



VET'S STALL

Interpreting Your Horse's Body Score

HORSES WILL BE HEALTHIER AND HAPPIER IF KEPT AT AN OPTIMUM WEIGHT.

Guest Columnist

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OK, the vet was out and said your horse has a body condition score of 5. That's perfect, right where you want your horse to be. Good job, your horse is not too fat or too skinny. Unfortunately, it does not refer to your horse's muscle tone, protein, vitamin or mineral status, or whether he will win the next race. It refers to stored fat. Body condition scoring is a classification system used to determine relative fatness or body condition of horses. The system was developed in 1983 at Texas A&M University by Don Henneke and co-workers.

Horses are ranked from 1 to 9, with one being poor and 9 being very fat. Working horses should be at a score of 5–6 and brood mares at a score of 6–7.

If your horse is below a score of 4, call

your vet, or the neighbors likely will. Skinny horses are either being pushed away from the feed by the herd, or they have bad teeth, bad hay, bad worms, bad owners that aren't feeding them enough, or bad illness inside. Either way, a score of below 4 is bad. Skinny horses have decreased immunity, decreased work tolerance, decreased cold tolerance and impaired reproductive efficiency.

Horses above a score of 8 are too heavy. They are predisposed to colic, laminitis, founder, and have decreased work tolerance and decreased reproductive efficiency. Some researchers feel it can predispose the horse to metabolic syndromes.

So how do you score a horse? Observe the horse from the side at a distance of about 15 feet. Horses with noticeable ribs will score 4 or lower. If the ribs are not noticeable it will score 5 or higher. Now, a well-muscled Quarter Horse will show ribs and be just fine. Racing Thoroughbreds will also show ribs when in condition. We are talking about old Midnight out on pasture. Horses with long hair, such as November through April, will need closer inspection. You need to touch them and feel the ribs. If your fingers drop in between the ribs like a washboard, it is a grade 4 or lower. If you can feel and count the ribs but only slightly play over them, it is a score of 5 or greater.

Next look along the back. There is a crease along the very top and middle of your horse's back. If it is level, that would be a grade 5. If the crease will hold water that would be a score of 6 or above. If water would run off the back, that is a grade 4 or below. If the dorsal spinous processes along the back stand up, you can feel the shoulder blade and vertebra in the neck, and the tailhead is very prominent, that would be a grade 2 or lower. Please call someone. If the horse has a crested neck, the shoulder blends into the barrel, and you have to push to feel a rib, that horse is grade 8 or above.

There are also weight tapes that can be used to judge a horse's weight and measure gain or loss. Or, you can estimate your horse's body weight by measuring in inches the heart girth just behind the withers and elbows. Now square that number (multiply it times itself), then multiply that number times the distance in inches from the point of the shoulder to the point of the buttocks. Now take this product and divide it by 330 to get the weight in pounds.

Your horse is going to be happier and healthier if you keep it at an optimum weight.

Enjoy your horse.

— Dr. Johnson

Dr. Johnson is an avid horseman as well as a veterinarian with Blue Sky Animal Hospital in Wyoming, Minn. He can be reached at 651-462-7387. For more animal-care information, visit Blue Sky's web site at www.blueskyanimal.com.

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