

## Back in Action

Fall and winter are the perfect seasons to spend time with your horse! Our expert shares tips on safely managing your horse this time of year.

By Edgar A. Ott, PhD

In the North, summer is the time to ride and compete. In the south, the opposite is often true. Many horse owners focus their attention on other activities in the summer, such as vacations, family outings and other sports. The horse(s) often gets turned out, let down and given a well-deserved opportunity to rest and relax. Now that fall is here, a return to the work schedule is common. There are shows, trail rides, parades, events and just getting back in the saddle. What do we need to do to get our equine companion back in action?

### Housing Checklistshowing western pleasure

If your horse has been turned out all summer and a serious show schedule is planned for fall and winter, it is probably going to include stalling the animal for eight or more hours daily. Remember that stalling changes the animal's routine and its forage program. A horse that is stalled more than two hours daily needs to have hay available in the stall. An abrupt change from a predominately pasture program to one that includes at least 50 percent of the forage intake as hay needs to be incorporated slowly. An abrupt reduction in pasture intake results in a significant reduction in the water intake from the feed. This water must be available to the animal or impaction problems can occur. Make the change to the stall slowly. Stall the animal for a couple of hours, and then turn him out. Increase the time in the stall by half-hour increments until you are keeping the animal in the stall for the desired period. Provide good-quality hay and plenty of clean, fresh water whenever the animal is stalled. Remember that exercise is important to the stalled horse. The greater the time in the stall, the more important that exercise becomes. If the horse is not ridden daily, exercise by hand walking or on a mechanical walker is very important for continued good health.

### Stable Management

Stalled horses need to be bedded. Most stall floors, clay, sand, asphalt, concrete, and hard surfaces with stall mats are not very forgiving. Bedding provides a cushion for the feet, similar to standing on a carpet instead of a concrete floor. Bedding also absorbs the urine, providing a mechanism for removing the urine. Bedding materials include but are not limited to straw, hay, wood shavings, processed cardboard and paper materials. Manure should be picked out of the stall at least twice daily and the wet bedding material removed. Some bedding may need to be replaced daily. It is also important to strip out all of the manure and bedding periodically. The frequency will vary with the bedding material used and the efficiency of

those mucking out the stalls.

Fresh water should be available to the animal at all times. Water can be provided in a bucket that is filled at regular intervals or by automatic waters. Care should be taken to keep the receptacles clean. Horses that empty the bucket at night should probably be provided with two buckets of water to ensure adequate availability.

### Careful Feeding

As the horse is switched from a predominately pasture program to a hay and concentrate program, care must be taken to be sure that the concentrate properly balances the forage and the activity of the animal. As the exercise level increases, the energy needs of the animal increases. This generally means that the horse will need more concentrate (grains) to meet his energy needs. The idle horse that stayed fat on pasture and 1 or 2 pounds of concentrate (just enough to coax him up to the barn so you could assure him that you still cared) might need considerably more concentrate as his activity level increases. grazing

The concentrate provides two functions in the feeding program. First, it provides added energy to increase the energy density of the diet. As activity increases, the need for added energy increases. Moving the horse from a maintenance situation to moderate work will increase energy needs by 50 percent. Because the added energy need cannot be provided by just feeding the horse more hay, the addition of a concentrate is essential to providing the additional energy. The increase in concentrate should be gradual, paralleling the increase in the activity level. Individual variability must be considered, so carefully evaluate the condition of the animal periodically.

Second, the concentrate provides a plenary of nutrients, included to balance the forage program and ensure adequate nutrient balance. We usually purchase concentrates based on protein content, however, mineral and vitamin content can be equally important. Nutrient concentrations in commercial concentrates are designed to properly balance the forage for the animal for which they are recommended. However, the proper balance assumes that you are feeding a normal amount of feed, usually 1 pound per 100 pounds of bodyweight per day. If you are only feeding half that amount, the availability of some nutrients might not be optimal. This means that some source of other nutrients is often needed in the program. A free-choice mineral mixture can be adequate, but always consider more complete supplements if you are feeding only low levels of commercial concentrates.

Make all diet changes slowly. This includes the amount of hay fed, the

type of hay, concentrate manufacturers, level of feeding and time of feeding. Horses are creatures of habit, so not only do they function best on the program to which they are accustomed but also the nutrient intake, form and source of those nutrients. Don't hesitate to make the adjustments in the program necessary to accommodate the changes in the horse's activities. Remember: just as you would not put an animal that had not been exercised for three months in an endurance ride, make all diet changes slowly.

Fall and winter is a wonderful time to ride in the South! Treat your horse well this fall and winter, and when you have questions or concerns, take advantage of resources in the horse industry. Call 1-800-683-1881 for free, individual advice from an equine nutritionist.