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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 or 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 and '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

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.

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. 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 economical and they are formulated to the latest NRC (2007) nutrient standards. Supplements include **Cell-Vital®**, **Cell-Vital Premium®**, **Cell-Provide®**, **Aussie Sport™** and for Palomino show horses, **Palomino Gold™**.
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.

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Handy Hint

Take care Feeding Good Quality Rye Grass Hay to Heavily Conditioned Horses and Ponies

Be careful when feeding good quality grass hay, particularly rye grass and oaten hay, to heavy, 'cresty' horses and ponies with a history of recurring founder. The sugar or Non-Structural Carbohydrate (NSC) content in these hays can be very high and besides making your horse over-energetic, it can result in obesity. Soak the hay in twice its volume of lukewarm water for 40-60 minutes prior to feeding. This will leach out a significant amount of the sugars, while still providing a good fibre source important for proper digestive health.

Handy Hint

Getting the Best from Mag-E

Mag-E has become a very popular supplement to provide a readily absorbed source of organic magnesium to help maintain proper nerve and muscle function during training, travelling and competition. It helps to keep horses unfazed and does not swab. For best results, when first introducing Mag-E, provide a loading dose consisting of one dose in each of the morning and evening feeds for the first seven days and then switch to a maintenance dose of one dose a day for the next two weeks. If needed, the maintenance dose can continue during the show preparation. Prior to a show or competition, supplement with 2-3 times the recommended maintenance dose for up to 7 - 10 days and then reduce to a maintenance dose between competitions.

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 [2½ 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 **Kohnke's Own 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.

Handy Hint

Commercial Feeds for Show Horses

There are a Large variety of commercial feeds suitable for show and competition horses. However, the full daily feeding amount suggested on the bag label needs to be fed each day to provide adequate energy and other important nutrients. These amounts of feed, however, can 'over heat' some horses. If you feed a commercial feed at a lower than the suggested amount for 'taste' and coat condition, other cool energy sources can be added to make-up shortfalls to keep a horse easy to handle with impulsion, but not 'fizzy' behaviour. Suitable feeds include steam-rolled barley, sugar beet pulp, limited amounts of copra meal (you must soak copra meal before feeding) and rice bran.

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**. Mag-E contains 2 forms of magnesium, the majority as organic magnesium amino acid chelate, to facilitate optimum absorption and reduce competition with calcium for uptake from the small bowel.

Gastric 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 Gastro-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 tablespoonsful of limestone (fine Ag-Lime) to the lucerne chaff and Gastro-Coat snack before daily exercise to assist stomach buffering.

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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 as 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.

Handy Hint

Many show competitors use 'greasy' fat or 'mineral' oil based hoof preparations which collect dust as well as melting or wearing off during exercise. Products containing Eucalyptus oil can adversely affect the hoof wall lamination.

Handy Hint

Aim for a Natural, Durable Hoof Appearance at Shows

For a natural even hoof colouring and shine, mix 20mL of Blackitt into 80mL of Hoof-Seal. Brush this mix evenly onto the hooves in preparation for competition. This combined mixture looks great, provides a semi-gloss appearance, stays on and is dust, water and urine resistant. It also helps to maintain hooves at a normal moisture level under wet or dry conditions and is easy to remove when you have finished competing.

Handy Hint

Show Off Your Horse's Natural Coat Gloss

A great way to improve coat gloss is to exercise the horse or pony by walking in the sun until it starts to sweat and dampens its coat. Then bring the horse into the wash bay or stable aisle and rub it over with a soft grooming brush while it is still hot and damp from sweating. The massaging effect of the grooming on the hot skin will stimulate dispersal of skin oils from oil glands, which will shine and soften the coat. Repeat at 3-4 day intervals for the best effect.

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 appropriate rugging. The ration must include a good source of vitamins and minerals, in particular copper, zinc, iron and Vitamin A, as well as polyunsaturated oils.

An additional iron supplement can be useful to assist with producing a deep, lustrous coloured coat. All of 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.

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.

During the week prior to competition, start the finishing touches by trimming the tail and clipping out the ears, trimming feathers and whiskers on the muzzle and around the eyes, only if Breed Regulations permit. Pull the mane and tail to remove bleached hairs and create a good line for plaiting. Keep the horse rugged to avoid any sun bleaching and to reduce the chance of dirty stains and insect bites.

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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 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.

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 overweight, 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.

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.

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Handy Hint

Eliminate the Time and Trouble of a 'Neck Sweat'

Many show horses will develop a hard, crest-like neck if fed high energy feeds to build up the top-line and condition for showing. Traditional ways to reduce the 'fat' neck is to apply a neck sweat over night for 7-10 days before a show. This is time consuming and often uncomfortable to the horse.

Many owners have found that providing a supplement of Kohnke's Own Trim daily for 7-10 days, which provides nutrients which have roles in burning fat and minimizing over-storage, helps correct low dietary levels of these nutrients to assist in maintaining the neck in an ideal proportion in the lead up to a show. It helps reduce the need for a 'neck sweat'. In conjunction with Trim, the top-line can be maintained by feeding a daily supplement of **Kohnke's Own Muscle XL**, within 15 minutes following daily training and riding exercise in a small double handful of feed, over 7-10 day course prior to a show. Muscle XL provides high quality protein for muscle maintenance without fat. It has a faster and more beneficial effect than herbal based top-line preparations, as it provides high quality protein as a food for muscle development.

Handy Hint

Improving the Top-Line in 10-14 Days

Once the horse or pony is in good condition, the top-line can be 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.

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 as short a 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.



Studies have shown that lunging in one direction for more than 3 minutes at a time can result in overloading of the fetlock joint on the inside leg and increase the risk of compressive 'wear and tear' of the joint cartilage. It is recommended to lunge a horse in alternate directions for no more than 3 minutes in each direction and limit lunging to no more than 6 minutes each day on a firm, (with a 5-8cm soft cushion), even and level surface. The lunge should be controlled at the trot with a minimum of an 8 metre radius (25 feet) radius on the circle.