



The Henneke Scale

How to Condition Score Horses

Condition scoring is a handy management tool to assess relative body fat without the use of scales, gadgets, calculators or anything other than your hands, eyes and a little experience. Condition scoring was originally developed at Texas A&M University for use in broodmares, but has since been developed for use in other species of livestock as well. In very general terms, animals are assigned a score between 1 and 9; 1 being a very emaciated animal, and 9 being an extremely obese animal.

First, a few of the misunderstandings-used correctly, condition scoring is independent of a horse's breed, muscling or aerobic fitness, conformation, age, hydration or gut fill. Contrary to a few opinions floating about, it has *nothing* to do with the amount of glycogen a horse has in his muscle stores. Why?

Condition scoring is an assessment *only* of the amount of body fat covering certain skeletal landmarks on the body, such as the point of the hip and buttocks, ribs, spine and so on. While some of the observation points (such as through the hindquarters or around the tailhead) are also areas occupied by muscle, manual palpation and a little practice will easily differentiate between fat and muscle. Horses with a gut full of hay may look very rounded at first glance, but the prominence of the skeleton will not change upon closer inspection. Likewise, a dehydrated horse will appear tucked-up and long through the underline, but prominence of the landmarks will not significantly change.

So to get started, let's go over the areas of assessment. There are nine areas throughout the body:

- 1) Neck
- 2) Withers
- 3) Shoulder
- 4) The area directly behind the elbow
- 5) Topline
- 6) Ribs
- 7) Tail head
- 8) Point of hip
- 9) Point of buttock

A tenth area that I personally find useful as well is the "twist", the area between the thighs, as viewed from behind. Each area should be appraised and scored individually and then the scores averaged to produce a final overall score. This doesn't mean you need to laboriously write down and calculate each area. What it does mean is that you need to look at the total horse and take into account individual differences. Some horses can be quite plump and yet still look a little ribby, so the overall score should look at areas other than just those ribs. Other horses can have quite a bit of fat cover, but because of funny conformation through the croup, look thin in just that one area. Be sure to look at all the areas, then form a general overall score based on individual areas of observation.

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When appraising each area, use your hands as well as your eyes. Skeletal landmarks can be hidden by a furry winter coat, dirt, lighting or just the way the horse is standing. Hold your hand flat, fingers together, and feel for the reference points. Then walk around the horse and see if your observations are consistent from the other side as well.

The original developer of this system, D.R. Henneke, has written that for a horse to correctly fall into each of the below described categories, every component of the description must apply. For example, if a horse meets all of the qualifications but one for a condition score of 3, then that horse should be categorized as something other than a 3. Trying to get more exact than that (for example, a condition score of 3.25) is probably not particularly accurate, as these observations are subjective, not quantitative.

The descriptions for the individual categories are as follows:

Condition Score 1: Emaciated: Bony structures of neck, shoulders and withers easily noticeable. Spinous processes, along the ribs, topline, point of hip and point of buttock all project prominently, with an obvious ridge down the back. Individual vertebrae may be identifiable. There is significant space between inner buttocks ("twist"). The animal is extremely emaciated; no fatty tissue can be felt.

Condition Score 2: Very Thin: Bony structures of the neck, shoulders and withers are faintly discernible. Spinous processes, ribs, topline, point of hip and buttock are prominent. Noticeable space between inner buttocks. Animal is emaciated.



Condition Score 3: Thin: Neck, withers and shoulder are accentuated, but not obviously thin. Tailhead is prominent. Slight fat cover over ribs, but still easily discernible. Spinous processes, point of hip and point of buttock are rounded, but easily discernible. Twist is filled in, but without noticeable deposition of fatty tissue.



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erately Thin: Neck, withers and shoulders are not obviously thin. Ribs are faintly discernible. Point of hips and buttocks are not visually discernible. Fat can be felt around the tailhead, prominence somewhat dependent upon conformation. There is a slight negative crease (a ridge) along the topline, especially over the loins and hindquarters.



Condition Score 5: Moderate:
Neck, withers and shoulder appear rounded and blend smoothly into the body. Ribs cannot be seen but are easily felt. Back is level with neither a ridge nor a gully along the topline. Fat around tailhead is beginning to feel spongy. Slight amount of discernible fat deposited between buttocks (twist).

Condition
6: Moder-



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Fleshy: Fat beginning to be deposited along the neck, withers and shoulders. Fat over the ribs beginning to feel spongy, ribs cannot easily be felt. Fat around tailhead feels soft. May be slight positive crease (gully) along the top-line. Noticeable fat deposition between buttocks.

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Condition
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deposited along neck and withers and behind shoulder. Individual ribs can be felt, but with noticeable filling between ribs. Slight positive crease down back. Fat around tailhead feels soft.

Score 7:
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Condition
Fat: No-

thickening of neck. Area along withers is filled with fat, area behind shoulder is filled in flush with body. Ribs cannot be felt, noticeable positive crease down back, fat around tailhead is very soft. Significant fat deposited along inner buttocks.

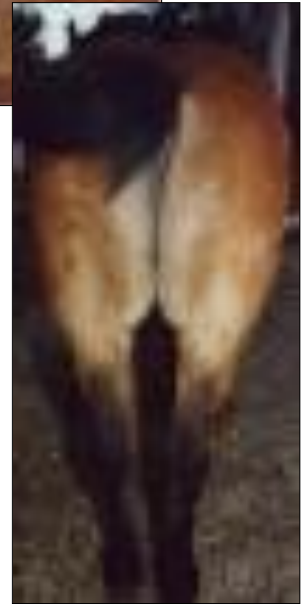
Score 8:
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Condition Score 9: Extremely
Fat: Bulging fat along neck,



shoulders and withers. Flank is filled in flush. Patchy fat appearing over ribs, obvious positive crease down back. Obvious fat deposited along inner buttocks.



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