

## **(MIS)USE OF THE BODY CONDITION SCORING SYSTEM FOR HORSES**

Over the past year, cases of alleged horse neglect have skyrocketed across the United States. I have been contacted by people from California to Maryland, from Minnesota to Texas, and from New York to Arizona. This phenomenon has reached epidemic proportions. Minnesota alone reportedly investigated almost 400 cases in 2011. Most of these can be attributed to the down economy and the drought making it difficult for horse owners to feed their horses like they would like to feed them. Therefore, we are seeing a lot more horses in below average body condition. That does not make every thin horse a neglected or abused horse.

Over the past decade, the Body Condition Scoring System for Horses (BCS) has become, in many if not most cases, the sole reason for seizure for neglect or abuse. The problem with this is that the BCS was not designed to reflect the health or well-being of the horse. The BCS provides an estimate of stored body fat, period. From a physiological standpoint, as long as a horse has any fat reserves and is receiving a diet that meets its daily maintenance requirements, that horse can be healthy.

For example, The Minimum Standards of Horse Care in the State of California (2011) arbitrarily indicates that any horse with a BCS of less than 3 does not meet the minimum standard. By definition, a BCS 3 horse still has reserves of body fat. Once a horse gets below a BCS 3, then reserves are low. However, the health of the horse is only in jeopardy if it is breaking down non-fat tissue to provide for its basic energy needs. The BCS cannot measure this function.

Breakdown of non-adipose tissue for energy can be evaluated through blood analysis focusing on liver and kidney function, and the breakdown of structural tissue for energy. Blood urea nitrogen, creatinine, and the ratio of blood urea nitrogen level to creatinine level are indicators of tissue breakdown. Analysis for hematocrit, serum concentrations of total protein solids, sodium, calcium, potassium, triglycerides, bilirubin, and albumin will also provide information concerning malnutrition and starvation. None of these tests are accurate on their own. However, evaluation of matching trends from the analysis can help confirm or disprove that the horse is nutritionally deprived.

In addition, the presence, or absence, of other physical indicators of inadequate energy intake should be used to evaluate alleged neglect. Energy deprived horses will be lethargic. Their reaction to stimuli will be depressed. They will usually show signs of dehydration: tacky gums, "tenting" of skin on the neck, concentrated urine with a very strong odor, and decreased fecal output. Coprophagy, the consumption of feces, is usually very pronounced in energy deprived horses, especially those kept in groups. Since energy deprivation is usually accompanied by protein deficits, the hair coat will dull and shaggy. It is imperative that a low BCS score be supported by other clinical signs of starvation to indicate nutritional neglect.

The presence, or absence, of feed and hay on the premises is an excellent indicator of the ability of the owner to meet the nutritional needs of their horses. If adequate feed and hay is present to

meet the needs of the animals, then seizure is not warranted. Few, if any, horse owners will refuse to feed their horses if feed is available.

Adding to the problem is that many "evaluators" have not received any formal training in the application of the BCS. They do not understand the physiology of fat deposition and utilization, they are not knowledgeable in conformation and breed characteristics that will influence the BCS, and most often they have personal biases that lower their estimate. The BCS is designed as a ranking system. It was never designed to be exact and it cannot be exact because of differences in breeds, size, age, and conformation between horses. It is a guideline. If the average lay horse owner gets within 1 body condition score, plus or minus, of the horse's actual condition, they are doing a good job. Seizing a horse based solely on an untrained person's estimated BCS is a very questionable practice.

I find it very disturbing that humane societies and local authorities have utilized the BCS in such a manner. There are definitely cases of neglect and abuse that need to be dealt with in a quick and decisive manner. However, care must be taken to be sure that the animals are truly being starved and that requires supporting evidence from their other physical parameters and blood analysis. My recommendation to all parties is that if neglect or abuse due to nutrition deprivation is suspected,

1. The evaluator must exhibit the ability to offer a trained, unbiased opinion based solely on the stored body fat of the animal. If seizure is to be considered, the evaluation of the animals by a qualified, impartial third person should be required.
2. A BCS of less than 3 is not cause for automatic seizure. The animals in question must exhibit altered metabolism confirmed by blood analysis or other physical signs consistent with malnutrition before they can be seized for inadequate body condition. If it is determined that the horse needs immediate attention, a veterinarian of the owner's choosing should provide those supporting procedures. These procedures may be done with supervision by the legal authorities.
3. Only horses exhibiting altered metabolism and having inadequate feed stores on the premises should be seized. Removing healthy horses from their home is not necessary and may often result in adverse consequences due to stress created by a new environment and untrained handlers.
4. If at all possible, the alleged neglected horses should remain at the owner's farm. Removing any horse from its familiar environment, drastically changing its diet, and exposing it to a new set of handlers will usually result in stress and a further loss of body condition. In the vast majority of cases, if the intent is truly the best care of the horse, that care can best be administered in familiar surroundings. If the legal authorities require, care can be conducted under their official guidance.

"Innocent until proven guilty" is the most abused legal standard in America today. Due to biased press coverage, most "trials" are conducted before the accused ever has a chance to answer the charges. Once a horse owner has been accused of neglect, they are stained for life. If they are later proven to be innocent, the public has already painted them with a negative picture. This should not happen. It is imperative that the state authorities demonstrate adequate cause for seizure. Unsupported claims of neglect against a horse owner should be followed by a vigorous

public campaign by the state authorities criticizing the parties who have filed a frivolous claim and, if possible, such parties should be prosecuted by the state.

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