4-1995

Condition Scoring for Your Horse

Craig H. Wood

University of Kentucky, craig.wood@uky.edu

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/anr_reports

Part of the Animal Sciences Commons

Repository Citation

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/anr_reports/10

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Cooperative Extension Service at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Agriculture and Natural Resources Publications by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
In a world where millions of people are taking steps to improve their own physical condition in order to live healthier lives, it only stands to reason that this same concept would be applied to other aspects of their lives and businesses. In Kentucky where horses are a multi-billion dollar industry, the health and welfare (condition) of the horses are of utmost importance to their owners. The ability to accurately assess a horse's body condition, which is vital to its welfare, weighs heavily on the industry.

The old saying “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” has never been more appropriate than in the body condition of horses. Beauty in one owner's eye is fat in another's. Hence the problem: What is the appropriate body condition of a horse, and what would be acceptable to the industry? A body conditioning scoring system developed by Dr. Don Henneke has served to provide a standard scoring system for the industry which can be used across breeds and by all horse people. The system assigns a score to a particular body condition (1 to 9) (Table 1) as opposed to vague words such as “good,” “fair,” “bad,” or “poor,” which leave differences in interpretation to the eye of the beholder.

The horse's body condition measures the balance between intake and expenditure of energy. Body condition can be affected by a variety of factors such as: food availability, reproductive activities, weather, performance or work activities, parasites, dental problems, and feeding practices. The actual body condition of a horse can also affect its reproductive capability, performance ability, work function, health status, and endocrine status. Therefore, it is important to achieve and maintain proper body condition. In order to do this, one must evaluate body fat in relationship to body musculature.

Body Condition Scoring System

The system developed by Dr. Henneke assigns a numerical value to fat deposition as it occurs in various places on the horse's body. The system works by assessing fat both visually and by palpation in each of six areas. Horses accumulate fat in these areas in a set order. For instance, a horse that scores 7 will have the same amount of fat as any other horse that scores 7, whether he is a thoroughbred, quarter horse or Arabian.

Figure 1. Fat is assessed in the following areas: the loin, ribs, tailhead, withers, neck, and shoulders (Figure 1). A numerical value is assigned based on the cumulative fat in all six areas (Table 1).

Loin. An extremely thin horse will have a negative crease and a ridge down the back where the spinous processes projects up. No fat can be felt along the back of the horse. However, this is one of the first areas to fill in as a horse gains weight. Fat is first laid down around body organs, then along the base of the spinous processes. As the horse gets fatter, an obvious crease or depression forms down the back because of fat accumulation along the spinous processes.

Ribs. The next place to look is in the ribs. Visually assess the rib area, then run your fingers across the rib cage. A very thin horse will have prominent ribs, easily seen and felt, with no fat padding. As the horse begins to gain weight, a little padding can be felt around the ribs; by level 5 the ribs will no longer be visible, but can be easily palpated by passing a hand down the rib cage. Once the horse progresses towards obesity, feeling the ribs will be impossible.

Tailhead. In a very thin horse up to a number 3, the tailhead is prominent and easily discernible. Once the horse starts gaining weight, fat fills in around the tailhead. Fat can easily be palpated, and as the horse becomes obese, the fat will feel soft and begin to bulge.
You Make the Call

Determine the body condition of the following three horses based on the system in Table 1.

**HORSE 1**
This horse would have a condition score of 3.5. The neck is thin, but not accentuated as required to be a 3. The withers are thin, there is fat buildup halfway on the spinous processes, and the tailhead is prominent but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. The ribs are easily discernible with no fat being deposited behind the shoulder.

**HORSE 2**
Horse 2 is a horse that is in proper body condition. His score would be a 5. His neck blends smoothly into his body, the withers are rounded over the spinous processes, and the back is level with no positive or negative crease. Ribs cannot be visually distinguished but can be easily felt and the shoulder blends smoothly into the body.

**HORSE 3**
This horse is obviously fleshy with a condition score of 7. Fat is beginning to be deposited along the top of the neck as well as in and around the withers. This mare is beginning to have a positive crease down her back. The individual ribs are not visible and are becoming increasingly difficult to feel. Fat has been deposited behind the shoulder, but the area behind the shoulder is not yet flush with the body.
Table 1. Characteristics of Individual Condition Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Neck</th>
<th>Withers</th>
<th>Loin</th>
<th>Tailhead</th>
<th>Ribs</th>
<th>Shoulder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Poor</td>
<td>Bone structure easily noticeable, animal extremely emaciated, no fatty tissue can be felt</td>
<td>Bone structure easily noticeable</td>
<td>Spinous processes project prominently</td>
<td>Spinous processes project prominently</td>
<td>Tailhead (pinbone) and hook bones project prominently</td>
<td>Bone structure easily noticeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Very Thin</td>
<td>Faintly discernable, animal emaciated</td>
<td>Faintly discernable</td>
<td>Slight fat covering over base of spinous processes, Transverse processes of lumbar vertebrae feel rounded. Spinous processes are prominent.</td>
<td>Tailhead prominent</td>
<td>Slight fat cover over ribs. Ribs easily discernable.</td>
<td>Shoulder accentuated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Thin</td>
<td>Neck accentuated</td>
<td>Withers accentuated</td>
<td>Fat buildup halfway on spinous processes but easily discernable. Transverse processes cannot be felt.</td>
<td>Tailhead prominent but individual vertebrae cannot be visually identified. Hook bones appear rounded but are still easily discernable. Pin bones not discernable.</td>
<td>Slight fat cover over ribs. Ribs easily discernable.</td>
<td>Shoulder accentuated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Moderately Thin</td>
<td>Neck not obviously thin</td>
<td>Withers not obviously thin</td>
<td>Negative crease along back</td>
<td>Prominence depends on conformation; fat can be felt. Hook bones not discernable.</td>
<td>Faint outline discernable</td>
<td>Shoulder not obviously thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Moderate</td>
<td>Neck blends smoothly into body</td>
<td>Withers rounded over spinous processes</td>
<td>Back level</td>
<td>Fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy</td>
<td>Ribs cannot be visually distinguished but can be easily felt</td>
<td>Shoulder blends smoothly into body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Moderately Fleshy</td>
<td>Fat beginning to be deposited</td>
<td>Fat beginning to be deposited</td>
<td>May have slight positive crease down back</td>
<td>Fat around tailhead feels soft</td>
<td>Fat over ribs feels spongy</td>
<td>Fat beginning to be deposited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Fleshy</td>
<td>Fat deposited along neck</td>
<td>Fat deposited along withers</td>
<td>May have positive crease down back</td>
<td>Fat around tailhead is soft</td>
<td>Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat</td>
<td>Fat deposited behind shoulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Fat</td>
<td>Noticeable thickening of neck, fat deposited along inner buttocks</td>
<td>Area along withers filled with fat</td>
<td>Positive crease down back</td>
<td>Tailhead fat very soft</td>
<td>Difficult to feel ribs</td>
<td>Area behind shoulder filled in flush with body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Extremely Fat</td>
<td>Bulging fat. Fat along inner buttocks may rub together. Flank filled in flush</td>
<td>Bulging fat</td>
<td>Obvious positive crease down back</td>
<td>Building fat around tailhead</td>
<td>Patchy fat appearing over ribs</td>
<td>Bulging fat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
