

A Primer for Evaluating Body Condition of Foals and Aged Mares

Poking, pressing and prodding on a horse routinely is an effective way to gauge its fat reserves. The amount of fat that a horse carries is an indirect measurement of its energy intake. The primary cause of emaciation among horses is inadequate consumption of energy, while obesity is typically brought about by overconsumption. With foaling and breeding season in full swing, now is a good time to nail down the finer points of condition scoring foals and mares.

Among horsemen, body condition scoring is a well-accepted method of determining weight adequacy of horses. The numerical system ranges from 1 to 9. Scores of 1, 2, or 3 signify severe undernourishment, as is frequently seen in cases of abuse or neglect; scores of 4, 5, and 6 indicate moderate to optimal body weight; and scores of 7, 8, and 9 denote borderline or extreme obesity. At first, body condition scoring was used principally by veterinarians and researchers as a way to communicate effectively with one another about the energy status of certain horses. Today, the practice is used by conditioners of top-flight race and sport horses, and has spilled over to breeding farms, where even the youngest residents are evaluated.

When foals are born, they have little body fat, so they look sharp and angular. Once they are a few weeks of age, however, foals begin to fill out and bony areas, such as the points of the shoulders and pelvic bones, smooth over and become less protuberant.

"Babies tend to be a little rounder than adult horses," said Steve Caddel, an employee of longtime KER Team Member Farmers Feed Mill of Lexington,

Mark Lewellyn

BABY FAT

Kentucky. For over a decade, Caddel's hands and eyes have assessed thousands of foals on some of central Kentucky's largest and most revered Thoroughbred farms.

"Foals lay down fat differently than older horses. Fat is deposited first on the sides of the withers and behind the elbows. Once those initial pockets are filled, fat deposition occurs back and down the ribcage. Babies are slower to cover their ribs, so much so that the ribs are visible even on foals of ideal weight," said Caddel.

Healthy young foals that are consuming sufficient quantities of high-quality milk will rarely have trouble maintaining adequate body condition. Typically, foals that are seriously underweight, with a body condition score of 2 or 3, have an illness, such as a diarrheal or gastric ulcer condition, that is adversely affecting their health. If mares are producing inadequate milk or milk of only minimal nourishment, foals may become unthrifty. For these foals, veterinary care is pertinent.

Like mature horses, foals should be kept in moderate body condition. These foals, considered "average" by Caddel, have "a slight crease over their rumps as viewed from behind and have well-defined musculature." Fat is evident around the withers and behind the elbows.

As foals age and become fleshy, they begin to amass fat over the topline on either side of the vertebral column. The back widens and begins to resemble a tabletop, rather than a peaked rooftop, and a definite crease is noticeable. As more and more fat is laid down, the ribs may become invisible, though they will likely still be palpable. The foal's neck will become noticeably thicker as well.

Once foals are weaned and transition into yearlings, fat distribution becomes more like that of mature horses. In particular, fat will cover the ribs more evenly and be dropped in other areas such as the crest and shoulders, particularly in overweight yearlings.

Spring and summer are also peak seasons in which the body condition of mares may fluctuate. With the accelerated growth of grass, some mares will require fewer calories in the feed tub and hay manger to maintain ideal weight. Maiden mares in early gestation, for example, may need little hay or grain in the spring when grass growth is rapid, though an all-purpose vitamin and mineral supplement is recommended when mares are fed all-forage diets.

Lactating mares, on the other hand, require more energy than lush pastures can provide, for the mares must consume sufficient energy to sustain milk production and everyday physiological processes, which may include the growth of a developing fetus. Because of these marked energy demands, mares that produce copious amounts of milk will oftentimes lose precious pounds from their frames.

The nutritional goal, however, is to maintain mares in moderate body weight, at a condition score of 5 or 6, throughout both phases of production—gestation and

lactation. Young mares generally adapt well to motherhood with few problems in weight management. Indeed, some youthful mares may be easy keepers and require only slightly elevated energy levels to maintain optimal body condition.

With the passing of time, many mares will display alterations in conformation that may, on the surface, affect the body condition score. Caddel is particularly attuned to managers that express concerns over the body condition of aged broodmares.


"Elderly mares can be raw-backed, meaning their backbones stick up and are not flush with the muscle or fat of their backs, loins, and croups. Because the backbone is visible, people assume these mares are thin, but when you begin mashing on their ribs, they've got two inches of fat cover and their sides are like sponges," said Caddel.

He stressed that not all mares possess these saggy toplines, as much depends on conformation, though with advancing age and number of foals, it is a common finding. "When mares reach their teens and have had six, seven, or



eight foals, they begin looking a little raw-backed." This change in topline becomes more or less a fixture of particular mares' conformation, remarked Caddel.

"I get calls every year about mares like this. The managers are feeding them 12 to 14 pounds of grain a day and good-quality hay, and they think something's wrong because they see the mares' backbones," Caddel said. "It's not unusual for broodmare managers to begin overfeeding these mares in an effort to get fat where it's never going to be again."

Regularly assessing body condition is a sure way to keep horses at appropriate weights. By keeping in mind the distribution pattern of fat in young horses, breeders will ensure their foals are receiving sufficient energy to grow but not an overabundance of energy, which may pave the way to developmental orthopedic disease. Moreover, realizing that aged mares may experience conformation changes that disguise themselves as body condition problems can save conscientious horse owners worry and frustration. 



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3910 Delaney Ferry Road
Versailles, KY 40383
Phone: 859-873-1988
Fax: 859-873-3781
Order Department: 888-873-1988
www.ker.com
info@ker.com