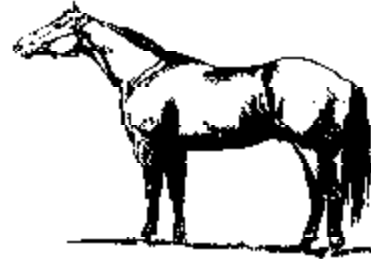


Animal Science Horse Information Series

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THIN ISN'T IN FOR PERFORMANCE HORSES

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Baseball, America's summertime sport, is in full swing. Did you notice there are not any over-weight players on the pro-teams?

As Americans, we have become quite conscious of our weight. In fact, there is a whole industry based on the weight problem of Americans.

There is a corollary in horses, as performance horses should not be fat either. Nor should they be thin.

Researchers at Texas A & M University developed a body condition score (BCS) system for horses.

The BCS is a visual, hands-on evaluation of the body fat content of the horse. The score ranges from 1 for an emaciated horse to a 9 for an obese horse.

The horse tends to put on body fat from front-to-rear and top-to-bottom. Fat first appears in the horse's neck, then around the withers, along the back, down over the ribs, over the croup (hips) and in the flank and thighs.

Initially BCS was used with broodmares. It was determined that broodmares need to be at least a 5-5.5 (moderately) or higher in body condition to conceive. BCS's lower than 5 usually result in less foals.

But BCS has also been applied to performance horses.

It was determined that most performance horses needed to have a BCS of 5-5.5 too. If below a 5, horses do not seem to have adequate energy to perform well. Over a 5.5, they do not perform as well either probably due to extra body fat. Horses ridden occasionally or for short periods of time at a low intensity of performance can have a higher BCS than 5.5.

Recently, California State Polytechnic University (Pomona) researchers have shown that too low a BCS can be detrimental to some performance horses.

They studied 193 equine (190 horses and 3 mules) in the Tevis Cup Endurance Ride. This is a 100-mile one-day ride. It is a challenging performance event.

No horse with a BCS of 3 or less completed the ride, and only 26 percent of the horses with a BCS of 3.5 finished the event. Horses with a BCS of 4 had a completion rate of 95 percent, while 88 percent of those with a BCS of 4.5 finished. About 94 percent of the horses with a BCS of 5 completed the ride, and 100 percent of the horses with a BCS of 5.5 finished it.

In a previous study, no horse completed the ride with a BCS less than 3.5.

Weight of rider did not affect the completion rate.

However, heavier horses (1,000 lbs.) were more likely to be eliminated for lameness than were lighter weight horses (964 lbs.).

Most horses used in summer equine events do not have as challenging a performance test as the Tevis Cup Ride. But their BCS can still affect the out come of their performance.

A fat horse will not perform as well as a horse in moderate body condition. But some owners may think that a thinner horse is better for more strenuous performance.

The performance horse needs some stored body fat for energy reserve. It does not seem advisable for most performance horses to have a BCS below 5.

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