

Chubby or size zero? Controlling the nutritional status

By Karen Diehn

Upon judging a horse's physique, opinions might vary. Is it muscle mass or rather a layer of fat that emerges there at the belly? Does the horse impress with a monstrous fatty crest or a well-proportioned upper line, thus is it rather a well-fed chubby or trained athlete? Some one may generously overlook those "love handles", while someone else may especially like horses with ribs that are sticking out as the "sporty type" and also finds protruding spines completely "normal".

For a long time, a bit more mass was seen as "more expressive". Especially dressage horses thus were fed a bit too much. Nowadays, however, in the Icelandic horse scene a kind of size zero frenzy seems to take hold.

But a realistic judgement of the nutritional status is tremendously important, seeing as with the help of the horse's physique mistakes in feeding can be recognised and training and nutrition of the horse can be adjusted to each other. This in turn serves the preservation of performance and health.

Master groom Judith Amediek leads a riding farm, housing next to Icelandic horses also Connemaras and Shetland Ponies. She stresses: "It does not make sense to call a too skinny horse 'sporty-slim' or to dismiss discrepancies in weight as caused by race or type." In fact consequences have to follow if a horse visibly gains or loses weight especially if single horses in a herd are affected. After all - other than mistakes in feeding - also health problems could be the cause.

Once underweight persists (resulting from under- or malnourishment), deterioration of performance, deficiency symptoms (visible for example on hoofs and coat), low immunity and susceptibility to infections threaten. Overweight stresses - like in humans - joints, circulation, breathing and single organs, lowers performance and fertility and increases the infection pressure.



If a horse keeps getting thinner, this can hint at a health problem, like for example a metabolic disease.

So how do you find out if the own horse has the ideal physique, is it chubby or a size zero? The much quoted rule that a horse is then perfectly nourished if the ribs can be felt under "soft pressure" does not bring meaningful results in practice. For everybody defines "soft pressure" somewhat differently. And the ribs are but one of the flab-collecting problem areas of the equine body. Judith Amediek came across the fact with horse owners again and again that they mainly went by the animal's abdominal girth. The experienced professional noticed a downright "fear" of a grass or hay belly.



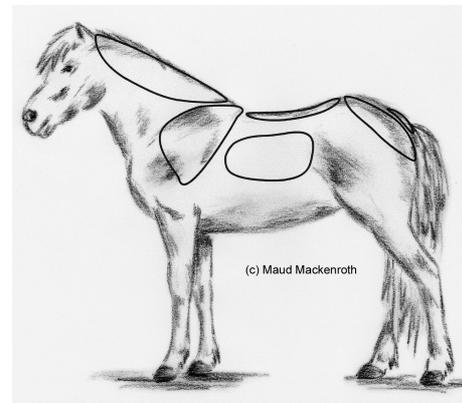
Thick winter coat can obscure the real nutritional and physical condition.

"A thick belly does not make a thick horse", Ines Fischer of the Mobile Horse Weigh clarifies. This was a typical misbelieve. "The abdominal girth can vary strongly depending on the amount of intestinal contents, especially after pasturing it contains up to 60kg of grass..." In addition a badly trained abdominal musculature or the fluffy winter coat of robust horses can distort the appearance in the abdominal region.

"Flab does not always disperse evenly", Fischer stresses and recommends to judge

the entire horse and apply "tough" criteria. The expert for horse weight from near Hamburg has been travelling for the Mobile Horse Weigh for four years. She has weighed around 4,000 horses and for about 1,000 she has calculated the so-called Body Condition Score (BCS) that objectively provides information for horse and stable owners about the nutritional status. In contrast to the "rib method" the Body-Condition-Scoring counts on reproducibility, says Fischer. She and her colleagues from the weigh judge the horses according to the system that was developed by vet Stephanie Schramme in 2004. Six problem areas at the horse body (throat, shoulder, back, chest wall, hip and dock) are judged and receive a mark between one (extremely haggard) and nine (highly adipose) according to a detailed spreadsheet. The average mark results in the overall score.

In the system, improved by Dr Schramme, one acts on the assumption that at a BCS of 5 the muscle mass is pronounced while the additional weight-loading through subcutaneous fat reserves is still kept within a limit. Thus the vet calls this state the optimum for horses that high physical achievements are demanded from, whereas for breeding mares a BCS of 6 is suggested. A BCS of 7 or more should be avoided.



To determine the BCS certain body areas - similar than in this drawing - are judged.

Nevertheless, characteristics caused by race, age or illness are taken into account, so that discrepancies both up- and downwards may happen. Pony races may, according to Ines Fischer, have a BCS from 5 to 6. Icelandic horses also fall into this array. "However, we look what calibre and type we have in front of us", explains Fischer. After all, there is no standard-type in Icelandics and thus no desirable standard-weight.

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