), we conducted a study based on participant observation of Landsmót 2012 in Reykjavík. Our initial aim with this project was to observe the spatial and temporal qualities of the event by noting how event spectators moved around the event site, and the extent to which this movement was influenced by the event programme, the physical environment of the event site and external factors such as the weather and time of day.

Ethnographic methods were employed in this study, with two observers independently recording their experiences and observations as guests at the event, following the event programme and moving around the event site (see also Pettersson & Getz, 2009). Recording was systematic and continuous with field notes and photographs chronologically following the event as experienced from buying the ticket to leaving the site for the last time. Comparison between the two sets of independent observations began after the field notes had been completed and photographs tagged and organised by each observer.

Each of the authors acted as an independent observer, taking notes and photographs according to a pre-agreed schedule. For example, every 15 minutes we recorded our observations in note format and through photography based around pre-established criteria (e.g., crowd behaviour, weather, event programme). We are both involved in the horse world, and have both previously attended Icelandic horse championships and so expected that this shared background would enable us to follow the programme and activities at the event. Guðrún is Icelandic, lives in Iceland and owns and rides Icelandic horses for recreation. Katherine is British (and does not speak Icelandic), lives in the UK and owns and rides non-Icelandic horses for recreation and sport competition, but has knowledge of Icelandic horse events and has researched the subworld of Icelandic horse riding in the UK. Therefore, although our backgrounds differ in some important ways we expected our shared knowledge of the horse world, and the Icelandic horse subworld in particular, to enable us both to engage with all aspects of the event. The Landsmót is marketed as an international event, suitable for international visitors, so we did not expect language barriers to be much of an issue.

We conducted data collection independently, meeting at the end of each day and discussing our experiences only in general terms, leaving analysis until after the event finished. In addition to more objective elements such as the time of day, density of crowd and activities in the programme of events, we included our own subjective impressions. Borrowing from analytic autoethnographic traditions (Anderson, 2006) we wanted to include our personal reflections on the event in order to

add to the richness of our data and to contribute a more individual and intimate perspective on event experiences. Autoethnography is a method of linking personal stories and experiences to wider social and cultural issues (see Anderson, 2006; Coghlan, 2012; Dashper, 2013). Personal experiences are valuable sources of data that can help to capture the nuances of event experiences 'from the inside' which can then contribute to understanding the lived realities of events from different perspectives (Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Dashper, 2015).

Thematic analysis was conducted on the field notes and photographs in order to draw out overarching codes and themes emerging from the data (Aronson, 1995). In the first round of analysis of field notes one theme that became evident was the Icelandicness of this event which is marketed to international as well as domestic 'friends of the Icelandic horse'. Although ostensibly an international event, the event experience was strongly Icelandic. The use of language, the inherent assumptions about background knowledge, the use of national symbols such as the national flag, the presence of the president, the use of national dress as well as the more intangible experiences of visitor and staff actions were experienced very differently by an Icelandic to a British observer. This realisation led us to question what it means to be an 'insider' or an 'outsider' at an event or festival. Our assumptions that we would both be 'insiders', as a result of our prior equestrian knowledge and experience, were challenged when we began to compare our notes and reflections. Katherine experienced more of a distinction between the 'Icelandicness', which was not part of her background, and 'International' elements of the event, which she felt herself relating to as a foreign guest. Guðrún on the other hand saw the distinctions less in terms of international-Icelandic than as related to the level of Icelandic horse knowledge and expertise among both Icelandic and foreign visitors and event staff.

In the following sections we use extracts from our field notes to explore some of these feelings of belongingness and otherness that can arise as part of the event experience. We acknowledge that this can only be a partial exploration of the event experience, based as it is on just two personal accounts and sets of field note data. However, drawing on autoethnographic traditions, we argue that such personal accounts can be revealing of wider issues and experiences and can thus add to our understanding of social phenomena, including events, festivals and tourism (Anderson, 2006; Coghlan, 2012; Dashper, In press).

## Results

Analysis of our field notes resulted in the identification of two key themes relevant to our discussion in this article. First, we discuss the ways in which Landsmót 2012 acted as a site of inclusivity and an opportunity for spectators to demonstrate their identity as a member of a wider community of Icelandic horse enthusiasts. We then go on to discuss how the 'Icelandicness' of this international event created barriers and confusion for some spectators, indicative of the paradoxical mix of togetherness and isolation that can characterise event experiences. Events are social constructions, experienced differently by different attendees, based on their engagement in the event, personal background and experiences. Our findings illustrate the social constructedness of event experiences as the notes of two field researchers at the same event illustrate considerable variation. Language is not the only barrier to inclusion, and we discuss how feelings of both belongingness and exclusion are influenced by a variety of factors at events and festivals.

### Identity and belonging

The Landsmót is an event with a clear focus – the Icelandic horse – and the programme of the event is designed around horse sport and breeding classes, with horse-related entertainment included. The majority of spectators at the event are there because they like the Icelandic horse and are interested in the breed and related sports activities. In this sense they are a real rather than imagined community as they have chosen to be at the event. As an event with such a specific and specialised focus, it is not surprising that attendance at the Landsmót functions as a key marker of identity for those within the Icelandic horse community, both in Iceland and internationally. For individuals in this subworld attending the Landsmót demonstrates to others that they are a committed 'insider' in the Icelandic horse community. This is communicated verbally and through the purchase and display of event memorabilia, such as shirts, hats and stickers.

The opening ceremony involved a diversity of signs and symbols of Icelandic nationalism; the women giving prizes wearing Icelandic national dress, the use of the Icelandic flag and music, as Guðrún noted:

All rise as the national anthem of Iceland is performed by male choir and trumpets.  
Riders remount, the crowd still standing and the trumpets now play the tune to a well-known nationalistic poem.

Although such symbols express an Icelandic nationalism they were presented within the context of an opening ceremony - aspects of an event which are often filled with ritual and symbolism (Toohey & Veal, 2000) - so this was not exclusionary to either international or domestic 'friends of the

Icelandic horse'. Building on shared knowledge and understanding within this community of the close links between the Icelandic horse and its country of origin, Iceland, the use of symbols of Icelandic nationalism in the opening ceremony worked to remind all spectators of the uniqueness of the Icelandic horse within the wider international equestrian community and in comparison to other breeds of horses. One key element in the mythology and symbolism surrounding the Icelandic horse is that it has been illegal to import horses to Iceland since about 1100. However, it is permissible to export horses from Iceland and the breed has become popular in many other countries, notably Scandinavia, Germany and USA, building an international fan base for the breed. The perceived genetic purity and uniqueness of the Icelandic horse is closely tied to Iceland as a country, and so use of Icelandic national symbolism in the ceremonies of the Landsmót actually worked to unify guests at the event – both international and domestic – around a shared understanding and interest in this breed of horse and its country of origin.

Many spectators at Landsmót demonstrated their membership of the subworld of the Icelandic horse through their dress, as Katherine noted:

Lots of the spectators (men, women, children) are wearing the 'riding trousers' . . . Quite a few are wearing jackets of different designs but with some kind of image of an Icelandic horse, plus a name – possibly representing affiliation to different horse farms?

The 'riding trousers' referred to in this note are of a style that is specific to the Icelandic horse community, differing from the 'jodhpurs' and 'breeches' worn in most other horse-related subworlds by being designed for wearing with shoes or ankle boots rather than long boots. The designs on the jackets are also specific to the Icelandic horse community. This illustrates how dress can be a key marker of identity and is often used by group members to signify to others – insiders as well as outsiders – their affiliation with this specific subworld. Such visual markers delineate group membership and are visible to all, even those outside of the 'in-crowd' of a particular subworld. However, some more subtle markers (such as jackets showing affiliation to particular horse farms, in this case) may only be meaningful to other full members who will understand the significance of these markers. Katherine, although not a member of the specific subworld of the Icelandic horse, was able to recognise these visual markers of identity amongst the crowd at the event, even if she did not always understand their full meaning and significance.

Another way in which group membership can be demonstrated is through the exhibition of specialist knowledge about the activity under question. This extract from Guðrún's notes illustrates the level of embedded knowledge about the Icelandic horse, breeding and breeding classes, that characterises many members of this community:

The crowd at breeding track: People talk but keep an ear out for the results of the breeding judges, jotting them down in the event book if they are interested in the horse. In a few cases there are significant differences from previous assessments at events and people comment on that and on their likes and dislikes of the horses and their blood relatives . . . Behind me a man in his thirties keeps a running commentary in Icelandic about the horses, his companion - another man, similar age - agrees and asks the occasional question.

However, although one may be born into this subworld and hence brought to the event from an early age, actually liking breeding track (a highly specialised space at the event, focused more on horse business than entertainment) may be an acquired taste, as Guðrún noted:

[a boy about 7 says in Icelandic]: “Dad, I think breeding track sucks, it’s just djing this way djing that way all the time it’s really lame! Daaad don’t you think it sucks?” “It’s supposed to be this way darling” “But WHY?” [pause, then pensively] “Dad, it is more fun in H...” [this may refer to a kids soccer meet, but maybe not].

The breeding track is a specialised zone at this event. It is a shop window for breeders who are hoping for good ratings for their horse(s) that will then sell for a good price or for the stallions to be in demand for breeding purposes. The spectators at the breeding track appeared to understand the assessment process that took place on the track, although it was never explained to the watching crowd. They followed the assessment intently, many making use of the Mótaskrá for note-taking and discussed individuals, offspring and parentage of the horses shown as well as previous marks awarded, if applicable. Knowledge was thus assumed and, as noted in the field note extract above, many participants demonstrated their knowledge, understanding and engagement in these processes verbally and through recording and discussion of marks at breeding track. In such ways, participants show that they are not just casual observers of these specialised activities.

Even away from the specialised zone of the breeding track, spectators at this event demonstrated collective knowledge about how to behave at a sports event that involves horses – animals who will respond with alarm to excessive noise and shouting, as Katherine noted:

The music playing is matched to what the horses are doing. For the slow tölt, the music is really slow and calm. The crowd seems to be watching carefully, but they remain quiet, mirroring the calmness of the music and the slow tölt. The crowd waits until the horses finish the slow tölt and then burst into applause – shows consideration for the

horses and riders and a level of understanding about how to behave so as not to put the horses off.

At most sports events spectators are encouraged to shout and cheer competitors along as this can add to the atmosphere and levels of enjoyment at the event. At Landsmót spectators knew that this was not appropriate behaviour whilst the horses were performing, even though there were no announcements made to instruct spectators to stay quiet until the horses had finished. The crowd thus exhibited a form of collective knowledge about appropriate behaviour. Spectators at sports events often display such collective knowledge, such as in the stillness and silence required for snooker, or the noise and cheering encouraged at darts events.

For non-Icelandic guests – ‘international friends of the Icelandic horse’ – attendance at the Landsmót carries cultural capital within the Icelandic horse community of their home country. To attend this event – seen as the pinnacle of all Icelandic horse sports events in the world – is to show dedication and attachment to this subworld. Attendance at the Landsmót for international guests is a relatively expensive commitment, including tickets, merchandise, refreshments, flights and accommodation. Katherine engaged in conversation with a group of British spectators at the event. The following field note illustrates how, for these guests, attendance at the Landsmót is a significant marker of their identity as a member of the international Icelandic horse community:

They [this group of British spectators] said they were enjoying themselves at the event and that it compared well to other Landsmóts they had been to. They liked the fact that they had options about where to stay in Reykjavik, although getting accommodation had been difficult as everything of a “reasonable price” sold out early . . . Their conversation over the afternoon had a lot to do with identifying horses that their horse, or someone they knew, was related to. There was quite a bit of name-dropping with riders, breeders and trainers and showing that they know Iceland and have links here, especially through their horses.

This group of seven British adults displayed their affiliation with the international Icelandic horse community visually, through their choice to wear ‘riding trousers’, as discussed above. In addition they were keen to show their dedication to the group through their knowledge of specific horses, bloodlines and riders as this level of knowledge characterises their allegiance to the subworld and distinguishes them from casual spectators and enthusiasts. Important to these international guests is the link to Iceland the country, as well as to the Icelandic horse. To be a fully committed member of this international group is to also be interested in Iceland, the horse’s country of origin, and it is important for members to demonstrate that they have visited the country previously and have links

with people and places there. This demonstrates the close links between the Icelandic horse and the construct 'Iceland' for these international guests. The following extract further illustrates how specific local knowledge – this time of the norms of Landsmót as an event, and of Icelandic styles of partying – carries cultural capital within this group of international guests:

The one [British spectator] who is camping this time said that you get no sleep until about 5am when they [other campers] pass out and don't wake up before 9am and are all hungover. Here [this event site] you can hear the music really loud from the campsite – but she said this is exactly what she expected, she knew what the campsite would be like and selected it on cost – “it was either stay on the campsite and be able to come to Landsmót, or not stay on the campsite and not be able to come”.

She was able to demonstrate to the other international guests in the group her prior experience of Landsmót – “this is exactly what she expected” – and her dedication, through her decision to endure the campsite or not be able to afford to attend the event at all. For international guests at this event, demonstrations of affiliation to the subworld and dedication to its norms and practices are enacted in slightly different ways to that of the Icelanders, mentioned above, but both international and Icelandic guests illustrate their group membership through attendance at this event, the flagship event for this particular sporting subworld.

An international or an Icelandic event – a moot point?

I hear greetings in Icelandic, English and German ... The women beside me speak Finnish, behind me there is Swedish ...I hear Swedish, Icelandic, English and German spoken.

The crowd at the event was multilingual, but the programme and the site were only partly so. The signs announcing the availability of things like local culinary delights were only aimed at the Icelandic speaking audience, as Guðrún noted:

The concession vans are lined up at the top of main track; people line up for refreshments at the concession vans, a sign says meat soup and sheep's heads – in Icelandic.

In other respects, however, the organisers showed an awareness of the multilinguality of the crowd while at the same time creating and maintaining exclusive features of the Landsmót as Guðrún's notes reveal:

I have just bought the event book [Mótaskrá – a term only used to my knowledge about this event, otherwise you speak of ‘the programme’], that includes all the horses with parents, the schedule and various info in 3 languages (Icelandic, English and German)

Our results indicate an interesting ambiguity between the national and international role and character of the event. While on the one hand it was attractive to overseas equestrians as it enabled them to clearly show allegiance with the international Icelandic horse community, the event was not completely accessible to international guests. The non-Icelandic speaker was at times mystified by the proceedings and challenged in navigating the site, the programme and in understanding the ethos of the event. In this situation it is valuable cultural capital to have command of some important Icelandic terms and phrases such as the terms for the five gaits, the different tracks, and the competitions that the event is made up of, as these terms were not explained in the book or during announcements at the event.

At Landsmót 2012 language, and the use of national symbols and imagery, acted to include and exclude different spectators at the event at different times and locations. It was difficult to detect rhyme and reason in the use of language over the loudspeakers. Guðrún’s field notes have various references to the use of different languages:

[Breeding track] The speaker announces in 3 languages [the same woman as the first day]

[Main track] The announcer uses the famous Churchill quote to try and raise the anticipation and importance of the occasion – “There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man”... The speaker asks people to be patient and reminds us that a raffle in support of the national team is on at the breeding track where the gallop is to take place. This announcement is only in Icelandic. ... The male announcer speaks Icelandic, English and German to explain the rules for choosing the best breeding farm

[Main track]. Two announcers, they announce in English and Icelandic... The two announcers are quite different, both have an engaging style working with the excitement but the Icelandic one speaks with great familiarity about the riders

[Closing ceremony]The minister of agriculture enters midfield to give a speech, he speaks Icelandic, English and German and he declares the event closed. At the post competition event in the food hall the champions are called onto a stage at the end of

the hall, one by one and interviewed by a female announcer [TV news woman and an equestrian herself] and an English speaking announcer translates.

Announcements regarding children were delivered in Icelandic only, suggesting that organisers assumed children at the event to be Icelandic speakers, as Guðrún's note illustrates:

The speaker [in Icelandic] asks the parents of the children who are playing with the cord demarcating the main track to remove them. The children remove themselves. Perhaps it is more likely that the children are local as I hear mostly Icelandic.

Some of the same aspects remain mysterious even with the facility of language. Event management texts underscore the importance of clear signage and defined spaces in order to facilitate easy and safe movement around the site. This was often not successfully achieved at Landsmót 2012, as Guðrún noted:

On the way back I see an Icelandic family [I know them] being escorted from the riders' entrance to main track at the intersection [I find it understandable that they took the wrong turn as when you arrive from the parking lot or camping a big gate is open but the pedestrian traffic should go past it and up the hill]. Even the parking lot is tricky: A man and a boy get into the car next to me and turn the wrong way to get out. Getting in is not straight forward either, people are still arriving at the site. Three adults speaking Icelandic look for a gate onto the site.

Guest confusion about how to navigate the site appeared to transcend language barriers, as both Icelanders and international guests were observed looking confused and lost, or being escorted by event staff back to the designated public areas. However, there were some aspects of the event programme and experience in which language, and cultural knowledge about Icelandic practices, norms and symbols, were important for understanding the programme. These issues came to the fore primarily during the symbolic, ritualistic elements of the event programme like the opening ceremony and displays put on for entertainment, more than sport, purposes.

The 'gallop race' offers one such example. This race was presented on the event programme as different from the rest of the scheduled activities, and spectators were encouraged by the event team to leave the main arena site and head to the breeding track where this 'entertainment' would be taking place. Guðrún's field notes merely record that the event took place, and we suggest that as an Icelandic she already knew the purpose and format of the gallop race and thought it unremarkable. However Katherine, as an international guest, had a different perspective on this event and her field notes indicate a high level of confusion and bewilderment:

Every now and again some horses gallop past but I have no idea if the race has begun; how many times do they go round, who is racing who (there seems to be more than one group in action)? Some of the crowd does seem to know what is going on as this may be a format they are familiar with . . . Another 3 horses gallop past and the crowd gets excited again. But what is happening? Where is the finish? Where did they start? I have no idea what is going on! . . . There seems to be some kind of prize-giving now, but who has won? What have they won? How was it decided? I didn't see a finish. There is a trophy being given out by a woman in traditional dress and official photos being taken, but it is not clear what is happening.

For international guests the gallop race was impenetrable as the format was unclear to the inexperienced spectator and there was no explanation offered. Billed as a 'race', a familiar sporting format to most sport spectators, the gallop race did not seem to follow the established format of a race, which would normally have a clear start and finish line, adding to the confusion of some guests who were unsettled by the unusual format of a supposedly familiar 'race' event. At moments like this the sense of 'otherness' of non-Icelandic spectators was keenly felt, as without the cultural knowledge of how such events work it was impossible to follow what was going on.

The opening ceremony offered further examples, as it drew heavily on Icelandic imagery, symbolism and cultural traditions which were easily recognised by Icelandic spectators, as Guðrún noted:

A few plastic lawn chairs are lined up at the west end of the main track and are reserved for dignitaries. The president, ministers, the bishop and the mayor, as well as club reps.

International guests could follow some of what was happening in the opening ceremony and were able to recognise and appreciate some of the traditional Icelandic practices, as discussed above. However, throughout the opening ceremony a number of speakers clearly differentiated between Icelanders and 'international guests' or 'foreign friends', and in so doing created a sense of otherness for non-Icelandic spectators, as Katherine noted:

The male choir has started to sing from the stage at the side of the main track. I think male choirs are a big cultural tradition in Iceland and this seems to be marking the beginning of the opening ceremony . . . The speeches begin. The first is by the mayor or some other official; he speaks in Icelandic for quite a long time. The crowd laugh and clap at some of the things he says. Then he gives a much shorter speech in English, starting "Dear international guests" . . . The next speaker (not sure who he is)[Mayor of Reykjavik, Guðrún adds] then spoke first in Icelandic and then in English (much shorter).

He said that a key reason why Reykjavik was chosen to host the 2012 event was so that “foreign friends” could enjoy the accommodation, restaurants, museums etc. that the city has to offer. But the event does not seem to be really targeted at ‘foreign friends’ so I wonder if this really was a reason in the choice of venue . . .

However, although our field notes clearly show that Guðrún, as an Icelander and native speaker, could follow what was happening and understand the cultural references better than Katherine, a ‘foreign friend’, this did not mean that Guðrún always felt like a full ‘insider’ at the event either. Being an Icelander she was able to understand linguistically what was happening, but being an Icelander brought its own problematic elements as part of this project, as she reflected in her field notes:

For the native speaker the participant observation is sometimes too close for comfort, meeting people I know and being able to understand what people are saying makes taking photographs almost like spying . . . Being one of only 400,000 Icelanders and the handful of people likely to be doing research at Landsmót means that I am not as anonymous as I would like . . . Sitting on the patio provided by the insurance company that offers free coffee, enjoying their free coffee. I congratulated the saleswoman on the décor . . . She recognises me from last Landsmót; “you were doing some research, sitting on our patio from time to time writing?” [So much for being unobtrusive as an observer, I can’t deny but try not to get engaged in conversation about the research].

Our field notes illustrate the paradoxical nature of event experiences and notions of belonging and otherness, feelings that fluctuate across spatial and temporal boundaries over the course of an event or festival. In the context of this research we were researchers, event attendees, horse enthusiasts, Icelander, ‘international guest’ and much else besides. This shows the complexity of the idea of ‘event experiences’ which are multifaceted, situational and dynamic. In the concluding section we discuss the implications of our findings in relation to wider issues of inclusivity, exclusivity, language and symbolism as key components of event experiences.

## Conclusions

The Landsmót is not only a sports competition and horse show. It is marketed and received by visitors as a celebration of the Icelandic horse, a breed that thousands of horse enthusiasts worldwide have formed an attachment to. This attachment comes with baggage. While the

marketing of the horse requires it to become international, the niche carved out for this particular breed is within the discourse of Icelandic nationalism.

However, many elements of the event were not easily accessible or understandable to non-Icelandic visitors and so these international 'friends of the Icelandic horse' were placed in a liminal position – as fans of the horse they were 'inside' the event, but as non-Icelanders they frequently struggled to follow what was happening. These feelings of confusion and switching between inclusion and exclusion were not only felt by international guests, however, and this case study illustrates just how complicated event experiences can be, even for those who should be classed as 'insiders' (in this case, Icelanders who are also 'friends of the Icelandic horse').

The role of events in the commodification of nationalism within tourism is an underexplored issue. As events are used in the creation of imagined communities, they both include and exclude groups of visitors. The use of national symbols in events can turn them from sites of inclusion to sites of exclusion.

The guests at Landsmót are a niche market in tourism; they are as the event organisers address them: 'Friends of the Icelandic horse'. They show their allegiance in various ways; by visiting the country of origin, by wearing the Icelandic sweater, by knowing what tölt is – and by hanging out at Landsmót. While Bourdieu (1984) discusses the role of sport in building and maintaining social distinctions using the large scale social constructs of class and gender, the results reported here suggest a complex set of distinctions involving special interest, origin and role at an event where the issue of the horses' origin – one is tempted to say "nationality" - figures prominently. In many respects 'friends of the Icelandic horse' undoubtedly share much with other connoisseurs or special interest groups attending events that are part of the festivalization of the subworld in question, in this case Icelandic equestrianism.

What sets this event apart is the centrality of national symbolism inherent in the special interest itself - the Icelandic horse - in attracting visitors to the event and to the destination. The language/nationality use that is at the heart of the event results in changing feelings of inclusivity/exclusivity for different guests and at different times and spaces at the event site. This suggests that event organisers need to consider carefully how event programmes and sites are designed and performed as event attendees have a variety of backgrounds and levels of knowledge (be that knowledge of language, of national norms and symbols, of the specific activity that is the focus of the event etc.). The aim should be to ensure the event is accessible and enjoyable for the target market while still allowing for a measure of exclusivity for the connoisseurs among the attendees.

Inclusion/exclusion as categories of analysis are a bit too generic to be useful here. Everyone at the event is included as a participant but some are more exclusively on the inside. Despite the advantages of 'insider knowledge' facilitated in part through language and nationality, it would be oversimplifying to read the data as Icelandic=insider, Foreigner=outsider. The case shows a more complex or diffuse array of borders between inside and outside.

For tourism and event management the study thus raises interesting questions and issues regarding the insider–outsider experience, how language, layout and labour of the event affect programme, site and visitor. The results suggest that there is yet untapped potential in the deliberate, concise and systematic use of distinguishing elements such as language, symbolism, myths of origin and markers of identity to enhance the visitor experience of community.

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