**A Better “Weigh”**

We’ve all seen horses around the barn, on neighboring farms, or quite possibly in our own barn that are a little, shall we say—heavy. But what exactly is heavy? For that matter, what determines if a horse is thin? Sure, it’s easy to point out those horses at either of the extremes, but for those in between there can be gray areas.

In the early 1980s, as a part of his graduate research project at Texas A&M University (TAMU), Don Henneke, PhD, currently an associate professor at TAMU, developed a scale to evaluate the body condition of broodmares. The scale looked at the amount of fat deposited in different areas of the body in an effort to classify them for research purposes. His study was published in the Equine Veterinary Journal in 1983.

Since then, the TAMU Body Condition Score (BCS) system has been used as the gold standard for classifying horses’ body conditions by equine health professionals and horse owners. The method uses sight and touch to evaluate the amount of fat over the loin, ribs, tailhead, withers, neck, and shoulders. The horse is then scored overall on a scale of 1 to 9.

A BCS of 1 means the horse is very emaciated, a BCS of 9 represents an obese horse, and a BCS of 5 is ideal for the moderately active horse. However, there are variations to this (more on this later).

**What to Look For**

Scoring a horse using this technique is relatively simple, but it requires some basic knowledge of anatomy and bone structure. Here’s what you should look for in each of the areas:

- **Loins**
  - An emaciated horse will have a negative crease and ridge down the back where the spinous processes (the bony column of the vertebrae) project up. This is one of the first areas to begin to fill in as the horse gains weight because fat accumulates around organs for protection.
  - As he gains weight, fat deposits coat the ribs.
  - At a BCS of 5, the ribs should no longer be easily visible, but still be easily palpated with light pressure. As the horse reaches a BCS of 8 or 9, the ribs will have enough fat covering them that they will be difficult to feel with light pressure.

- **Ribs**
  - The ribs are the second most noticeable area to identify an over- or under-weight horse. An emaciated horse’s ribs will be visibly protruding and easily felt when running your hands over his barrel.

- **Neck**
  - In an extremely thin horse, the throat latch will be drawn up, as well. On the other side of the scale (such as a BCS of 8), a thick, “cresty” neck will be visible, and the jugular groove and throat latch will be less defined.

- **Shoulder**
  - The shoulder is more useful to determine if the horse is overweight rather than if he’s underweight. Fat tends to deposit behind the shoulder and elbow area, over the horses heart girth.
  - When looking at an obese horse, it can be hard to distinguish between the shoulder and the chest.

**One Size Does Not Fit All**

It would be easy to say that a BCS of 5 would be the ideal condition for every horse, but that’s not always the case.

Pete Gibbs, PhD, a professor and extension specialist at TAMU, along with several other individuals, have conducted research and compiled extensive information on BCS and how it relates to the horse’s intended usage (you can find and entire listing of these articles at [TAMU](http://www.equine.science), then publications).

A BCS of 5 is ideal when it depends on level of activity or breeding status, and in some cases packing on a few extra pounds could be a good thing.

For instance, if a breeding stallion doesn’t have a few extra pounds at the beginning of the breeding season (a BCS of 6 or 7), due to the stress of breeding, he could possibly gain a bit for his breeders and fill out before the breeding season.

Likewise, research has shown that non-lactating mares have a greater pregnancy rate when they are maintained at a BCS between 6 and 8.

Establishing and maintaining pregnancy becomes increasingly difficult when the mare’s BCS drops below a BCS of 6. Gaining weight while nursing can be very difficult for the mare, and most mares will experience a small to moderate weight loss. To ensure a BCS of 5 or more at the time of rebreeding, ideally they should foal at a BCS 6 or better.

Endurance horses should also be kept in adequate body flesh. Two studies examined the relationship between BCS and the horse’s ability to finish the 100-mile Tevis Cup endurance race. Researchers concluded that mean BCS for horses that successfully completed the race was around 4.6. Horses that were eliminated for metabolic reasons such as colic, heat stress, and tying-up had a mean BCS of 2.9. When a horse enters energy levels above and beyond his normal limits, the body begins to burn fat reserves. However, at a BCS of 3 or less, there is very little in the way of fat reserves. Instead, the body breaks down muscle protein to use as energy.

However, a BCS above 6 can also be detrimental to those horses because it adds extra weight to carry, and extra insulation, creating more heat for the horse to combat.

**Take-Home Message**

The TAMU Body Condition Score System gives a reference guide that is universally understood by veterinarians and horse owners alike. It can help take the guesswork out of vague phrases such as “he’s a little thin” or “he’s fat” and help gauge the horse’s overall health and well-being. So, how does your horse score?ación de la rabadilla de los cuernos, en este caso se verán una cresta negativa y una protuberancia por encima del mismo, una condición de apariencia atractiva.

El artículo comienza con una explicación sobre el cálculo de la calificación de condición corporal de los caballos (BCS) desarrollado por Don Henneke en TAMU en 1983, que se ha utilizado como estándar oro para clasificar la condición corporal de las hembras de cría. A continuación, se describe cómo se observa la calificación de condición corporal en diferentes áreas del cuerpo, como los riñones, los costillas, el cuello y el hombro. Se explica que los valores ideales varían según el nivel de actividad del caballo.

El artículo proporciona información sobre las medidas de seguridad en el manejo de los caballos, así como orientaciones sobre cómo mantener a un caballo en una condición corporal adecuada para diferentes fines, como la reproducción y el entrenamiento. También se abordan temas como la pérdida de condición durante el embarazo y la alimentación adecuada para diferentes fases de la condición corporal.

En resumen, el artículo ofrece una visión completa de cómo el manejo adecuado de la condición corporal de los caballos puede mejorar su bienestar, su rendimiento y su seguridad. La visión del lector es fundamental para que los caballos mantengan una condición corporal óptima en todo momento.
**Equine Body Condition Score**

**SCORE**

1. **POOR**
   - Horse is extremely emaciated. The backbone, ribs, hipbones, and tailhead project prominently. Bone structure of the withers, shoulders, and neck easily noticeable. No fatty tissues can be felt.

2. **VERY THIN**
   - Horse is emaciated. Slight fat covering over vertebrae. Backbone, ribs, tailhead, and hipbones are prominent. Withers, shoulders, and neck structures are discernible.

3. **THIN**
   - Fat built up about halfway on vertebrae. Slight fat layer can be felt over ribs, but ribs easily discernible. The tailhead is evident, but individual vertebrae cannot be seen. The hipbones cannot be seen, but withers, shoulder, and neck are emphasized.

4. **MODERATELY THIN**
   - Negative crease along back. Faint outline of ribs can be seen. Fat can be felt along tailhead. Hipbones cannot be seen. Withers, neck, and shoulders not obviously thin.

5. **MODERATE**
   - Back is level. Ribs can be felt, but not easily seen. Fat around tailhead beginning to feel spongy. Withers are rounded and shoulders and neck blend smoothly into the body.

6. **MODERATELY FLESHY**
   - May have a slight crease down the back. Fat on the tailhead feels soft. Fat over the ribs feels spongy. Fat beginning to be deposited along the sides of the withers, behind the shoulders, and along the neck.

7. **FLESHY**
   - A crease is seen down the back. Individual ribs can be felt, but noticeable filling between ribs with fat. Fat around tailhead is soft. Noticeable fat deposited along the withers, behind the shoulders, and along the neck.

8. **FAT**
   - Crease down back is prominent. Ribs difficult to feel due to fat in between. Fat around tailhead very soft. Area along withers filled with fat. Area behind shoulders filled in flush with the barrel of the body. Noticeable thickening of neck. Fat deposited along the inner buttocks.

9. **EXTREMELY FAT**
   - Fat is in patches over rib area. With bulging fat over tailhead, withers, neck, and behind shoulders. Fat along inner buttocks may rub together. Flank is filled in flush with the barrel of the body.

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**Illustrations by Dr. Robin Peterson; Based on TAMU Body Condition Score**

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