

This month, Cherry Tree Equine's Michelle O'Neill helps HW readers with some common Summer rugging dilemmas... as well as offering some top training tips on how to help both horse and rider to find their balance.

Dear Michelle,

My pony doesn't like having her rugs put on. She gets very itchy, so she needs them on, but she bites, backs away and sometimes kicks if she's really upset about it (having her rugs put on). I want to find a way to get her used to rugs, without forcing them on her. Can you help? Thankyou, Acey :)

Hello Acey

Your pony must be very uncomfortable being itchy all the time! If she were my pony, I would want to know why she was getting itchy. Is she allergic to something? Has she got a skin condition, (such a Queensland itch), that needs to be seen by a vet? Do you need to change her feed or paddock or start a maintenance treatment program for her?

It is not normal for a pony to be that itchy, so you may be best to get a vet to check out why she is in discomfort. Your vet will also be able to advise you on various skin treatments and medications, as well as whether rugging is really helping her itch...or making it worse! Indeed, until you know what is making her itchy, I would not be putting any rugs on her, as it seems, (from the behaviour you describe),

that the rugs are not helping. If fact, if they are making her itching worse, she may even be trying to tell you that by reacting to being rugged the way she is!

The other thing you may need to check is that it is not the rugs themselves that are making her react and become itchy. If you wash your rugs in human washing powder, she may be actually be allergic to this. Human washing powder is not designed for horses and can often make horses and ponies have an allergic reaction.

Finally, once you get the itch cured, it may take a while to get her used to being rugged again. I would suggest you have an experienced horse person with you to monitor her behaviour and to ensure you are safe. Some horses require a lot of desensitisation (and plenty of patience) to get over their 'rugging phobias' (particularly if they've had a bad or scary experience with being rugged at some stage). Perhaps you might even find that she is just not happy being rugged at all and it might be best to not rug her. But as with anything to do with good horsemanship, just keep experimenting and listening to your horse until you find what works best for both of you!

Hi Michelle,

My name is Olivia, I live in Perth and I am 14 years old. I do not own a horse yet but I am still very intrigued to know the answer to this question (plus I would like to know for when I get my own horse in the future!) In the summer should I rug my horse?

I have heard that horses need to be able to lift/raise the hairs in their coat to allow airflow between their coat and the skin to aid in the cooling process, as well as cooling through sweat evaporation. So would rugging them, even with an extra light mesh rug, actually make them hotter and do more bad than good? Thank you, from Olivia x

Hi Olivia

Congratulations on being such a thinking horse person; when you do get a horse he or she will be one very lucky pony!

As I just explained to Acey (see above) there are some horses and ponies that are just not suited to wearing horse rugs and others that have to, because of their location, their showing commitments or even for health reasons.

At Cherry Tree Equine, we do not rug any of our horses in summer unless they are being prepared for competition or sale. We believe this is better for the horses that are 'turned out' and it also makes less work for us. But if the horse is being shown or prepared for a special event or even regular (weekly) work, a summer rug can help keep their coat looking well kept and shiny and will also help protect them from bugs, bites and even the odd nips from their paddock neighbours!

But remember, if you have a horse rugged you must check on him twice a day; to ensure that the rug has not slipped or gotten tangled. It is also a good idea to take the rug off regularly to make sure it is not rubbing anywhere.

You are correct about horses needing to be able to raise the hairs on their body to regulate their temperature; and this is especially relevant when it is cold. Research coming

out of America is now saying that horses that are not required to be in regular work or training during the colder months, are often better off not being rugged in winter for this reason.

You also need to remember that if you put a light summer rug on your horse and it gets wet, your horse will get cold very quickly – as the hairs are laid flat underneath a wet rug and therefore don't do much to help regulate body temperature. Which is yet another reason why you need to check horses twice a day when they are rugged and change your rug type depending on the weather conditions.



Here are two of our broodmares; they have beautiful coats in the middle of summer despite never wearing rugs.

Photo by Michelle O'Neill

Hi Michelle,

I recently bought my dream horse, who is perfect in just about every way...Except she has terrible balance, she finds it difficult to canter/trot the entire way around the arena, and also on large or small circles. What are some exercises I can do with her, to help her become more balanced? Thankyou! From Jesse.

Hello Jesse

How wonderful that you have found your dream horse; you are very lucky!

Balance is something that you and your horse will have to work on together.

You need to make sure that you are balanced as the rider, so that your horse can also be balanced underneath you. So it's a real 'team' effort!

A great exercise to help with balance is "Perfect Circles". It is one of the first exercises I do with students at all my clinics. Simply start at the walk and riding a ten metre circle. You are aiming to walk the same circle over and over by controlling your horses every step. To do this, you need to feel what your horse is doing; is he stepping in or out, is his body remaining bent in his direction of travel, and are you sitting nice and straight in the saddle and looking ahead or are you leaning in or out?

As you can see in the attached photo, if you have a sand arena you can see your tracks developing. My horse Squiggles is scribing a perfect circle with a soft rein and soft body....and he's literally drawing a perfect circle in the sand! If you are having trouble starting your circle off or keeping it circular, you can put a marker in the middle of the circle and stay the same distance away from the marker the whole way around.



Photo by Erin Harriott

Squiggles doing a Perfect Circle. Note how he has only made a very narrow track in the sand.

Once you have perfect circles at the walk you can progress to the trot and then eventually the canter. But be patient and take your time with increasing speed. You can also check out my new website for more training ideas, as we will be putting lots of video footage up over summer, to help with problems just like yours! Have fun!



Photo by Andrew Hennell

michelle o'neill



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