



feeding the ex-racehorse



So many Thoroughbreds are now finding new careers as riding and competition horses and, when they first come to a new home, a new diet is one of the first major changes they face. The Thoroughbred straight out of training will have been used to a high energy, low fibre diet, consuming large amounts of concentrate feed whilst often only being fed relatively small volumes of forage. This rather unnatural diet means that an ex-racehorse coming off the track has to become accustomed not only to his new home but also to the quite different feeding practices associated with it.

Adjusting feeding regimes when bringing horses in after a long period of “down time” in the field, should be done gradually. Grass provides more calories, protein, vitamins and minerals generally than hay or haylage so, when substituting the grass with conserved forage, it is important that the nutrient content of the concentrate ration is adjusted accordingly. If feeding a balancer, it may be necessary to increase the calorie content of the diet by changing to a high fibre, low energy cube or mix. Where further calories are required, a specially formulated conditioning feed is the preferred option.

Safe Conditioning

Whatever your ex-racehorse is doing, if he needs to gain weight, the most effective solution is a specially formulated conditioning feed, like Top Line Conditioning Cubes or Mix. These provide a concentrated source of non-heating calories, keeping meal sizes manageable and ensuring the feed is utilised more efficiently with a smaller risk of digestive upsets or “crabby” behaviour. Cubes tend to contain less starch than a mix of a similar nutrient specification so, if your horse is prone to being a bit fizzy, which is fairly typical of Thoroughbreds out of training, feed a cube rather than a mix.

Providing 2¼ times as many calories as cereals, oil is a useful addition to the diet

Whether you are feeding a horse straight out of training or a Shetland pony, they both require a balanced diet to meet their requirements for energy, protein, fibre vitamins and minerals, whilst suiting temperament, workload and age. The first hurdle to tackle nutritionally is to reduce the amount of energy (calories) the horse is receiving. He may well have come out of training being fed in excess of 16lbs (7.2kg) of a high energy racehorse mix designed to provide plenty of fast release energy (with a digestible energy (DE) of 13-14MJ/kg) - probably the last thing that is required at his new home!

Although it is necessary to reduce energy intake it is still important that the level of nutrients received is not compromised and offering a handful of pony nuts and chaff will not be sufficient. Choosing a lower energy cube or mix, such as Baileys No.2 Working Horse & Pony Cubes or Everyday High Fibre Mix and feeding it at correct levels will in comparison supply just 10MJ/kg of DE plus the protein, vitamins and minerals that the horse needs. A typical Thoroughbred, weighing 500kg (1100lbs), at rest or in light work will need 2.5kg (5lbs) of concentrate per day alongside a minimum of 7.5kg (16.5lbs) of forage.

Feeding at Grass

For those being turned away on good grass, a balancer, like Baileys Lo-Cal, will provide essential nutrients likely to be lacking in pasture but with no associated calories. Balancers provide a concentrated source of nutrients in a small volume which can be beneficial when feeding at pasture. As little as 450g per day are required for a 500kg horse at rest so Lo-Cal can easily be fed once a day but, where grass quality is not good or the horse requires more condition, correct levels of a mix or cube are a better option as a balancer provides few calories.



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where further slow release, non-heating energy is required in a small volume. 250 – 500 ml per day is necessary to make a significant contribution so a high oil supplement, like Baileys Outshine, may be preferable as a mess-free, palatable alternative. This provides a blend of soya and linseed plus supporting antioxidants, which are necessary for the efficient utilisation of the oil by the body, and is fed in small amounts from ½ to 3lb per day.

No.21 Ease & Excel is also perfect for providing plenty of slow release calories

as it is high fibre and high oil and low in starch than other conditioning mixes as well as Top Line Conditioning Cubes. This makes it ideal for stressy types and because it contains loose alfalfa there is no real need to add extra chaff either.

Fibre – Especially Important!

Research suggests that 90% of horses in training suffer from gastric ulcers due to the low fibre, high starch diets they receive during training. This makes it all the more important to ensure that an ex-racehorse is returned to a high fibre diet as soon as is possible. Forage is important in any horse's diet as they have evolved to consume large amounts of forage eaten over an 18 hour period. The physical bulk of fibre is also vital for maintaining regular bowel movement, helping to push out any excess gas that may be accumulating in the gut, which can become distended when it builds up, leading to considerable pain and often resulting in colic symptoms.

Fibre is also important for counteracting acidity throughout the digestive tract. When the horse chews, the resulting saliva produced helps to neutralise the acidity of the stomach contents. Because fibre takes longer to chew than concentrates, more saliva is produced so acid is neutralised to a greater extent than when concentrates are consumed. This helps to avoid gastric ulceration to the squamous (top) region of the stomach, which is vulnerable to ulcers, and also helps to mop up excess acid in the stomach, aiding the healing process of existing ulcers whilst reducing further risk of ulceration.

Fibre is fermented by bacteria in the hind gut and acids produced from the breakdown of fibre are much weaker than those from the breakdown of starch (cereals). This means that the environment in the hind gut is more hospitable to the bacterial population and, as these bacteria are particularly important to the overall health of the horse, it is important to keep them happy by maintaining fibre levels!

Healthy Mind

Not only does fibre help keep the gut healthy, it also keeps the mind healthy. Providing your horse with plenty of fibre either in the stable or field is beneficial in preventing boredom and also relieving stress. As horses are herd animals, reducing their contact with other horses can cause considerable anxiety and result in problems. It has previously been assumed that boredom was the main reason horses receiving very little fibre started to develop stereotypies, as they had long periods of time doing nothing.

However, research is suggesting that in fact, some stereotypies are a response to increased acidity in the digestive tract. Therefore if a horse isn't receiving much fibre he won't be spending very long chewing and the gut may remain very acidic. The importance of fibre can never be under-estimated; feed more of it, and keep the volume of concentrates down, and the risk of digestive upsets occurring will, quite simply, be reduced.

Creating a healthy gut

If your Thoroughbred has come from a reschooling/rehabilitation centre, the gut should be healthy and already adapted to a new feeding regime. However, moving to a new home or adapting from a life in racing can still take its toll on the digestive system. During times of stress, beneficial bacteria in the digestive tract can become disrupted resulting in an unhealthy gut. One of the most obvious signs of stress is loose droppings which is often a physiological response to the "excitement" or stresses of racing. Although using a probiotic is unlikely to stop the droppings from becoming loose, it should mean that harmful bacteria are unable to take advantage of the compromised condition of the



digestive tract. The use of prebiotics, like Baileys Digest Plus, should help to reduce the incidence of diarrhoea caused by bacterial infections.

Probiotics and prebiotics have been developed to help enhance the bacterial population and are particularly beneficial when the digestive tract is under stress. Prebiotics work by providing 'good' bacteria with a food source, maintaining a healthy environment for them to reproduce, expelling 'bad' bacteria by competitive exclusion as have no room to develop. Helping to maintain the natural bacterial balance of the gut also promotes efficient feed utilisation, beneficial for the 'poor doer' and overall good health.

Normal Horse

With attention to detail and a little care in the early stages, there is no reason why your ex-racehorse shouldn't thrive on a diet where the ratio of forage to concentrates is kept in a healthy balance. Once settled into their new life, most Thoroughbreds simply need treating as any other individual horse and some even become laid back good doers!



For further information or a practical and individual diet for your horse, contact one of Baileys Nutrition team on 01371 850 247 (option 2)
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