

# THE HENNEKE SYSTEM

## A Reliable Method for Judging a Horse's Condition

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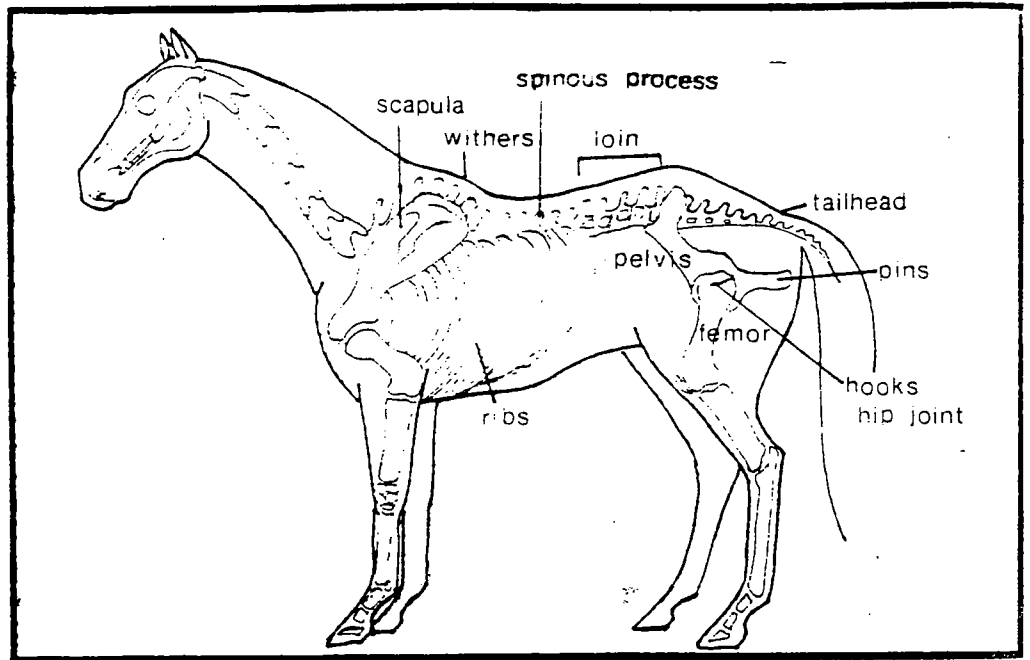
The horse is a unique animal unlike the other species of livestock.

Horses are expected to be athletes and to be productive in different ways than the "edible" species of livestock. Because of this, the agriculture community has not been concerned with developing an objective standard for judging the body condition of a horse other than an individual's background, preferences and prejudices. This sometimes makes for interesting conversations but frustrating court cases involving cruelty to horses.

There are accepted standards for judging cattle, sheep and swine that are fairly constant regardless of an individual's background. Recently a consistent system of objective evaluation of a horse's body condition was developed based on visual and palpable fat cover. It is called the Henneke System after its developer, Don R. Henneke, Ph.D., of Tarleton State University in Texas.

The six points on horses that are the most responsive to changes in body fat were located as reference points. These points are: the lumbar spinous process (bony projections of the spine over the loin), ribs, tailhead, area behind the shoulders, crest of the neck and the withers. Palpation of these areas and visual evaluation are combined to give a numerical score. A horse that scores a 1 has no apparent fat cover and is emaciated while a 5 is the average pleasure horse and a 9 is an obese animal.

Although the Henneke System was developed to try to settle the age old question of whether fat mares or skinny



Underlying bony structures of the six reference points and some other areas needed for visual evaluation.

mares breed easier, it has found its way into humane and animal control investigations. It is a fast, efficient system of evaluation requiring no special equipment. **it is easy to learn and best of all the results are reproducible between different people.**

For the humane investigator and the Animal Control Officer, this system has several uses. It can be used as a way of educating horse owners and as a standard for the court system.

In a recent investigation, the owner of a mare with heaves was ignoring everything I was saying about the weakness in his management of the horse's condition until I informed him that I had scored the mare and let him read what the results were. The mare scored a 2, which meant she was extremely thin, near emaciation.

He was shocked and for the first time realized that there was reason for concern and then was open to my suggestions for changes in the mare's management. The follow-up investigations have

shown a slow but steady increase in the mare's weight and overall condition. I feel that by being able to prove to him that a non-judgmental, objective system agreed with my concern we reached a turning point in our working relationship.

The second value of this system is that it can be used as a tool for the judge and/or jury to help decide a case. For example: I was involved in a case before I learned the Henneke System. It involved a mare that was extremely malnourished and crippled. The prosecution's veterinarian claimed the mare was emaciated and near terminal starvation. The defense's veterinarian in turn claimed the mare was just "a little skinny."

The jury was forced to discern between conflicting opinions of equally qualified professionals, other facts in the case, and their backgrounds and opinions before returning a verdict.

How much easier would their jobs have been if they had available to them a standard to help evaluate the facts and professional opinions offered to them. By canvassing the jury after the verdict was

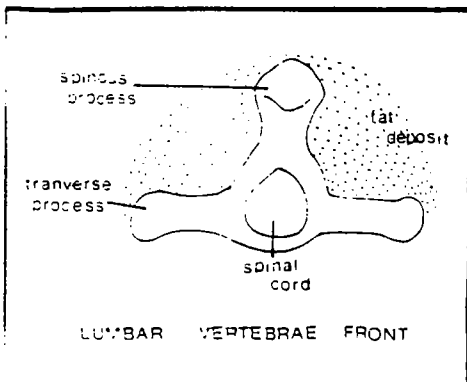
### On Our Cover

Six reference points on a horse's body that are used in the Henneke Scoring System. These areas are palpated to determine amounts of fat deposited there.

returned we discovered that several jurors had problems judging how bad the mare's condition really was, and therefore it took nine hours of deliberation before a guilty verdict was returned.

The Henneke System gives the investigator a tool that can be used consistently to evaluate different horses or the same horse over a period of time. It also adds a note of professionalism to an investigation. I have been treated with more respect and courtesy since I incorporated the Henneke System into my investigations. I think this is because I can now work from a position of knowledge that in the past was reserved for veterinarians. In other cases I have used it very quickly and unobtrusively while I am "patting" the horse and visiting with the owner so that the hostile feelings are kept at a minimum. It is versatile and it is a consistent tool for investigations of horse abuse and negligence cases. The system will never replace photographs or a well prepared report but it can enhance already good investigative techniques.

It is necessary for an individual to be trained on how to use this system in order to be effective. There are several Horse Abuse Investigator Schools being put on around the country that are teaching the Henneke System. I recommend contacting the American Humane Association in Denver about where schools are and when they are being held.



Anterior view of a single Lumbar Vertebrae showing its parts and how fat is deposited along the vertebrae and therefore the backbone of a horse.

## HENNEKE CONDITION SCORING SYSTEM IN HORSES

(1) **POOR** - The horse is emaciated, with prominent spinous processes, tailhead, pelvic bones and ribs; the bone structure under the withers, shoulders and neck can be seen and no fat can be felt anywhere.

The spinous processes are the prominent bones of the spine (backbones). This area is the most responsive to changes in amounts of fat in the body.

(2) **VERY THIN** - The spinous processes are still prominent but fat can be felt at their bases, and the transverse processes of the lumbar vertebrae feel rounded; the ribs, tailhead, and pelvic bones stand out, and bone structures under the withers, neck and shoulders can be faintly-discerned.

(3) **THIN** - The spinous processes stand out, but fat covers them to midpoint so that the transverse process can't be felt; the ribs and tailhead also have a light coat of fat, ribs can be seen but vertebrae in the tailhead can't be distinguished; pin bones can't be seen; the withers are prominent, but the structures under them, as well as those under the neck and shoulders, can't be seen.

Not adequate amounts of body fat for the horse to be healthy.

(4) **MODERATELY THIN** - The horse has a negative crease along its back and the outline of the ribs can be seen. How prominent the tailhead is depends on conformation, however, fat can be felt around it and the hook bones can't be seen; the withers, neck and shoulders no longer look obviously thin.

This is the minimum acceptable amount of body fat but not enough for the horse to handle illness or extreme stress.

Well conditioned endurance horses will score about 4.5 on this scale.

(5) **MODERATE** - The back is level; the ribs can be felt but not seen; fat around the tailhead begins to feel spongy; the shoulders and neck blend into the body; the withers look rounded.

Horse has a blended, smooth overall appearance. The average performance horse will score within this range.

(6) **MODERATE TO FLESHY** - Fat at the ribs feels spongy; at the tailhead it feels soft. The horse may have a slight crease down his back and the beginnings of fat deposits can be felt at the withers, behind the shoulders, and on the sides of the neck.

A good condition for a horse on maintenance. This is the condition the average pleasure horse should be.

(7) **FLESHY** - There may be a crease down the back and while the ribs can be felt, fat fills the spaces between them; fat is also noticeable along the withers and neck and behind the shoulders.

This is the level that ~~hobby horses~~ are kept and it is also a good level for horses wintering outside of a stall.

(8) **FAT** - The horse has a crease down its back, and it is hard to feel the ribs, the fat around the tailhead feels very soft, the neck is noticeably thicker, and the area along the withers is filled with fat; the space behind the shoulders is filled in flush, and fat is being deposited along the inner buttocks.

There is a very deep crease over the loins.

Continued on page fourteen

# SHELTER HEALTH

## Constant Evaluation and Monitoring Make Animal Shelter

Editor's Note: This is the fourth part of a series on managing animal health by John E. Freed III, executive director, and Douglas P. Seif, DVM, staff veterinarian, both of the Greenville Humane Society. Mr. Freed, a member of the Animal Advisory Committee of the American Humane Association, and Dr. Seif, a graduate of Michigan State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, are available to answer ques-

tions by phone or mail and offer advice on specific problems an animal facility might have. They can be reached at the Greenville Humane Society, 328 Furman Hall Road, Greenville, South Carolina, 29609, telephone (803) 242-3626.

this point, potential health problems will be foreseen, and the preventative medicine program can be designed with special emphasis in those areas.

Not only management, but everyone on the staff must understand and believe in the program. Allowing input from the staff in each area is a good method to achieve cooperation. Explaining the rationale behind each change is another necessity. Final results of improved health and sanitation will generally get everyone's support. A lack of understanding and compliance by the staff will result in health problems being concealed or ignored. Health care is a team effort and must be treated as such.

A good method of quality control requires one individual to assume responsibility for doing daily rounds and assessing the health of each animal. Special training in animal health care is very helpful to ensure early disease detection. Any sign of infectious disease means euthanasia or isolation for the entire animal group exposed. This person should make no decisions of a subjective nature. Being totally objective and removing animals from the population only for

This final article in our series on shelter health deals with controlling, implementing and managing the program. Without reinforcement and monitoring, any program will degenerate into chaos.

The first step in establishing a quality health program is the determination to do so. Noticeable results will take place, but may require one to two months to become apparent to everyone. Confidence and resolve will guide the program through start-up problems.

Designing the program requires everyone involved to take a step back and look at the facility's use and layout. Input from the entire staff is advisable. The animal flow and different handling areas are evaluated first. The principles of segregation are used as a yardstick. Once this is done, the best way to sanitize the entire environment is worked out. At

### Horse Abuse Investigator School Set for April

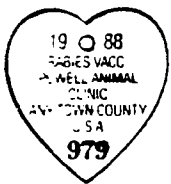
The Texas Animal Control Association and The American Humane Association will sponsor a Horse Abuse Investigation School April 10 - 15 1988, in Kingsville, Texas.

The highlight of the week will be a tour of the King Ranch and a barbeque at the ranch.

The school is limited to 40 participants; registration for Texas residents ends March 11 and if there are any vacancies, out-of-state registration will end on March 25. Registration fees are \$475 and include room, all meals, transportation from the motel to all classroom locations, notebook with outline of program and handouts, and a T-shirt.

For further information, contact Cathy Clark, President of the Texas Animal Control Association, P. O. Box 190, Lufkin, Texas 75901, or call (409) 634-7422.

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### HENNEKE CONDITION SCORING SYSTEM IN HORSES

(Continued from page nine)

(9) **EXTREMELY FAT** - The crease down the back is obvious; fat appears in patches over the ribs and bulges around the tailhead, withers, shoulders and neck, the inner buttocks may rub together; the flank is filled in flush.

The neck will appear very cresty and thick, spongy fat will be at the elbows and large amounts of soft, spongy fat deposited at the tailhead. The horse will be so fat at this point as to lose all definition of muscle and contours.

#### POINTS TO NOTE

Aged horses will have decreased scores because there is a softening in their muscle structure. Add a half a score.

Pregnant mares in the last trimester will have decreased scores. The weight of the foal pulls down her loin area decreasing that score and the hormones necessary for delivery will make her tailhead area flaccid, decreasing that score. Add one half a score to her overall score.

Thoroughbred conformation has naturally more prominent withers and back than some other breeds and therefore will naturally score one half score less.

Pony and draft breeds conformation is naturally fleshy and will score one half score higher.