

Preparing The Halter Horse

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Judging a halter horse in the show ring is an evaluation of conformation, body condition and way of going. Each of these judging criteria can be influenced by the preparation of the horse for the show. Fitting halter horses is a combination of balanced nutrition, daily grooming, aggressive health management, specific exercise programs and superior genetics. All of these factors are combined with more hard work and attention to detail than many people care to do. Fitting halter horses is both an art and a science, and those who master the techniques can make a good living preparing horses for the show ring. There are limits that proper preparation can have on a halter horse. Genetics cannot be changed and will eventually sort out the “real ones” from the pretenders. All the ethical preparation and attention to detail will not take an inferior horse and transform it into a world champion. With that being said, preparation of three age classes of halter horses (weanlings, yearlings and mature animals) will be discussed.

Preparing the Weanling

Getting the weanling in show condition is probably the most difficult fitting job of all. The combination of rapid skeletal growth, selecting a proper exercise regime, and managing a hair coat that seems to change daily, makes life difficult for those showing weanlings. From a nutrition perspective, several factors must be considered in a weanling diet. First, weanlings have specific nutrient requirements that must be satisfied in order to achieve sound growth. The first six dietary factors to consider are energy, protein, calcium, phosphorus, copper and zinc. Another fact that must be considered is that a weanling can eat only so much feed. This limited intake capacity dictates that a weanling diet be concentrated with respect to critical nutrients. It also indicates that a poorly digested, high fiber diet would serve only to fill up the weanling creating the appearance of a hay belly, without delivering the essential

nutrients required for growth. The forage (hay/pasture) component of the diet should consist of high quality hay that was harvested at an early stage of maturity. Coarse stems or long (mature) seed heads indicate the forage is past the optimum nutritive value for weanlings. A good alfalfa or alfalfa/grass mix provides a palatable source of fiber for young horses. Again, almost any type of hay is acceptable provided it was harvested when the plants were young and tender. The amount of forage provided depends on several factors including size and weight of the weanling along with desired growth rate. In general, a weanling is fed proportionally more grain and less forage as the desired growth rate is increased. A rule of thumb for forage intake is a minimum of 1 pound of good quality hay per 100 pounds of body weight.

The grain portion of a weanling diet is the primary vehicle for delivery of essential nutrients. Depending on the nutrient content of the hay, the grain will provide the majority of the energy (calories), protein, minerals and vitamins. Therefore, a grain concentrate designed for a weanling should be fortified with high quality protein, additional calories (from fat) and readily available minerals and vitamins. Generally, a grain concentrate

*Tashmere,
AQHA World
Champion
Halter Horse,
currently
stands at stud
in Sydney,
Australia.*



Photo by Judy Leffler

appropriate for a weanling will contain at least 14% crude protein. If grass hay is being fed, the grain concentrate will contain between 16 and 18% crude protein. Many people are afraid to feed young horses too much protein for fear of causing bone problems. However, mild excesses in protein intake will not cause bone problems. Instead, imbalances in mineral intake or extremely rapid growth triggered by excess energy intake are likely

Grooming will make or break the fitting process. A thorough, vigorous daily grooming should follow the exercise program. A small, flexible rubber curry is an essential instrument to remove dead hair and stimulate skin circulation. Horses can then be vacuumed or soft brushed to remove the dirt and dander raised by currying. A warm bath with mild shampoo can also be used to rinse off dirt and dander. Care should be taken to rinse the weanling

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causes of bone anomalies. The grain should be balanced with respect to calcium and phosphorus so the weanling will get the proper amount and the correct ratio (balance) of these minerals. Copper and zinc need to be fortified in the grain such that the weanling receives approximately 150 mg of copper 450 mg of zinc per day. At a recommended grain intake of 1 pound per month of age, this would make it necessary for the grain to contain approximately 50 ppm copper and 200 ppm zinc. For weanlings receiving larger amounts of grain, the concentration of copper and zinc can be less. The physical form of the grain concentrate, whether a pellet, textured (sweet) feed or an extruded product, is not critical as long as the product is properly fortified and the weanlings readily consume it.

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thoroughly to prevent skin drying and irritation that can result if shampoo is left on the skin. Scrape excess water from the horse and allow time for drying before turning the horse loose in the stall. This is also a good time to reapply tail and mane conditioner. Allow the tail to dry completely before working out any tangles or brushing. If the tail is long, a loose French braid starting at the top of the tail minimizes hair breakage but the braid needs to be loose so as not to cause breakage. Tail bags are another useful means of protecting valuable tail hair. The hooves should be kept well trimmed or shod. On show day, a light buffing with a fine emery cloth makes the hoof surface smooth and slick. A hoof polish or light coat of hoof oil can be applied to give the hoof a shine. The bridle path, ears, legs and face should all be carefully clipped prior to the show. A highlighter around the eyes and muzzle is a nice touch on show days. Ears and nostrils should be wiped out with a cloth treated with a light coat conditioner. Finally, a beautiful hair coat with a healthy shine cannot be sprayed on. It is a product of hard work and preparation done in the months prior to the show.

Preparing the Yearling

Yearlings are generally easier to prepare for show than are weanlings. However, many yearlings can go through awkward stages due to growth spurts. These periods of rapid growth can leave the yearling looking poorly balanced (taller in the hindquarters) and occasionally thin. Many people equate awkward yearlings with human teenagers. Just as teenagers come in different shapes and sizes, so do yearlings. Therefore, large variations in the amount of feed necessary to prepare a halter yearling are common.

A standard grain concentrate for a yearling is less fortified than one for a weanling. Usually, a 12 - 14% crude protein concentration is sufficient depending on forage quality. As with the weanling diet, the grain concentrate should be properly fortified with calcium, phosphorus, copper and zinc. A grain intake of 4 - 8 pounds per yearling per day is a fairly standard grain intake, but is variable with breed and body size. Larger amounts of grain are occasionally needed for big, scopey yearlings. If elevated levels of grain seem to be necessary, the owner may use alternative sources of energy. Two energy sources commonly used are fat and soluble fiber (beet pulp). Each of these energy sources provides the yearling with readily available energy to support growth. In addition, these energy sources are safer to feed than the high starch-containing cereal grain diets. Fat in the form of vegetable oil or rice bran can be top-dressed onto the standard grain diet. The upper limit of vegetable oil inclusion seems to be dictated by individual yearling taste preferences and could reach as much as 12 ounces per day. Beet pulp is fed after soaking in warm water. The amount fed varies from yearling to yearling, but it is nearly as safe to feed as hay. If the larger amounts of feed are necessary, the daily amount of feed should be split into at least three feedings. A common question asked is: Can we force a yearling to grow too fast? The answer to this question is a definite yes. Feeding yearlings excessive amounts of feed in an effort to produce weight gain

yearlings are more mature than weanlings, fewer skeletal wrecks are incurred in an exercise program. Care should be taken with any exercise program since yearlings are still immature and growing with a real potential for exercise stress injuries. Just as overfeeding the thin yearling can lead to serious problems, overexercising a fat yearling can also lead to serious problems.

Preparing Mature Horses

Preparing mature halter horses for show is significantly easier than fitting either weanlings or yearlings. Mature horses have finished growing and therefore do not experience growth problems as a result of the preparation process. In addition, their bones are mature and can withstand the implications of many different exercise programs. Nutritionally, feeding mature halter horses is a task of providing the proper amount of calories in the diet to achieve the desired body condition. With the use of high quality hay and well-fortified grain, nutrient imbalance with respect to protein, calcium, phosphorus, copper and zinc are unlikely. Mature halter horses, like other horses, will have varying rates of metabolism. Therefore, feeding each horse as an individual is essential. Overfeeding can result in colic and/or laminitis, while underfeeding can result in a thin, noncompetitive horse.

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There are many additional “tricks of the trade” that can be applied to help the halter horse reach his optimum potential, but the successful basics remain the same. It is essential for halter horses to be on a properly balanced diet.

can lead to a multitude of growth problems along with either colic or laminitis. Sometimes it is best to simply give the yearling some time and let it grow at a slower and safer rate.

For overweight yearlings, the amount of grain required is less. Often these horses get so little grain that a conventional grain concentrate cannot provide adequate nutrient intake. Feeding these individuals a supplement pellet (the actual pellet in the textured “sweet” feed) at a reduced rate of 1 - 2 pounds per yearling per day will ensure proper diet fortification.

The exercise and grooming protocols are similar to those techniques utilized for weanlings. Since

that can be applied to help the halter horse reach his optimum potential, but the successful basics remain the same. It is essential for halter horses to be on a properly balanced diet. Exercise must be carefully designed for each individual animal to avoid potential injury and build the valuable muscle tone that can make a difference between winning and being just another horse in the class. Careful attention should be paid to daily grooming. There is no substitute for old-fashioned elbow grease. A very valuable characteristic of a good fitter is patience. Not every horse will respond as quickly as others and modifications and delays in the process should be anticipated. ☺