



Becky Young

Career Change May Dictate a Diet Change

Feeding Management Tips for
Freshly Retired Racehorses

On a crisp spring day, a sleek Thoroughbred gelding is prepared for his morning work. He and three of his stablemates are scheduled to gallop on the racecourse's training track. After one-half mile of trotting, the gelding is eased into a gallop. When he presses forward with a seemingly effortless stride, his speed is deceptive—deceptively slow. The trainer glances at his stopwatch, and the time is far from competitive. In fact, he wonders briefly if the timepiece is functioning properly. He places a call to the gelding's owner. "He's not going to make it," the trainer says somberly. "Too slow." A few more words are exchanged and the trainer rings off.

Two days later, an aluminum trailer pulls up alongside the shedrow, and the same gelding is loaded onto the trailer. He is destined for his new home, that of an experienced horsewoman who plans to transform the gelding from racetrack cast-off to competitive sporthorse. No certainties exist, of course, as his talent or temperament may not be compatible with sporthorse endeavors. As an investment for his old owner, the horse tanked, but the owner is confident in the woman's horsemanship skills and is ecstatic that the horse will be given the chance to have a productive life after his racetrack trial.

For the horse, a new world awaits him.

Lives of Thoroughbreds in race training differ greatly from those of most sporthorses. Racehorses spend the majority of their days in confinement, unable to see anything but their immediate surroundings: three walls and a limited vista of other stalled horses and the goings-on of the shedrow. Their schedules are precise; they are fed at certain hours each day, worked at specified times in the mornings, walked until completely cool after exercise, and buffed to a high shine once or twice daily.

When a horse transitions from the racetrack to a second career, its schedule and therefore its life might be upset dramatically. Consequently, one of the most beneficial aspects of care given to a former racehorse is rest, according to KER nutritionist Dr. Kathleen Crandell. "Some people believe that because horses are fit from race training they need to keep them in training. From a physiological standpoint, that might be true, but horses, like people, are not just physical beings. They also depend on mental soundness to perform well.

"Horses do not lose condition as quickly as humans, so it is my opinion that horses leaving the track should have some rest and relaxation for their minds before beginning the training involved in a new occupation," Crandell explained.

Veterinary Checkup

Once a Thoroughbred has been placed into a home away from the track, a physical examination by a veterinarian is in order. One factor that might be affecting the horse's health—both physiologically and psychologically—is gastric ulceration.

"Ulcers are almost a given in racehorses, so consider having the horse scoped to see if ulceration is present," advised Crandell.

The incidence of ulcers among racehorses is overwhelming. Studies have placed the rate of occurrence as high as 90%, and the effects of ulcers on attitude and athleticism can be devastating. Ulcers can induce sourness and reluctance to work in horses and may be a precursor of colic and lesser evils such as weight loss and poor hair coat. If ulcers are suspected—and they probably should be—a veterinarian can perform a gastric endoscopy, which will reveal the health of the stomach lining. If damage is found, preparations can be prescribed to first heal the ulcers and then deter them from redeveloping.

Nearly all racehorses receive top-tier care at the racetrack. Presumably, this includes regular dental care. To be sure a horse's teeth are in sound condition, enlist the services of a veterinarian or equine dentist and request a whole-mouth examination. The majority of horses that come off the track and embark on a different life path are young, possibly at an age when significant changes

are occurring to their dental architecture. A professional can identify and correct any problems as well as suggest a reasonable time for reexamination.

Have on hand the immunization records of the horse so the veterinarian can review them and administer any recommended vaccinations. The same applies to the deworming history, if available.

During this initial letdown period, a critical eye can be turned to the horse's weight. Practically all racehorses that come off the track are sleeker and more streamlined than typical pleasure and show mounts; in fact, many have a "tucked up" appearance, showing a distinctive shallowness in the heart-girth and flanks. At this point in their lives, most are racing fit with well-developed musculature and little body fat. Changes in the diet, made over a period of several weeks, will set the stage for weight gain.

Overhaul the Diet

Racehorses must consume considerable calories daily to churn out competitive fractions on the track. In fact, such is the demand for calories that trainers and caretakers must often resort to inventive ways to load up horses with sufficient calories to perform their one job adequately. When horses leave the racetrack, typical workloads will likely decline considerably, and with that should come a corresponding decrease in calories.

"The decrease in calories is vital," commented Crandell. "Once they segue into a second career, horses rarely work hard enough to merit the calorie intakes they were given at the track."

If left on the same high-calorie diets, problems might ensue. Crandell recounted the tale of a woman who bought a Thoroughbred gelding directly off the track. "She turned the gelding out in a lovely, grass-filled pasture to let it unwind for a few months before beginning its reeducation. Upon picking up the horse, she asked the trainer what he was feeding it, and he told her four gallons of sweet feed per day, which would be about 16 pounds. She continued feeding the horse the same amount of grain as well as all of the pasture he could consume.

"When I first saw the gelding, the woman had owned it for five months, and he was obese and flighty. The horse was completely unmanageable and unable to focus on anything, including the handler. He acted like a child who had eaten his entire bag of Halloween candy in one sitting!

"Needless to say, I explained her horse did not need all the calories from the sweet feed because he was not working hard anymore. He was eventually cut back to a diet that consisted of grass and a well-balanced vitamin and mineral supplement."

Pasture is a welcome dietary diversion to most former racehorses. As with all horses, a gradual increase in the

James: Is Full-Figured in His Future?

The adjective “statuesque” came to mind when I first laid eyes on James, a Thoroughbred gelding that had little desire or talent to be a threat on the track. He reminded me of the models that strut the catwalks of fashion houses in New York and Paris, for he was long-legged and beautifully poised. Oddly, he even effected perfectly the vacant look that runway models adopt for their struts. Of greatest concern to



This photograph was taken when James was purchased in January. A gradual increase in calories was begun immediately. Veterinary and dental examinations were conducted soon after purchase.

me, however, was the fact he did not have a spare inch to pinch. Like many Thoroughbreds being let down from the rigors of race training, he was thin—ribs displayed prominently, bony withers jutting from his topline, a chain of vertebrae noticeable. And, just like many Thoroughbreds, his march to roundness has been painfully slow. Because I’ve admired show-ring hunters for decades, I adore athletic plumpness, and this is the “look” I had in mind for James.

I approached the matter of weight gain sensibly. All of the medical bases were covered: vigorous deworming coupled with fecal evaluation, thorough dental examination with significant molar correction, diet analysis by a KER nutritionist.

Eventually, James had at his disposal a smorgasbord of feedstuffs: five pounds of sweet feed two times a day (the absolute limit in terms of meal size), a scientifically formulated supplement containing 50% fat, free-choice alfalfa cubes, and an endless supply of high-quality mixed hay. Because it was the dead of winter when I purchased him, succulent, high-energy pasture was months away.

Compounding the weight-gain issue was his work schedule. No room for slackers, James was worked five or six days a week for never less than 45 minutes or an hour.

I gave fleeting consideration to a few other management practices, though each was eventually shot down for one reason or another. For instance, James resides at a nearby boarding facility. While the managers are dedicated to the well-being of their tenants, they only feed twice a day because they cannot guarantee that someone will always be present midday to offer James a third meal. I would prefer his total grain allotment be given in three meals, as several small meals a day are more conducive to weight gain than a couple of large meals. But, alas, that was not an option.

After five months of ownership, there is hope. My well-used weight tape reveals reasonable weight gain. I’ve become less concerned by James’ slow weight increase, knowing well that he will eventually meet his target weight if I stay the course. His weight gain in tandem with one-on-one attention has not only widened his waistline but also brightened his outlook.



Five months later, the changes in James' condition are plain to see. For example, fat now covers his ribs, and they are no longer discernible. Coupled with vigorous grooming, his high-fat diet has imparted a brilliant shine to his coat.

amount of turnout time is advisable. Turnout, however, can unveil other problems, including a degree of social ineptitude among racehorses.

Crandell said, "Many of these horses have not been pastured with another horse for a while and companionship can be stressful. Some Thoroughbreds fret as much with companionship as without. If a horse is to be turned out in a group situation, the owner must be careful that the horse gets enough to eat. Some are so intimidated by other horses that they would rather starve than fight their way up to the hay or feed bucket. On the flip side, some may be overly aggressive or possessive of the feed."

Though some shuffling of social hierarchy may occur in a herd upon introduction of a new member, most groups will establish a new pecking order within a few days.

The Ever-Skinny Thoroughbred

Once the horse has adjusted to the new situation and has started into work, some adjustments may need to be made to the diet.

Metabolism plays a significant role in fattening the retired racehorse. Thoroughbreds are often genetically programmed to inefficiently convert dietary energy to body fat, and therefore have a reputation for being hard keepers.

The core of the diet should be high-quality forage, especially young, flush pasture. If the horse must be stalled or maintained in a barren run or lot for a portion of the day, nutritious dried forage—preferably long-stem hay, though hay cubes are perfectly acceptable provided the horse finds them palatable—should be offered at all times. Expect to use heaps of hay, possibly as much as a bale a day. Horsemen with years of experience often keep hay stallside; if they notice a horse is fresh out of hay, another flake is always within arm's reach. Plainly stated, there's no such thing as too much hay, at least until the horse achieves the desired weight. Don't forget to keep clean water available to a horse that is eating dried forage, as this helps maintain proper digestive function.

When selecting hay, a mixed variety (part grass and part legume, usually alfalfa) is a sensible choice. Alfalfa hay is not an unreasonable option, especially if the horse is particularly fit and "racing lean." While the type of hay is important, the quality of hay should not be overlooked. After all, a high-quality mixed hay would likely supply more energy than an inferior, yellowed alfalfa. Hay analysis can determine if the hay is laden with or lacking in nutrients.

Concentrated Energy

While many horses can fare well on forage alone, most Thoroughbreds cannot, especially if they are on a weight-gain plan. Hence, a concentrated source of energy must be fed, and this is usually a commercial sweet feed.

A feed designed for maintenance works best for most horses. Feeding instructions will be printed on the bag or the tag; read them carefully and always feed at least the minimum recommendation. This ensures that the horse is digesting sufficient feed to meet his protein, vitamin, and mineral requirements. Never feed more than the recommended amount.

There are many options for increasing caloric intake with concentrates. A feed intended for senior horses or high-performance horses may be tried. The calories in these feeds are often delivered through energy sources such as beet pulp, vegetable oil, and soy hulls. These ingredients are high in fat or fiber and low in starch. These energy sources feature an added boon—they are less likely to make horses "hot" or excitable.

If a horse's weight remains static on a diet of all-he-can-eat high-quality forage and maximal concentrate, consider a fat supplement. Vegetable oils are the most common, and these can be drizzled over the feed at mealtime. Like any new feedstuff, the oil of choice should be introduced slowly to the horse. Most horses consume vegetable oils without complaint. A significant drawback with vegetable oils is messiness. Feed tubs often become grimy with residue and regular scrubbing might be necessary. Care must be taken too to keep a fresh supply convenient. Exposed to high temperatures, vegetable oils can spoil quickly.

Another source of supplemental calories is rice bran. "In many instances rice bran is just the thing for horses that need an extra kick in their diet," said Crandell. If a rice bran is selected, be certain it is stabilized, which means it has undergone heat processing that greatly reduces the likelihood of rancidity. The rice bran should also have a balanced calcium to phosphorus ratio.

Seek Advice

Veterinarians and equine nutritionists can offer valuable nuggets of advice for those tackling the reconditioning of off-the-track Thoroughbreds. Also of assistance might be horsemen with past experience in such endeavors. Those that have worked with many Thoroughbreds might have an encyclopedic knowledge of practical solutions to everyday problems such as backing off high-fat rations and hitting a plateau in weight gain.

Feeding the retired racehorse is often a challenging proposition. The rules are not hard-and-fast and often require an inventive and flexible mind. Fortunately, horsemen have at their disposal a battery of feed choices that will help horses achieve weight gain. ☺☺



Reprint Courtesy of Kentucky Equine Research, Inc.

3910 Delaney Ferry Road
Versailles, KY 40383
Phone: 859-873-1988
Fax: 859-873-3781
Order Department: 888-873-1988
www.ker.com
info@ker.com