

Picking your pony's new winter rug can be a daunting experience...and choosing the right rug for your pony can often mean the difference between a happy, healthy winter and a rubbed, ripped and very soggy one! This month, Michelle O'Neill from Cherry Tree Equine has some great tips on keeping your horse warm and happy during the colder months...as well as ideas on how to keep your horse engaged and willing while working in the arena.

*Hi Michelle,*

*I'm 14 and I live in Victoria and own a beautiful 15hh Stockhorse gelding named Jackson. Winters are very cold and wet down here, which obviously means lots of rugged horses! Last winter, Jackson has had two rugs on... a medium weight canvas (that turned out not to be that waterproof), and a waterproof canvas with no lining (to keep him dry). I have heard from some books that it's better for your horse to only have one rug on, but neither of his rugs are warm or water proof enough on their own. Jackson is quite finely built for his breed and had quite a thin coat. We were thinking of in future getting him a canvas that has a wool lining (all our other ponies have them and they are very warm and water proof) but I also read somewhere else that it is bad for your horse to have heavy rugs (and this sort is quite heavy). I'm very confused as to what is the best way to rug your horse in cold, wet weather. Please help!*

*Thank you! Evie*

Dear Evie

I know exactly what you mean about cold weather; here in the Snowy Mountains we are used to getting cold weather at almost any time of year! In fact, something that is even more important than how you rug your horses over the colder months, is how much shelter and feed you can provide for them.

Often, if horses have adequate shelter (which can be in the form of trees, hills, sheds or a combination of these things) to enable them to get out of wind and rain, and they are not being shown or clipped during the winter months, they may often be just fine with no rug at all. Horses (with mother nature's help!) keep themselves warm by "fluffing up" with a winter coat, which enables them to trap warm air close to their bodies.

Another myth is that feeding grain to a horse in the colder weather will help them to stay warm. In fact, the exact opposite is true! To keep warm, horses should be fed hay and lots of it. When horses eat hay (which is known as 'roughage'), it slowly ferments in their stomach and creates heat during the digestion process. Grain is digested and absorbed much faster than hay or other forms of roughage like chaff. Which means if the weather looks like it is going to get cold, it is a good idea to increase your horse's hay ration.

But if your horse's shelter is inadequate, if your horse is older, injured or hard to keep condition on OR if you need to keep your horses coast shorter for riding or showing, you WILL need to find a

good fitting, quality rug BEFORE the weather gets too cold. To find your horse's 'perfect rug', make sure you check out HW's top tips for rug fitting on page 38 of this issue, and follow these simple guidelines:

1. Make sure any new rug you purchase IS waterproof (so check the rug is waterproof and not showerproof with the store owner) or use a commercial water proofer to improve your current rug's ability to stay dry.
2. Be prepared to buy a good quality rug; and check that all the fastenings and linings are made from quality and durable materials. A good quality rug, while more expensive, will last a lot longer out in the paddock and will usually fit your horse a lot better than a cheaply made product.
3. Make sure the fabric is breathable and strong; some cheaper synthetic rugs do not 'breathe' well and will often hold moisture against the horse's skin rather than drying naturally.
4. If you do use a canvas rug, think about how heavy the rug might become when it gets wet; water will add more weight, but a good quality canvas rug SHOULD stay dry within it's lining, no matter how wet it gets on the outside!
5. If you have a rug that fits well and is still in good condition, but is no longer waterproof, you can use it as an under rug on really cold nights.

Once you have selected a rug for Jackson, don't forget the work is not over yet! 'Responsible rugging' is a twice a day job; so you need to check your horse's rugs twice a day for damage, slipping or overheating and you also need to make sure they are not rubbing him anywhere. On warmer winter days you may also be able to take some or all of his rugs off, so that Jackson can enjoy the pleasure and health benefits of some sun on his back during the winter months – even if it is only for an hour to two! Good luck Evie and stay warm!



Photo by Michelle O'Neill

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great to ride outside, but continually played up in the arena. So my friend set up lots of games and fun things for her horse to do in the arena; and because he never knew what he was going to do next, he started to really love being in there! You don't need anything 'flash' or expensive to make your arena time fun; simple things like old rails, sports cones, barrels and bending poles are all great training tools and often pretty easy to make yourself, get for free or only cost a few dollars to buy second hand. And when it comes to making up fun exercises, just use your imagination, make up some games or adapt some human ones to suit you horse! An

**Dear Michelle,**

**My pony 'pig roots' in the arena but is fine outside of the arena. He has had his back checked and has had his saddle, bit and teeth checked. Do you know why he does this?**

**From Teagan**

Hi Teagan!

You certainly sound as if you are taking great care of your pony; and it is great to hear that you have had all those important 'health' things checked out first, to see if your pony is experiencing any discomfort.

The fact that your pony is fine outside of the arena, and that he seems to have a clean bill of health, suggests to me that perhaps he is getting a little bored with arena work. So my first question is 'what sort of things are you doing with him in the arena?' Perhaps you just need to add a bit more variety to your training schedule and make it fun for your pony to be there with you!

As an example, a friend of mine recently bought a horse that was

obstacle course is always challenging and fun for both horse and rider, while bending or barrel racing at different speeds can help you and your horse to work as a team. Can you back your horse around various obstacles or side pass along a pole in both directions?

Good luck with your pony, Teagan and remember to keep it fun!



Photo by Andrew Hennell

**michelle o'neill**



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