Equine Body Condition

The Henneke Scoring System

In 1983, Dr. Don Henneke (Ph.D.) of Tarleton State Texas University developed the Henneke Body scoring Condition Chart. It's original purpose was to establish a system that would aid in determining the fertility of thin mares. The scoring method was scientifically devised so that a horse's body condition could be evaluated regardless of the body type, breed, sex or age. It is now used by law enforcement agencies to objectively determine a horse's body condition in cruelty cases, and is accepted in a court of law.

The chart covers six parts of the horse: the head, neck, withers, shoulders, ribs, loins and tail, and rates each of them from 1-9, with 1 being emaciated with no body fat and a 9 being extremely fat or obese. Generally, veterinarians will consider a score between 4 and 7 acceptable with 5 considered ideal.

A "5" rated horse has a level back, the ribs cannot be visually distinguished but can be felt easily. Fat around the tailhead is beginning to feel spongy. Withers appear rounded, and shoulders and neck blend smoothly into the body. This is the ideal body condition we, as horsemen, should always have in the back of our minds as we look over our horse for possible weight gain or loss.

A "4" horse is beginning to show rib outlines, but the withers, shoulders and neck are not obviously thin. It is easy to rectify by adding more of what you already feed or adding beet pulp, oil, rice bran to the diet, and the (otherwise healthy) horse will be at a good weight in just a few weeks. A low "4" horse is losing fat around the tailhead, the hook bones can be seen, and the withers, shoulder and/or neck are looking "thin." (Some horse adoption agencies require that adopters maintain a horse at no lower than a 4 on the Henneke scale)

Many caring horse owners, however, are looking at a Henneke 6 or 7 (or Higher) walking around their fields. At a 6 your "weekend warrior" may have a slight crease down the back, the fat over the ribs feels spongy, the fat around the tailhead is soft, and fat is beginning to be deposited along the sides of the withers, behind the shoulders and along the sides of the neck. Here again, like a " 4", the fix is relatively simple. In this case, more work, perhaps less grain, or cut back on oil.

The "7" horse is very fleshy. There may be a definite gully down the back, can still feel individual ribs, fat around the tailhead is soft, and there are definite fat deposits along the withers, behind the shoulders and along the neck.

The further the horse's condition moves from the ideal "5" the more effort it will take on the part of the horse owner to move toward the ideal. At the start of winter, a horse should not be moving toward "4", and going into summer's heat and growing grass, a "6" horse might need a muzzle or no grain.

Although Henneke's evaluations are useful, they assess only fat covering on the horse's body, and do not take into consideration such things as overall fitness, and amount of muscle. A horse can have a "hay belly" and appear heavy, but lack sufficient fat on the skeleton. Some horses, because of their peculiar conformation, will be of good weight, but always look thin in perhaps one area, maybe ribs, or croup. It is important to really know your own horse; use your hands as well as your eyes in your evaluation, and remember to look at both sides.

Please keep in mind that overweight mares tend to be more difficult to breed. In addition, overweight mares have more complications at the time of foaling, which is not a desirable situation. Conditioning and diet are very important to the success of your broodmares breeding.

"WEIGH" YOUR HORSE ACCURATELY

YOU DO NOT NEED A SPECIAL WEIGHT TAPE OR SCALE.

This is an accurate method:

Use a standard cloth measuring tape (in inches). Measure around the heart girth at the highest point of the withers. Take that number and multiply it by itself. Now measure your horse's length (point of shoulder to the point of buttock-around the corner of hip about half the distance to the tail.) Multiply that times the first figure you got, and divide that final product by 330. This gives you a more accurate weight measurement in pounds.

Heart girth x Heart girth x length ÷ weight