

## Horse Weight Watchers

On a regular basis people discuss their horse's weight and surprisingly they find it puzzling. Naturally one would think the extreme ends of the weight spectrum would be easily recognizable. This appears not to be the case! If any ribs are showing, many are quick to declare that their horse is under-nourished and too thin. The suggestion that ribs showing equals improper weight is too simplified a conclusion.

Many would remember when the great "Secretariat" came to Woodbine Racetrack and romped to a 6 1/2 length victory over a field of top contenders in the Canadian International. His ribs were very evident and so was his great fitness.

Without being a nutritional expert, people raise foals, show performance horses and board horses as a business with considerable success. The feeding of each horse is a very important part of their involvement and requires an individual approach. The youngsters often take a lot from their moms while nursing, and most moms show it, but there are others that don't. Ribs on a broodmare indicate that she is giving lots to her foal and not that she isn't adequately being fed herself. Usually the mares feed is upped in situations like this but it doesn't always show. Naturally foals should be encouraged to eat grain as soon as they show an interest. The first 2-3 years of development lasts for the rest of their lives.

**Performance**  
horses require a good amount of grain (14-16% protein) depending on the workload they are doing. The fat performance horse is just like us. They run the risk of breaking down and do not enjoy their work. The lean horse moves easier, breathes easier, and performs easier. Lean is not thin, it's tight, fit, and healthy. The coat should be shiny, their eyes clear and their rump (motor) round and solid. The hind end of a horse is an excellent gauge as to whether they are thin or not. The croup should be round and the flank filled out - not flat or falling off. If there is two golf balls showing on the top of the croup, this horse is too thin. The ribs depend a lot on the conformation of the horse. If they are well sprung they might look a little fat, but if they are pear shaped they will appear thin.

Some breeds seem to keep fat on air while others receive double the portion and still look slight. A thoroughbred was being fed 22lbs. of grain a day for about 7 months just to get him looking decent. No wonder he became a handful to handle. Fortunately he was being worked twice a day and settled into a normal intake of 10-12 lbs of grain. His hind and shoulders were beautifully muscled but he still showed a little ribs. One feed often used is beet pulp but doesn't do anything for the working horse and is like popcorn with little nutritional value. It might work to beef a horse up to sell by the pound but a performance horse will just melt away when he is asked to work with this kind of feed.

Remember,  
the marathon runner is very fit but not a candidate for a bathing suit commercial. Also, the body builder looks great doing their routine, but then has to sit down in the dressing room because of dehydration.

Appearance+performance+individual conformation gives us an indication of the correct weight and health of a horse - perhaps not as simple as we first thought!

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