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FEEDING AND FITTING: THE HALTER AND SALES HORSE

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There are two groups of horses that are assessed and therefore valued to a large extent on their looks, conformation and the way they are “turned out”; the halter or “in hand” horse and the sales horse. There are vast sums of money riding in the balance that literally can be made or lost depending on the job that the feeder and fitter does. We have all heard the adage “fat is a pretty color” and that sales and halter horses are simply fed all they want to eat and gotten too fat. In the modern sales and show arena simply fat is far from being enough. To be really successful in fitting sales horses and halter horses the “fitter” must be able to differentiate between fit and fat.

It may come as a surprise that one would consider the western halter horse and the Thoroughbred sales weanling and yearling in the same context. But let’s face it, the horse sale is a horse show and many times horses are worth more on sale day than they will be the rest of their lives. Fitting these horses is a combination of superior nutrition, superior health management, superior and specific exercise and superior genetics, tempered with more hard work and attention to detail than most people are willing to do (that is why sales agents and halter horse trainers have a job). In the following paper I will outline what has worked for me in the preparation of halter babies for futurities, halter horses for the major Quarter Horse shows, and in the preparation of sales weanlings, yearlings and broodmares for the major Thoroughbred sales. In consideration of this topic I specifically cast anabolic steroids in a very negative light as I see them as unnecessary, unethical and detrimental to the long term utility of the horse.

The weanling

Fitting a weanling is perhaps the biggest challenge of all. When one prepares a weanling for a show or sale it is critical to understand the nutrient requirements of the horse and the critical balance between feed intake and exercise as they impact on condition and soundness. Fitting the weanling for halter futurities may, in fact, be more difficult than fitting the sales weanling since most of the major weanling futurities are earlier in the year than are the weanling sales and there is more emphasis on overall fitness at

futurities than there is at the sales. The weanling feeding program should be based on a balanced ration using palatable, easily assimilated nutrient sources that meet the weanling's requirements for protein, energy, minerals and vitamins. All too often people fall into the trap of feeding all-grain feeds to weanlings that may encourage fattening but do little to insure optimum growth and bone development. It is crucial that people understand that "HIGH" PROTEIN DOES NOT CAUSE BONE PROBLEMS! and in fact more cases of acquired flexural deformities and metabolic bone disease are caused by improper mineral balance and over feeding energy than from any other nutritional cause. The amount of feed that an individual foal/weanling will tolerate is extremely dependent upon the individual and it is crucial to adjust individual feeding levels based on individual performance (growth rate and degree of fatness). I would usually expect to be feeding a light horse (Quarter horse, Thoroughbred, Paint, Appaloosa) weanling intended for the futurity or weanling sales a minimum of 1 lb of feed per month of age right up until the time of the futurity. In general one would be best served to feed a 16 - 18 % protein concentrate to these horses in addition to really good quality hay that was harvested in early stages of maturity. I prefer a heavy mixed alfalfa hay for these horses as this maximizes the utilization of fibrous feeds in meeting the energy requirements of these horses and as such decreases the amount of starch the weanling has to deal with. Also, in using a high quality, early cut hay one tends to minimize the appearance of gut-fill that is often associated with a hay of high lignin content. In selecting the appropriate concentrate feed for the weanling it is important that the total nutrient profile of the feed be considered, not just the protein concentration. All too often, due to formulation errors on the part of the feed manufacturer or misuse of a feed (primarily cutting sweet feed with oats) by the consumer, the nutrient calorie ratio of grain mixes fed to weanlings is all wrong. Consumers should be educated to the fact that the nutrient profile of a feed designed for a specific class of horses is critical and that by "tinkering" with a feed this critical balance of nutrients is destroyed. Similarly, feeds formulated for older horses do not get the job done with respect to macro and micro-mineral intake when fed at appropriate levels to meet the young horse's energy requirements.

Beyond the feed trough the real art involved in fitting weanlings is the exercise and "rubbing" they receive. Although I am not an advocate of longeing for the sales or show weanling under 5 months of age, I think that judicious use of longeing, free longeing ("round-penning"), ponying and hand walking can be very useful tools depending on the individual. Foals run, romp and play nearly from birth, and to think that a careful program of forced exercise is detrimental and risky is folly. Daily grooming, rinsing with warm water, braiding or banding of manes and conditioning of tails are all necessary for weanlings if optimum fitness is to be achieved. With respect to turn-out there are several factors to be considered and somewhat of a difference between what works for the sales weanling and what works for the show weanling. In general, turn-out for the futurity baby works to a limited extent. If feed intake is limited and weanlings are turned out on good pasture, they tend to get a little

belly on them; on the other hand, if weanlings are turned out in the evening after the strong sun for a little time on good pasture or in barren paddocks, this time out can be very effective in encouraging exercise. One must let the individual serve as a guide in this respect. Some halter futurity babies will tolerate pasture turnout and some will not. For sales weanlings this appears to be a little less critical as it is more acceptable for sales weanlings to carry both a little hair and a little belly.

Sales and show weanlings should be blanketed as soon as night temperatures drop to below 50 degrees. In many cases the blanket and hood serve to make the hair lay, as much as to make the hair remain short. It seems that hair growth and shedding for the weanling are somewhat heritable as is hair quality in general. The use of artificial lights may be of value in some programs. Day length should remain a constant 15 hours through the use of lights if they are to be used. One negative aspect of the use of lights for weanlings is that they appear to become refractory to the lights over time (in other words, you can only fool mother nature for so long). In the past I have had weanlings under lights that as yearlings were a real challenge to get fit the next spring. I guess if someone else buys the weanling this is their problem but if for one reason or another the weanling does not sell, the problem then becomes mine. For the above reason, I would suspect that more people are not using lights on weanlings than are using them.

Weanlings should be on a rigorous deworming program. Weanlings should be dewormed every 30 - 60 days alternating between anthelmintics. Although I would most frequently use purge de-wormers, there are instances when I have used Strongid C for horses that I can't get to slip hair or that appear to be dull and that do not want to put on any condition.

Show and sale weanlings should receive at least 2 oz of added fat per feeding and I have used as much as 9 oz. of fat per day in some instances when it was critical that more energy intake be achieved without increasing starch (grain) intake. If horses are gradually adjusted to fat intake, a great deal of energy may be fed to the weanling in the form of fat. Other useful nutritional tools include using beet pulp in the ration and selecting for very immature hays that have maximum digestibility .

The last thought for the weanling deals with weaning time. In general I have found 5 months of age to be the most ideal time to wean, all things considered. However, I really like to let the individual weanling tell me when to wean. If a weanling is top-heavy and too fat or starts to get erect in the pasterns or show severe physitis, I have no qualms about weaning as early as 3 months of age so that I can carefully control nutrient intake. Additionally, late August or early September futurities present a unique problem especially for April and later foals. My general rule of thumb is that I will wean a foal at least 45 days before a futurity or if that is too early for late foals I will wean 5 days before a futurity. Forty-five days gives me adequate time to get the weanling over the post-weaning slump and into good shape, and five days pre-futurity weaning does not give the weanling time to fall apart. Although some people take mares and foals to the horse show together, I will not do so!

Identify your horse and feed accordingly

Big, scopy, precocious individuals

The type that almost preps himself. Keep him out of the sun and avoid injuries. On 8- to 10-pounds of grain, good hay, and moderate exercise, he will be an attractive addition to any consignment.

Weedy individuals

The type of individual that requires as much energy as possible in order to gain condition for sale. This type of horse will need additional daily feedings, and alternate forms of energy, like oil and beet pulp, should be considered.

Fat individuals

The type of horse that stays fat no matter how much you limit their intake. They need to maintain their intake of roughage, and a pelleted supplement may be used to satisfy protein requirements. Controlled exercise is needed.

Feeding and fitting the yearling

Yearlings in some ways are easier to fit than weanlings. Since we are in most cases talking about horses that are at least 12 months of age there are fewer skeletal wrecks that we can precipitate when we start our fitting or “prep” program. In discussion of the fitting process it is appropriate that we start with the feeding program. Yearlings do best on a 13-14% protein ration balanced for macro and micro-minerals and fat and water soluble vitamins. Feeding rates for yearlings are extremely variable depending on growth history, skeletal size, individual metabolism, actual age in months and availability and quality of forage. In the preparation of sales yearlings I have seen feed intakes range from 2#/day of a supplement pellet (i.e., KER ALLPHASE) to 16#/day of a fortified sweet or pelleted feed. Most generally it seems to take more feed to get a colt fit than it does for a filly. The real key here is realization that “the eye of the master fattens the ox.” What works in the feeding program for one yearling may totally miss the mark for another! Comments made concerning hay type and quality for the weanling apply to the yearling as well.

Besides the base feed, there are some tools of the trade that fall into the nutrition category. First, I always use some supplemental fat. I have used vegetable oil alone or a mixture of vegetable oil and animal fat (i.e., Fat Pak 100 from Milk Specialties). I think that using at least 4 oz. per day of an unsaturated fat high in essential fatty acids (linoleic, linoleic and arachidonic acids) is preferable to using only saturated fats. The manner in which the fat is provided in the diet is a choice for the horseman but in

many instances it makes more sense to top-dress the fat rather than use a fat added feed. As for the “grain” portion of the ration, the amount of fat that is appropriate to use is going to be highly individual. This is due to the fact that there are two main reasons that we are using fat to begin with. First there is the hair effect and second there is the energy effect. The hair effect is easy, 2 oz per day of vegetable fat. The energy source rationale is the interesting application of fat and also beet pulp (to be discussed below). My use of high levels of fat intake in the yearling is to reduce the amount of starch that must be fed to achieve a specified energy intake. When I reach 10 lbs of feed intake in the yearling I start to really consider the advantages of supplemental fat. I have had big, rugged, raw boned yearlings on as much as 12 oz. of vegetable oil per day with absolutely no detrimental effect.

In addition to fat, many of my prep and show rations will contain beet pulp. Unlike the weanling, there is a real possibility of laminitis and starch over-load colic in the yearling. By using beet pulp as a feed ingredient, one can reduce the amount of starch that a horse has to consume while keeping at relatively high levels of energy intake. It is probable that beet pulp, a source of readily digestible fiber, is digested predominantly in the hind-gut and absorbed as volatile fatty acids therefore reducing the starch/glucose load, the amount of starch that may enter the cecum un-digested, and contributing to the maintenance of cecal homeostasis. All of these results are positive! Most rations that I use would contain 10% beet pulp (shreds, not pellets) and I have gone as high as 25% beet pulp in the concentrate ration. NOTE: At least for a time one will notice loose feces in many horses that are put on beet pulp. This increase in fecal moisture is totally innocuous and usually does not persist more than a week. Certainly I would rather have a horse a “little loose” than a “little tight.”

For other ages and classes of sales and halter horses the feeding and fitting techniques are the same as for the weanling and yearling. Emphasis should always be placed on the individual in terms of feed intake levels and exercise programs. The goal should be individual fitness. That takes an individually tailored feeding and fitting program. It is critical to understand that fit and fat are not the same and that lots of feed without a concomitant increase in the exercise program results in a horse that is patchy in its fat cover and more prone to disorders of the gut such as colic, laminitis and enterotoxemia.

Fitting tools

The essentials of fitting halter and sale horses really only start with the feed bucket. Hair quality and athletic appearance are crucial if a professional appearance is to be achieved. The exercise program that one uses to get horses fit may be very different from farm to farm and indeed even from horse to horse. I feel like the most useful tool on a sales prep or training operation is a covered round pen. I prefer a pen that is round and a minimum of 50 feet in diameter. The ground surface needs to be very forgiving and absorb concussion effectively. For this application I would opt for

sand, tanbark or shredded rubber over a gravel base (class I sand works well for a base). The surface should be a minimum of 6 inches deep. If this kind of forgiving surface is used the occurrence of splints and other exercise stress related blemishes can be minimized. Even though my preference is for a covered round pen, open topped pens can be very effective in some parts of the country especially with a little thought about drainage prior to construction of the pen. It should be pointed out that there are many uses for a covered round pen. Mares and foals can spend their first day “outside” in these structures especially in inclement weather, they can be used for post-surgical turnouts, turnouts for horses off the track before they go to larger pastures or paddocks, stallions can be exercised in them, if tanbark is used as a surface they make excellent breeding sheds and so on and so on.

Once the exercise area is built, design of the exercise program is the next order of business. I personally favor a free longeing or loose-line exercise program. It is **CRITICAL** that the person doing the longeing understand the importance of controlling the session. If a longe line is used it should remain loose and one should avoid putting pressure on the horse’s head. When the head is pulled to the center of the circle, undue pressure is put on the inside leg and there is a much greater chance of “popping” splints. **HORSES SHOULD ALWAYS HAVE SPLINT BOOTS ON WHILE BEING LONGED.** I generally start horses on the longeing program at the walk but do not go ballistic if they want to jog or trot some. The initial session will be five minutes duration in both directions. It is crucial that horses be worked the same amount of time in both directions every time that they work. Over a period of a week I will work weanlings up to seven minutes both directions and yearlings up to 10 minutes both directions. I always start in each direction with a minute of walking and then move to a long trot. I have found that a square, two-beat trot is safer and easier on the legs than is the canter. Older horses may be worked longer as fitness levels increase and body condition dictates.

Other possibilities for exercise techniques include hand walking, ponying, swimming, use of a mechanical horse walker and treadmilling. The traditional method of choice for fitting Thoroughbred yearlings is hand walking. I have always been of the opinion that the main fitness achieved using this methodology occurs in the person doing the walking rather than in the horse. However, there are some horses that for one reason or another cannot take a more rigorous exercise program. Horses are walked from twenty minutes to an hour each at a brisk walk and where possible, up and down hills. I have one friend that walks his yearlings 5 miles each at a brisk walk. Last year all of his help quit him and he prepared 7 yearlings for the sales by himself. You better believe that he was a fit son of a gun when he got finished. One positive aspect of hand-walking is that the horses are really taught to lead! Lead ponies are really effective for fitting sales horses and halter horses if one has an appropriate place to pony the horses. Horses may be ponied at the walk and the trot and if the pasture or paddock is big enough the yearling can be ponied in a straight line avoiding the lateral torque on the legs which may occur when some other methods are used. Swimming is beyond the reach of most people but is effective for sales or show

horses that may have borderline soundness. Mechanical horse walkers are used in many parts of the country very effectively in a manner much the same as the covered round pen. The main difference is that horses are usually only walked and not trotted on the walker. One disadvantage of the walker is the tendency for horses that have been fit on a walker to drag along when being led. Treadmills are great tools if used judiciously. I think that horses can be fit very effectively on the treadmill at the walk and trot and the newer, high speed treadmills are fairly easy on a horse's legs. When we use a treadmill for fitting yearlings or show horses, we use sessions of five minutes to begin with and if the treadmill is adjustable, a 6% incline. One personal observation concerning the use of the treadmill is the tendency for horses to roll their shoulders rather than really breaking cleanly over and bending their knees. As with any exercise method, one should be alert to changes in the feet and legs which may indicate an impending soundness problem or blemish. Common problems which necessitate reducing work load or backing completely off the exercise program include: splints, windpuffs, thoroughpins, joint effusion (swelling) in any joint but particularly the ankles, hocks and stifles, active physitis, foot soreness, tendinitis or any signs of lameness. It is essential that horses that are receiving a great deal of feed be exercised EVERY DAY. People seem to be inclined to think that exertional rhabdomyolysis (tying up) is strictly a problem affecting performance horses but there are a significant number of halter horses that tie up due to the large starch intakes that are characteristic for these horses and due to the tendency for people to skip exercise days therefore setting a horse up for a management induced episode of tying up. Another caution for horses being prepared for halter competition and sales is heat stress. Because most of these horses are fit in the summer months, heat stress and even heat stroke are real possibilities. Careful observation of the horse can prevent this problem. Horses that are not sweating when worked hard should be stopped immediately. This is particularly true in areas where anhidrosis is common.

During and after an exercise bout is an ideal time to work on conformational deficits. Horses with thick cresty necks should be exercised in a neck sweat and then be tied in the stall after exercise for a cooling out period. The shape of a horse's neck and therefore the balance of a horse can be improved significantly using a sweat. Likewise, there are individuals that may benefit from a throatlatch sweat or even a full shoulder sweat. Horses that are particularly coarse in the throat benefit from wearing a throat collar all of the time (care should be taken that the mane is protected from the collar when these are used). Another quite useful tool for fitting horses is a set of side-reins and a biting rig. Horses with thin weedy necks, ewe necked horses and horses that appear to have their necks put on upside down (thin on top and a belly to the neck below) should be exercised in side-reins. This makes the horse arch the neck and can significantly change the appearance of the shoulder and neck. When reins are first used they should be adjusted loosely and only after the horse has worn them a couple of times should they be tightened and the horse be made to really go to work.

Now the most important and most neglected part of fitting the horse, RUB TIME. If a really good hair coat is to be achieved, horses must be groomed vigorously on a daily basis. I find that immediately following exercise is a good time for an initial grooming. If you don't sweat grooming a horse then you are probably not doing a good job! The best tool for the job is a small (about the size of the hand) flexible rubber curry. The horse should be thoroughly and vigorously curried all over the body and then a medium soft brush should be used followed by a rub rag. Most horses should have one good grooming per day followed by a light "knock-off" later. I usually will give a horse a bath with plain water daily and use a mild soap one time per week. Manes should be washed and unruly manes should be braided or banded to get them to lay smooth. Tails should NOT be brushed unless plenty of Show-Sheen is used first and the tail is completely dry. Then, prior to brushing they should be picked out by hand and then put in a loose braid and bagged. Usually once a horse is fit the only time the tail is really picked and brushed thoroughly is on the morning of a show. Yearlings and weanlings that are turned out in groups should have their tails treated with something that is unpalatable to other yearlings (one of the best is a paste made from fish oil and cayenne pepper). There is nothing that detracts more from the balance and symmetry of a yearling than a chewed off tail. Regular foot care is also a must for horses to be shown at halter and for sale horses. I would generally show weanlings and yearlings unshod and other horses shod all the way around. By convention, Thoroughbred sales horses are shod in front and barefoot behind with the exception of weanlings which are sold barefoot and two-year-old in training horses which are sold shod all the way around. Even though biotin, zinc and methionine supplementation may help some horses with bad feet, nothing can take the place of regular trimming in terms of producing a good foot on a sales or show horse.

Obviously there are as many tricks of the trade as there are trainers and what techniques work for some may not work for others. The important thing is to design a program and stick to it. Modifications may be necessary along the way but the critical aspect of getting this job done is daily attention to detail. One should not get caught in the trap of thinking that there is some magical feed ingredient that is going to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. Great genetics, good feed and hard work beat steroids, poor genetics and lack of preparation every time.