WHAT IS YOUR HORSE'S BODY CONDITION?

We all want healthy horses, with beautiful muscle tone, that are neither too fat, nor too thin. In short, we want our horse to have the ideal body condition!

But what is an ideal body condition and, especially, how does one evaluate it effectively? Adequate evaluation of your horse's body condition is extremely important, as it allows you, notably, to provide it with a diet designed specifically for its needs.

For most horse owners, assessing body condition often comes down to a subjective description, such as good, not bad or bad, which leaves a lot of room for error. To avoid these approximations, a reliable and precise method exists for assessing your horse's body condition: the body condition scoring system.

Developed in the early 1980s by Dr. Don Henneke, of Texas A&M University, this system is used internationally, by both veterinarians and nutritionists, as well as by horse owners. The body condition scoring system is based on an evaluation of the sub-cutaneous fat deposited in very specific locations on the horse's body. Using the body condition scoring system allows you to determine whether your horse is too fat, too thin or just right and to make the necessary adjustments to its diet or amount of exercise to attain the desired body condition.

CALORIE INTAKE VS. CALORIE EXPENDITURE

The horse's body condition tells us whether or not the calorie intake from its feed ration is adequate. If the horse is ingesting fewer calories than it is expending, it will lose weight. This weight loss will result in a lower body condition and, more precisely, in a loss of fat. Conversely, if the horse is ingesting more calories than it is expending, it will gain weight and its body condition or, more precisely, its fat level will increase. Determining the horse's subcutaneous fat deposits thus provides a good measurement of the calories that the horse is getting from its feed ration.

Several factors can influence the horse's body condition, the most obvious of course being diet. However, physical activity, the young horse's growth, the pregnant mare's various stages of gestation, as well as weather conditions can also play an important role in this regard.

Also, watch out for chronic health problems, parasites and poor dentition which can negatively impact the horse's body condition. Finally, the pecking order that reigns among horses at pasture can also influence it, since horses at the bottom of the social scale possibly do not have the same access to the food that is available.

When loss of weight and body condition occurs without any concomitant changes in weather, diet or physical activity, consider consulting a veterinarian.

METABOLIC EFFICIENCY AND TEMPERAMENT

Why do two horses the same size, being fed the same diet, and performing the same amount of work, not have the same body condition? This is likely a matter of differences in temperament and in metabolic and digestive efficiency. Indeed, nervous horses, such as thoroughbreds, tend to burn a fair amount of energy. This is why their caloric needs are generally higher than the quarter horse or draft horse, which often maintains good body condition in spite of a low calorie intake.

Certain breeds/genetics are considered hard keepers; hot-blooded horses are generally in this category. Their metabolism functions a little like a high-rev car engine; it will burn more fuel, even when idling, than a low-rev one. Similarly, horses with a high metabolism will burn more calories, even if they are standing still, than horses with a slow metabolism. The latter are considered easy keepers, and cold-blooded horses are generally in this category.

Hot-blooded or cold-blooded? Slow or fast metabolism? Hard keeper vs. easy keeper? These aspects must be taken into account when developing your horse's feeding program.

THE IDEAL BODY CONDITION SCORE FOR EVERY LIFE STAGE

A body condition score of 5 to 6 is usually the score sought after for most adult horses, for both exercising and maintenance or senior horses. In anticipation of a season of competition or intense work, a score of 6 may be preferable at the beginning the season to ensure the horse has the necessary energy throughout the summer without dropping below a score of 5.

For the broodmare, an optimal score of 6 is recommended at conception. This score should be maintained throughout gestation and lactation.

For the growing foal, the ideal body condition score should be between 4.5 and 5 to avoid problems related to growth spurts often caused by too-high a calorie intake.

In conclusion, a body score that is higher than 7 is not recommended for any horse. Horses that are too fat, particularly ponies, are more susceptible to founder and metabolic problems, let alone the fact that the excess weight places needless and injurious stress on their limbs, and especially their joints.

OBSERVATION IS NOT ENOUGH

The body condition scoring system uses your hands and your eyes to evaluate specific spots on the horse's body. Evaluating a horse's body condition by observation alone is not enough and can lead to mistakes, especially in the winter, when the horse's coat is long, making it look round and full. Keep in mind that a mare's repeated pregnancies and hay bellies have no bearing on body condition. Even though they can, at first glance, give the appearance of a plump and healthy horse, they should not be confused with subcutaneous fat deposits. In fact, horses with hay belly are generally rather thin. Also be careful not to confuse a horse with well-

developed muscles with a fat horse. Muscles have nothing to do with body condition; only exercise and training, combined with proper nutrition, allow for the muscular development that many horse owners seek.

There are six different spots to assess carefully on a horse: along the neck; along the withers; behind the shoulder; the ribs; the crease down the loin; and the tailhead. The horse is assigned a score of between 1 (poor or extremely emaciated) and 9 (extremely fat or obese) based on the visual and manual evaluation.