Preparing the Show Horse

By Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA

The preparation and conditioning of a horse for showing is a combination of careful planning, motivation, dedication and skill. It can be rewarding once the horse competes and is successful in its targeted equestrian discipline. Many experienced and successful competitors have their own program developed over years of practice. Conditioning for equestrian competition and showing involves a combination of balanced and careful nutrition, preparation of the coat and hooves and ensuring that the horse has the proportions and top-line to stand out in the show ring. The horse has to have good overall fitness with a willing, unfazed approach to training, travelling and competition.

Formulating the Ideal ration

Providing your horse and pony with a well balanced diet is essential for good body and coat condition, digestive health and to maintain bone and skeletal strength, as well as ensuring optimum health and vitality. Many have a tendency to be overfed, resulting in ‘fizzy’ behaviour and an overweight condition, which can have detrimental effects on joints and the general health.

On the other hand, poor feeding can result in underweight condition, with show horses and ponies having no top-line and ‘sluggish’ movement due to inadequate energy. For these reasons, it is important to provide a diet which has been formulated to match your horse’s needs relative to age, temperament, body condition and metabolic state, as well as exercise level.

A simple way to formulate a balanced diet is to apply the following principles when making up a ration for competition and showing:

1. Include 1-2 energy sources, such as limited amounts of cereal grains (eg steam-rolled barley), by-products (eg pollard, bran and rice bran) or commercial feeds. Low GI and ‘cool’ feeds are becoming popular and many ready-mixed low GI feeds and pellets are available to help maintain a quiet temperament. Other ‘cool’ feeds include cracked lupins, sunflower seeds, copra meal and sugar beet fibre. These ‘cool’ feeds are usually preferred by show and pleasure owners to avoid ‘fizzy’ and difficult behaviour whilst maintaining weight and energy for exercise.

2. Include 1 good quality protein source, such as full fat soyabean meal (200g), or cracked lupins (300g), or sunflower seeds or copra meal (400g) daily is adequate to meet protein needs. Lucerne hay and chaff provided as roughage also provides good quality protein, but avoid amounts in excess of 3-4 kg for a 500kg horse as it can lead to increased heat production during digestion in the hind gut, with sweating in the flank area ‘blowing’ when working to offload extra heat in a heavily conditioned (well insulated) show horse.

3. Provide a good quality fibre source, from pasture, hay and chaff. On average, a resting horse needs to consume 1.5-2% of its body weight in dry feed per day. For example, a resting 500kg horse would need to consume on average 7.5-10kg of roughage per day, depending on the energy content. If there is little access to pasture, this roughage should be made up of one third lucerne hay and chaff and two thirds grassy or cereal hay and chaff, to provide an ideal protein and fibre balance.

A horse or pony in light work needs to consume 2.0-2.25% of its body weight in dry feed per day. For those in light work where a hard feed is provided, a diet of around 70% roughage and 30% concentrate by weight should meet requirements.

4. Supplement with bone minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins to meet daily needs. Spelling horses which are not regularly exercised can usually maintain themselves on good quality pasture.

However, once horses and ponies begin a show preparation with regular exercise, they will require a high quality vitamin and mineral supplement to make up for the shortfalls in their diet. Kohnke’s Own market a number of high quality supplements in Supplet® pellet form to avoid wastage due to sift-out, dust and nutrient interaction- the dose rates are

HANDY HINT

Avoid Excess Sweating from Lucerne Hay

Lucerne hay and chaff are well digested sources of calcium (12g/kg), magnesium (3.2g/kg) and potassium (14.2g/kg) and protein (average 17%), feeding more than 1½ - 2 biscuits (3-4kg) to a horse with already adequate protein in its diet, can result in high amounts of heat waste from the digestion of excess protein and fibre in the hind gut. Horses often develop sweaty flanks and a sweaty underbelly and ‘puff and blow’ excessively during exercise. Furthermore, feeding more than 3-4 biscuits of hay a day to a horse you are already feeding a large bulk of ‘hard’ feed to help with weight gain, may fail to put on significant condition because of the large volume of fibre hindering the uptake of other energy sources and protein from the small bowel. In this case, limit the hay to a maximum of 4 kg per day and add additional ‘cool’ energy sources (eg steam-rolled or boiled barley) to improve overall show condition.
5. Salt (sodium chloride) is the most important electrolyte required for nerve function and fluid balance in the body. Many commercial feeds contain adequate salts for light work if the full recommended daily amount of the feed is fed. Other important salts include potassium, magnesium and calcium which are often low or inadequate in common feeds. Supplementation with Kohnke’s Own Cell-Salts provided on a ‘scoop-for-scoop’ basis with fine, plain salt will ensure requirements are met.

6. Fresh, clean, cool and palatable water must be readily available to horses and ponies as it is essential for health. Horses and ponies require on average 5 litres per 100kg body weight of water per day, with higher amounts required when exercising under moderate to hot conditions or for extended periods.

Rapid Rehydration after Exercise, Travelling or Competition

It is important to provide water and salts to replenish fluids and electrolytes after exercise or long distance travel to a show or competition. Simply mix 2 teaspoonsful (10g) of fine table salt into each litre of lukewarm water (50g [2 1/2 tablespoonfuls] in 5 litres of water) and offer it as drink after each day’s training. You can add an equal amount of glucose to sweeten the warm drink and aid sodium uptake.

By conditioning your horse to drink the warm ‘saline’ after exercise, it will look for it as a rehydration drink following travelling or competition. It helps to rapidly rehydrate the blood and body fluids within 5-10 minutes if a horse is hot and thirsty.

A daily supplement of Cell-Salts should be added to the feed each day to provide a range of salts to correct low or inadequate levels in feeds.

Your Horse’s Temperament – Keeping your Horse ‘Cool’ and Easy to Handle

When competing in the show ring, it is important that your horse or pony be relaxed and attentive. An excited, ‘hot’ or nervous horse or pony can result in misbehaviour and an unenjoyable experience, besides being marked down for distraction during competition. There are a number of considerations which should be taken into account as the possible cause or contribution to this unwanted behaviour, including organisation and routine, overfeeding, feeding ‘hot’ feedstuffs, magnesium deficiencies and gastric ulcers. Eliminating these problems is likely to produce both a happier horse and rider, as well as reducing the chance of injury.

It is important to match your horse or pony’s feed intake to the amount of exercise. By overfeeding relative to the workload, you could be providing excess energy in the ration which can increase the risk of the horse becoming ‘fizzy’ or over-energetic and badly behaved, as well as ending up in an overweight condition.

Horses and ponies which have an inadequate intake of magnesium in their diets can develop a nervous, temperamental and anxious attitude. They often have difficulties in adjusting or coping with unfamiliar surroundings. Some of the symptoms include anxious and unsettled behaviour during handling, travelling or competition, especially when they are removed from their home environment. Magnesium is often relatively poorly absorbed from feeds as it competes for uptake with calcium. As well, when excess phosphorus (for iron) is provided in the ration, there will also be a reduction in magnesium uptake from the small intestine. For horses and ponies with low intake of magnesium, consider supplementing the ration with magnesium and Vitamin E, such as contained in Kohnke’s Own Mag-E.
Gastric burns and ulcers can cause anxious behaviour

Many stressful and anxious horses and ponies often have a poor appetite and are picky eaters particularly after exercise and travelling. Other horses can develop an anxious temperament when travelling or waiting to compete. These horses are likely to be suffering from Equine Gastric Ulcer Syndrome (EGUS). Symptoms also include unwillingness, bad behaviour when travelling and pawing the ground when waiting to compete due to gastric discomfort. For a 500 kg horse, try feeding 4 litres of dampened lucerne chaff, or ¼ biscuit of dampened lucerne hay with 3-4 scoops of Kohnke’s Own Gastro-Coat 30 minutes prior to exercise, travelling and on arrival before competition to help salivation and normal gastric function.

Lucerne contains natural mucilages, saponins and buffering compounds which are often found to be low in processed and heat treated feeds. The mucilages in lucerne and Gasto-Coat encourage chewing and saliva buffering which helps to maintain optimum gastric conditions and digestive function, assisting the appetite and often making the horse more comfortable and contented. In problem horses, add 2 tablespoonfuls of limestone (fine Ag-Lime) to the lucerne chaff and Gastro-Coat snack before daily exercise to assist stomach buffering.

Prepare Hooves and Coat for Showing

Regular hoof care and trimming is essential to prevent injury and reduce uneven and unwanted pressure on joints which can lead to early breakdown. Proper hoof balance helps to facilitate optimum gait and a smooth stride.

Regular hoof trimming is particularly important in growing horses as it helps to ‘set the bones’ in place and correct any limb deviations. It is important to trim to realign the limbs during the first 3-12 months while the horse is growing. Corrective trimming in young growing horses to ensure straight limbs should be carried out every 4 weeks rather than the standard 6-8 weeks in mature horses.

Adequate nutrition is essential for proper hoof growth and strength. The diet for a fully grown horse should contain a good source of protein such as 200-300gms full fat soya bean meal, or 400gms cracked lupins or 500gms copra meal as well as a high quality vitamin and mineral supplement which includes calcium, zinc, vitamin A and biotin (Vitamin H) such as Kohnke’s Own Cell Vital, Cell Provide or Aussie Sport.

Where a horse has poor quality “shelly” hooves, an additional 15mg of biotin daily may be worthwhile. Be aware of the weather conditions and terrain on which you are exercising your horses. Stony, dry working areas can lead to bruised soles, broken away and chipped hoof edges, as well concussion on joints and limbs.

Kohnke’s Own Hoof-Seal is a hoof dressing made from a natural protective blend of biodegradable wood tars and oils. It provides a thin coating of breathable polyurethane which can help to reduce moisture variations in the hoof, so in the winter months it prevents the hoof from excessive softening and in the summer months, Hoof-Seal limits moisture loss from the soles, keeping the hooves soft, easy to trim and less likely to develop sand cracks.

Hoof-Seal needs to be only applied as a thin coat once a week making it highly economical and easy to manage. It dries on the hooves within 10 minutes, doesn’t melt off or collect bedding and dust when working on an arena.

Producing a Shiny Coat

Skin and coat condition is largely a reflection of a well balanced ration, a good worming program and regular grooming, cleaning and rugging. The ration must include a good source of vitamins and minerals, in particular copper, zinc, iron and Vitamin A, as well as polysaturated oils.

An additional iron supplement can also be useful to assist with producing a deep, lustrous coloured coat. All the Kohnke’s Own supplements, such as Cell-Provide, Aussie Sport and Cell-Vital contain the full range of these nutrients, including extra iron.

For Palomino horses and ponies, supplement with Kohnke’s Own Palomino Gold as it has been specially formulated and trialed on 100’s of Palominos to produce a uniform colour without the risk of ‘smut’.

Supplement with Omega-3/Omega-6 Fats

Polyunsaturated vegetable oils, fed in conjunction with a supplement containing zinc, copper, iron and Vitamin A, will help to maintain optimum coat and skin condition. Kohnke’s Own Energy Gold is a blend of vegetable oils containing Omega-3, Omega-6 and Omega-9 fatty acids, as well as added Vitamin E which is important to prevent destructive oxidation in muscle.
tissues during exercise and garlic oil flavouring for high palatability. It can be included in the daily ration at 15mL per 100kg of body weight as a coat conditioner and has a reputation for improving coat condition in just 2-3 weeks. Regular grooming will keep the coat short and clean as well as stimulate and disperse skin oils from oil glands producing a soft coat and healthy shine. Rugging with a well-fitting rug (to avoid rub marks and hair loss) will also help ensure a flat, short and clean coat.

**HANDY HINT**

**How to Achieve a Flat Smooth Hair Coat**

After washing with Kohnke’s Own Kleen Sheen, scrape as much excess water off as you can, then rug up immediately with a clean warm drying rug even in good weather. Leave on the rug on and don’t allow air to get to the coat until the horse is completely dry. This will leave the coat lying completely flat and smooth!

**HANDY HINT**

**Remove ‘Poo’ Stains on White Socks**

When travelling, horses with white socks often stain their hind limbs with manure even when fitted with full length padded floating boots. On arrival at the show, any stains can be removed by lightly rubbing the area with Kleen-Sheen neat from the bottle and rinsing off with a squirt of water.

**A Clean Hair Coat Ready for Showing**

It is important to keep the coat clean and free from stains and scurf. Avoid shampooing excessively and avoid shampoos which are soap/detergent based, as these will often strip the natural oils from the coat and dry out the skin. Kohnke’s Own Kleen-Sheen is a biodegradable, foaming shampoo (no detergent or suds), with natural colour highlighters and built-in conditioner. A horse only needs to be washed every 10 days with 60mL of Kleen-Sheen for the full body, and it washes out (even the mane and tail) with one pass of the hose. It saves water and time and is fantastic in drought conditions.

**Improving Condition and Top-line**

Improving condition on a horse and building top-line are two quite different objectives in a show preparation, which are sometimes confused and regarded as the same by some. Often show horses and ponies are overfed and carry too much condition to provide the illusion that the horse is ‘well built’ and has a well developed ‘top-line’. Putting condition on a horse or pony is usually a result of the diet being high in carbohydrate and fat, while top-line is developed by limited amounts of good quality protein and muscle loading exercise. When conditioning horses and ponies with high carbohydrate and fat diets, it is important not to overfeed and cause an over-weight, fat appearance as this can increase the risk of joint disease from overloading during exercise, especially as the horse ages.

It is important to be able to distinguish between fat deposits and muscle in the horse, and despite popular belief, fat cannot be converted to muscle, unwanted fat stores must be reduced, while muscles must be built through exercise and protein in the diet. High energy diets will cause fat deposits to first accumulate behind the shoulders, then above the tail butt, followed by behind the withers, elbow and over the ribs and finally on the crest of the neck.

Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS) and Equine Cushings Disease (ECD) are also a result of overfeeding and obesity during years of show conditioning without a winter ‘strip out’ to readjust glucose and insulin metabolism. It is relatively common in show horses and ‘cresty’ ponies as they reach 12-13 years of age. Refer to Factsheet No.40 (EMS) and No.9 (ECD).

For lighter weight horses and those in poorer condition, particularly older horses who have a reduced digestive efficiency, a planned step-wise increased feed intake, including an increase in both energy and protein is recommended to reduce digestive and metabolic upset. Feeds should be divided up between 3-4 small feeds per day to avoid gut overload.

**HANDY HINT**

**Limit tight circle lunging to take out the ‘fizz’**. Many competitors lunge a fizzy over-energetic horse to help settle it down by making it burn up excess energy. However, only lunge on a 15-17 metre diameter circle on soft even ground for a short time as possible. Studies have shown that the inside front limb on the circle can suffer overload injury within 3 minutes, especially in a horse or pony in show condition. Changing the direction of the circle every 3 minutes is recommended.

**Improving the Top-Line in 10-14 Days.** Once the horse or pony is in good condition, the top-line can improved by regular exercise and by feeding a product such as Kohnke’s Own Muscle XL, which has been formulated especially to help build muscle and top-line in 10-14 days. Muscle XL is a blend of natural protein building amino acids based on high quality protein whey powder, with added organic sulphur, organic zinc and Vitamin E to correct low dietary levels. Muscle XL can be mixed into a watery slurry paste and deposited over the tongue or mixed into a double handful of feed before the main meal after each day’s training. For best results, it must be given to the horse within 15 minutes after exercise while the muscles are still warm and recovering as they are able to take up and utilise the muscle building nutrients most effectively. Once a suitable top-line has been achieved with daily Muscle XL after exercise (usually by 14-21 days), the supplement can be given on alternate days. It can be increased to once daily for 5-7 days prior to competition, or whenever the top-line drops away during training – usually at 3-4 week intervals.