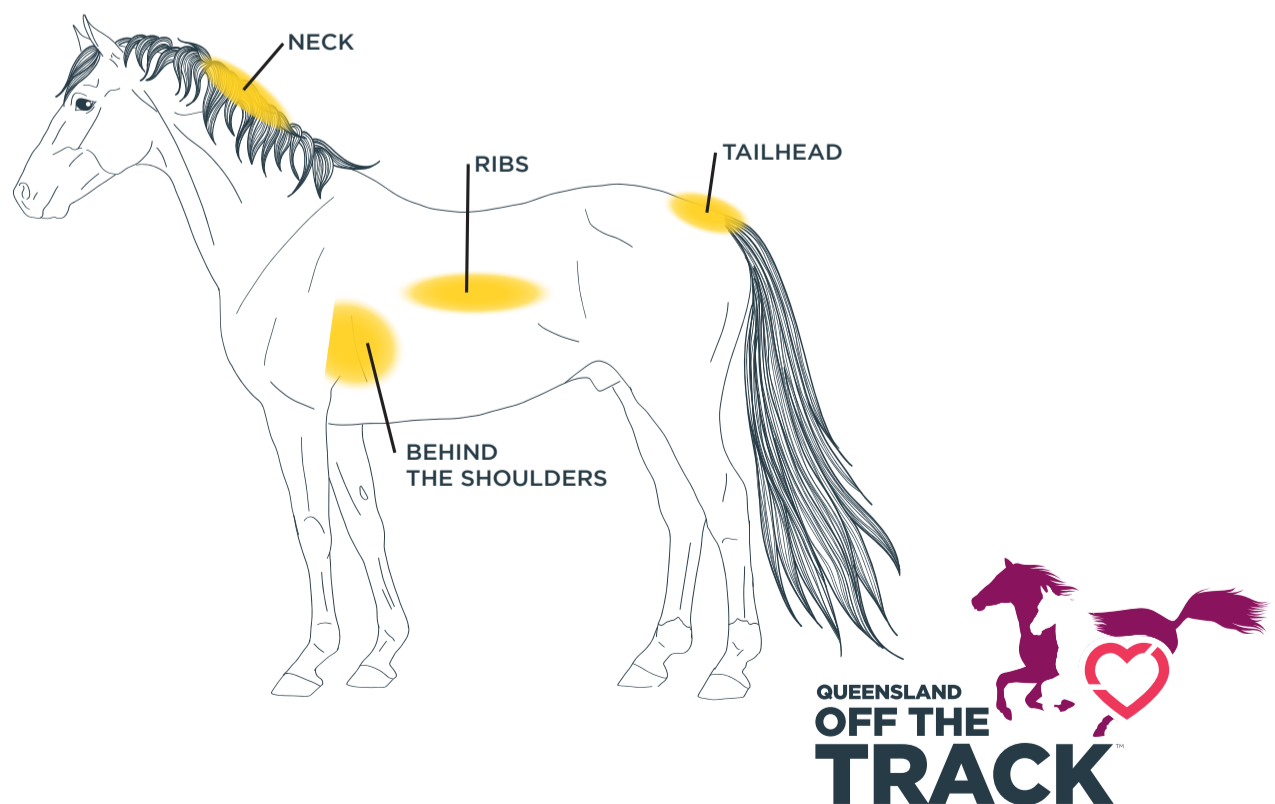


HOW AND WHY TO BODY CONDITION SCORE YOUR OFF THE TRACK

BY DR. NERIDA MCGILCHRIST



INTRODUCTION

Knowing how much you should be feeding your horse can sometimes be a little tricky... so let me teach you one useful skill you can use that will tell you if your horse is getting a little bit too much feed, or not quite enough feed or if your feeding is, as Goldilocks would say... just right!

When I say feeding here, what I mean, specifically, is the amount of calories - or energy - your horse is being fed on a daily basis. Energy comes from almost every feed ingredient your horse eats, with some feedstuffs, like straw and low quality grass hay being very low in energy and other feedstuffs like grains and oils being high in energy.

The feeds you give your horse all combine to make up your horse's daily energy intake... and that daily energy intake will either match your horse's daily energy needs and, in true goldilocks style, be just right for your horse.

OR it will be too high or too low for your horse.

But how do you know?

How do you know if the amount of energy you are feeding is just right for your horse?

By Body Condition Scoring!

Let me show you how



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WHAT IS BCS & HOW TO DO IT

WHAT IS BODY CONDITION SCORING?

Body Condition Scoring is a way to assess if you are feeding your horse too much, too little, or just the right amount of feed.

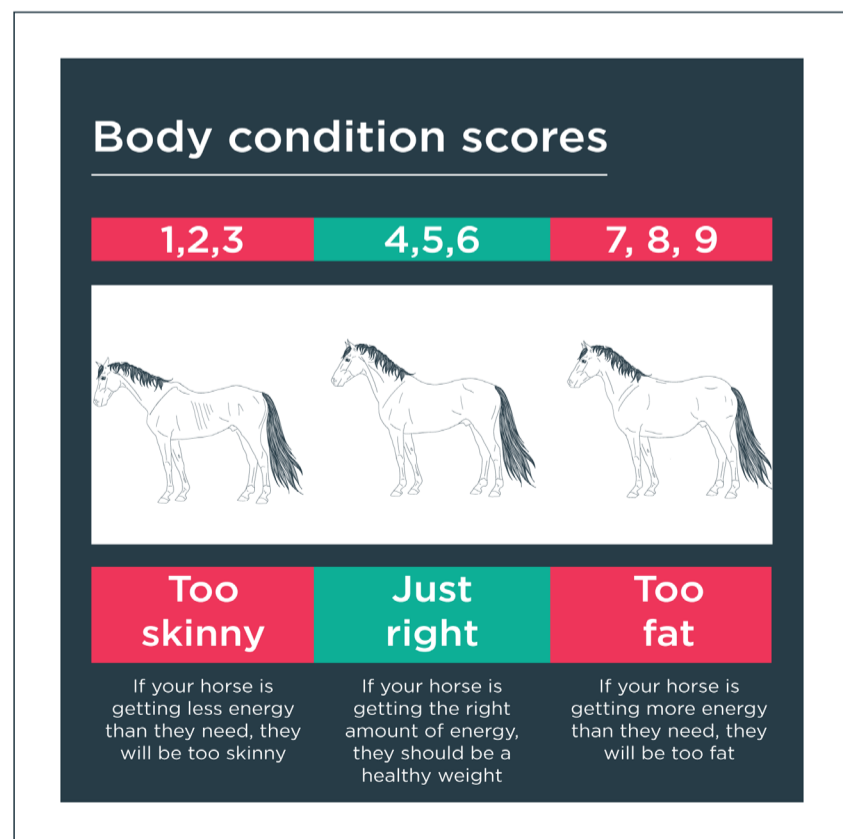
Body Condition Scoring is simply your own educated but personal assessment of how much fat is on your horse's body.

How does that relate to your OTT's diet?

Well, if your horse's dietary energy intake is too high, your horse will store the extra energy as fat on their body and your horse will gain condition.

OR if your horse's energy intake is too low, your horse will be forced to use up some of its fat reserves to make up the daily energy shortfall, and your horse will lose condition.

OR if your horse's daily energy intake is just right, they will maintain the same body condition.



HOW TO CONDITION SCORE

Condition scoring is an assessment of how much fat is on your horse's body. To assess body condition score, we need to ignore muscle and focus on the areas of the body where fat accumulates.

The main areas where fat accumulates are:

1. The top of the neck
2. Over the ribs
3. Behind the shoulder; and
4. The tailhead

When I condition score OTTs, I almost always only use the top of the neck and over the ribs. Mainly because it is not until a horse or pony gets really overweight that the area behind the shoulders or the tailhead start to accumulate fat... so when working with OTTs, you will rarely see these areas filled.

Neck

Along the neck, pinch up the skin on top of the neck right in the middle of the neck. For a horse with little to no fat accumulated in the neck, you will be able to pick the skin up and sort of feel your thumb and finger coming together.

The skin will be sort of loose, and easy to 'roll around' on top of the neck.

As a horse starts to accumulate fat in its neck, this area will feel 'full', you won't feel your thumb and finger coming together so much, it may feel a bit spongy, and you won't be able to roll the skin around as easily.

As horses get fat, this area will start to feel firm to hard and potentially lumpy. You won't be able to actually pinch any skin up. And you will start to be able to see the fat accumulated there as a 'cresty neck'.

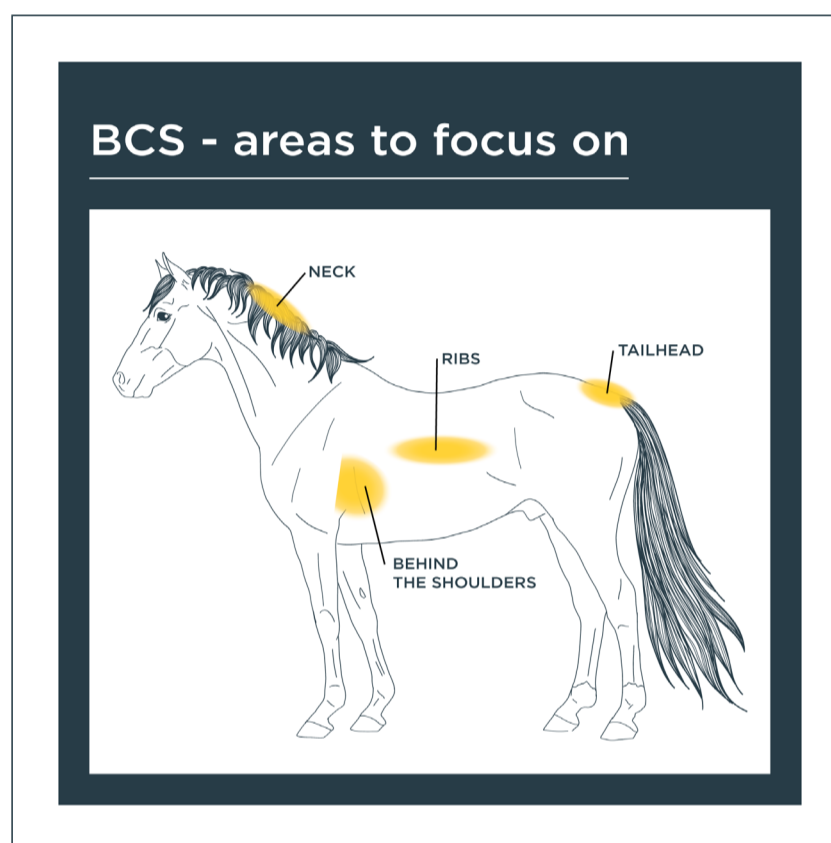
I know it is hard to really know what I mean, with how this feels with me just describing it to you in words, but here is what I want you to do... every time you go near ANY horse or pony from now on, start to condition score their necks.

Leaner horses will have skin you can pinch up and roll around, and overweight horses will have firm necks with no loose skin... the difference in the extremes is really obvious, and once you learn them, you will start to be able to feel much more subtle differences... it just takes some practice.

Ribs

The second area I want you to focus on is over the ribs... in the area of the ribs highlighted in the image above.

In the lighter body conditions (see page 5), you will be able to see the ribs, so your assessment in this area is initially visual.



And if you can't see the ribs, you will need to feel over the ribs to see how easy they are to feel, with the idea being that the easier they are to feel, the less fat there is in the area.

Just use a light pressure initially to run your finger tips over the ribs to see if you can feel them. When there is virtually no fat in this area, you can feel the ribs as easily as if you run your finger tips over the back of your hand. They are right there and very easy to feel.

Horses that have ribs that can't be seen but can be felt very easily will usually be classified at a condition score of 5 (see page 6).

If you can't feel the ribs with just a light pressure, increase the pressure you are using to see if you can feel the ribs. The more pressure you have to use to feel them, the more fat there is accumulated in that area.

In very fat horses, at condition scores 8 and 9, their ribs disappear... they can't actually be felt, even when you push really hard.

Ignore muscle!

Be careful to ignore muscle as you condition score. The build of a horse is an entirely separate consideration to their condition. So always remember when you are condition scoring you are ONLY looking and feeling for fat!

THE HENNEKE 1 TO 9 CONDITION SCORE SCALE

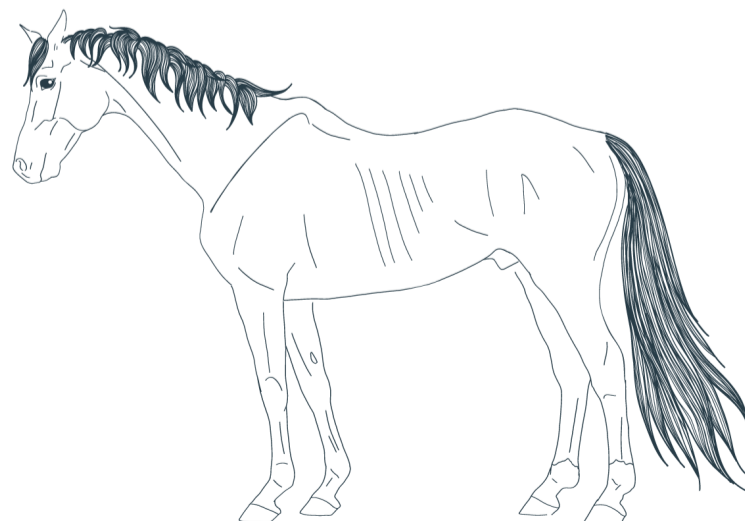
The following condition scores are based on a 1983 publication by Henneke et al and is used worldwide to describe equine body condition scores.

The scale starts with 1 being the lowest condition score and goes through to 9 being the highest.

Scores 1 and 2 are severely emaciated horses and are usually the result of neglect. They are not depicted below as they are virtually walking skeletons and are veterinary care cases. I also hope you never (ever!) have to care for a horse in this condition.

BCS 3

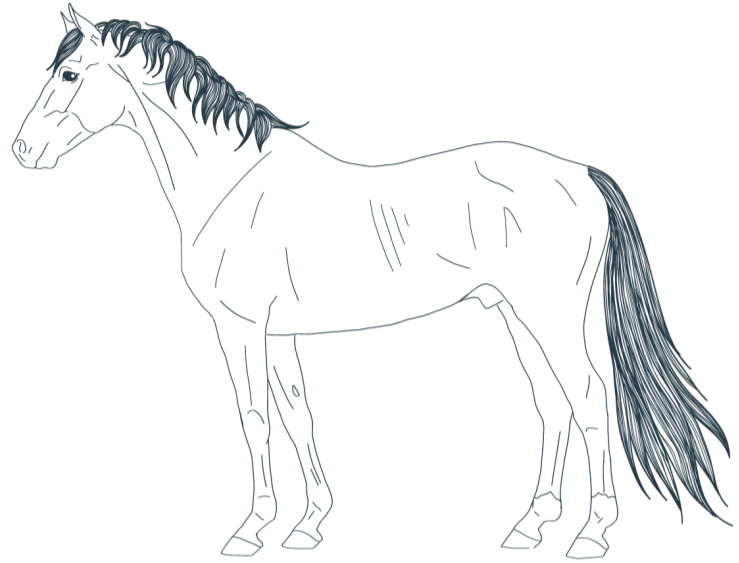
OTTs in condition score 3 will have ribs that are clearly visible. And the skin on their neck will be easy to pinch up and roll around. The bone structure will be visible and the tailhead juts out and is easy to see. Horses in this score look obviously thin.



HOW TO CONDITION SCORE (CONT..)

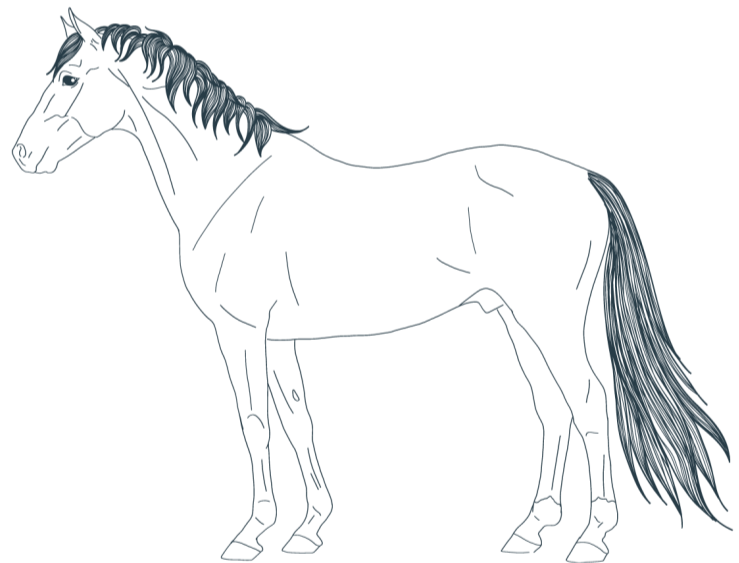
BCS 4

When an OTT is in condition score 4 they won't look 'obviously thin' but you will be able to still see their ribs when you are standing back and looking at them. When you feel their neck, you will be able to easily pinch up the skin and roll it around.

**BCS 5**

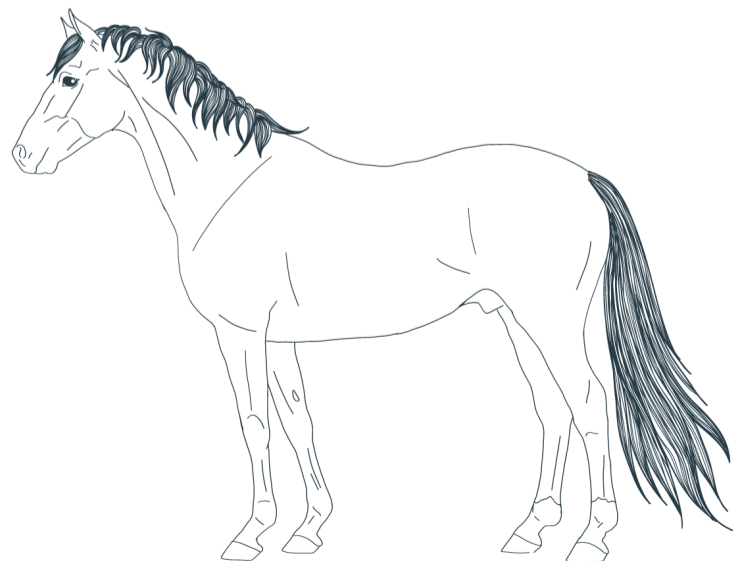
In condition score 5, you will no longer be able to see the ribs, which means you must feel the rib area to see how easily you can feel them. At a score of 5, the ribs are 'right there' and very easy to feel with light pressure.

And the skin on their neck is still able to be pinched up, and while there is the tiniest bit of filling there, the skin is still easy to pick up and roll around a little.

**BCS 6**

When an OTT is in condition score 6, you will need to use a little heavier pressure to feel the ribs and you can feel an obvious layer of fat between their skin and their ribs... BUT their ribs are still easy enough to feel.

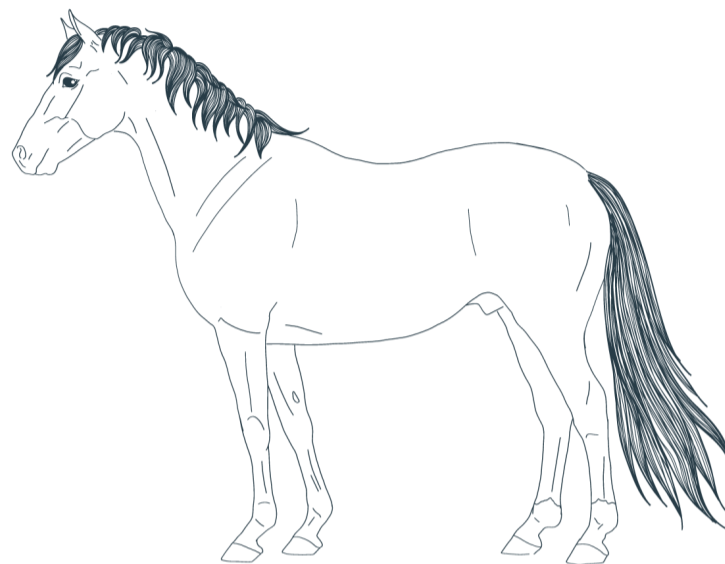
And when you feel their neck, there is a definite filling of fat under the skin. When you pinch up the skin it will feel a bit spongy and you will get the sense that you can't get your finger and thumb as close together as you can when your horse is lighter in condition.



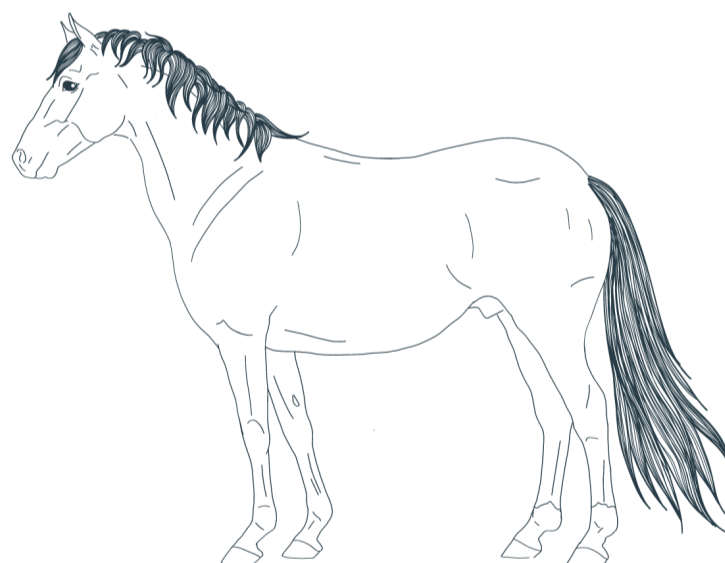
HOW TO CONDITION SCORE (CONT..)

BCS 7

In condition score 7 you will need to push hard to feel the ribs and there will be a noticeable thickening and 'fatness' about the top of the neck, but the neck should still be somewhat 'soft' fat, as opposed to hard and lumpy with fat. Fat will also be starting to fill in the area behind the shoulder. And the area over the tailhead will be starting to feel soft.

**BCS 8**

Horses in condition score 8 will have a lumpy, hard top of the neck that is full of fat. And their ribs will be near impossible to feel, even with very hard pressure. The area behind the shoulders will be full of fat. There will likely be a 'gutter' down the middle of the horse's back and the tailhead will feel soft.



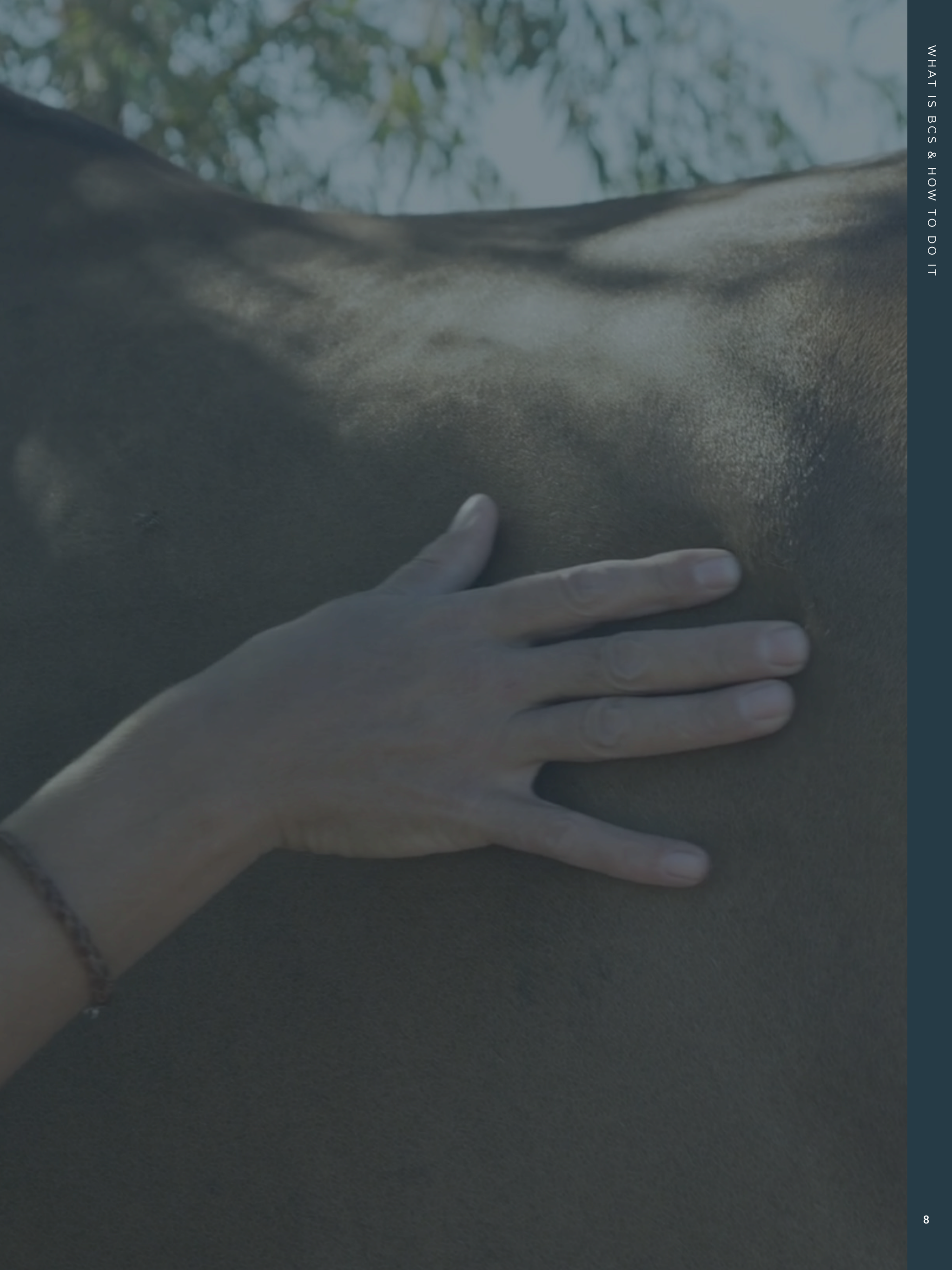
In condition score 9, horses are obese. The neck, the area behind the shoulders and the tailhead are bulging with fat. You will generally also see patchy fat over the ribs and rump and there is an obvious gutter down the centre of the back.

Note that you are VERY unlikely to ever see an OTT in condition score 9. It is usually only very fat ponies and Haflingers that end up this heavy in condition!

The differences between the consecutive scores are relatively subtle, but as you get confident in condition scoring you will start to pick up small shifts in your horse's condition.

Which Score Should Your OTT Be?

Scores 4, 5 and 6 are all healthy condition scores for an OTT to be maintained in. Which of these scores you keep your horse in depends on your horse, your personal preference and the requirements of your horse's new career.



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WHY BCS & HOW TO USE IT

WHY DO WE BCS?

While condition scoring helps you to know what condition your OTT is in, the most useful purpose of condition scoring an OTT is to enable you to pick up subtle changes in condition.

And those subtle changes in condition will prompt you to make small adjustments to the diet.

If you don't condition score you may miss the small shifts in condition and only notice once your OTT is visibly thinner or fatter... which will then require you to make a big change to the diet.

How often should you BCS?

You should condition score often... every time you lay your hands on your horse is ideal!

It is particularly important to body condition score your horse regularly when your horse's environment, lifestyle or diet are increasing the likelihood of their condition changing.

Weight loss is typically more of an issue in OTTs, so let's have a look at some of the factors that may cause a loss of condition.

REASONS A HORSE MAY LOSE CONDITION

OTTs can, and often will lose weight quickly, which, when you have spent so much time and money building that condition, is frustrating and heartbreaking.

BUT hopefully what you will learn below can help...

Horses lose weight because the amount of energy they are consuming is too low.

OR the amount of energy they are expending has increased.

Reduced energy intake

A couple of the main things that will reduce your horse's energy intake, resulting in weight loss, include:

- **A drop in the quality of your pasture.** As pastures change from being green to brown they also go from being high to much lower in energy and this reduces your horse's energy intake.
- **A change in hay that results in lower energy intake.** With a change in hay your OTT may eat less hay because the hay doesn't taste so good or the hay may be a lower energy hay (which can happen even when the hays look the same!) or both, they eat less and it's lower in energy! Any of these scenarios reduces energy intake.
- **A change in your OTTs hard feed or the hard feed's digestibility.** Changing hard feed quantities or brands and sometimes even batches can result in lower energy intake and/or lower energy digestibility, resulting in weight loss.
- **Reduced feed intake.** Any situation that reduces your horse's feed intake, for example back pain that reduces the time they spend grazing, which will in turn reduce energy intake, will lead to weight loss.

Increased energy expenditure

A few of the main ways your horse's energy expenditure will increase include:

- **An increase in activity.** An increase in workload with you or excessive voluntary exercise like fence walking burns up energy.
- **Cold and especially cold + wet weather.** These climatic conditions make it harder for your horse to maintain their body temperature, making it necessary for them to burn a lot of energy to keep their body at the right temperature.
- **Disease.** Immune function is an energy expensive process, so whenever your horse is sick, and it can be diseases as subtle as leaky gut syndrome, the immune system switches on and uses up a lot of energy. Disease can also reduce a horse's appetite, and in doing so, can reduce energy intake!
- **Pain.** Pain also increases energy use, and like disease, if the pain is severe enough to affect appetite, it can be the double whammy of increased energy use combined with reduced energy intake.

Whenever your OTT's energy intake is too low, or the amount of energy they are using is higher than the amount of energy they are consuming and digesting, they will lose condition.

And if those two situations combine, for example in winter, when pasture quality drops, reducing energy intake, and it gets cold, increasing energy expenditure, they can lose weight fast.

If you are condition scoring regularly, and notice this happening early, you can make adjustments to their diet quickly and halt the weight loss, hopefully before it is even noticeable.

For some ideas on what to adjust in your horse's diet if you notice they are losing weight, go and watch Video 2 in the 'How to feed your Off the Track' QOTT video series and grab the e-Book that goes along with it for diets to encourage weight gain.

THE IMPORTANT BITS

To recap, the most important bits I want you to remember are:

1. Body condition scoring is **a tool** that tells you if your OTT's **daily energy intake is too high, too low or just right.**
2. The best areas on your OTT's body to use for scoring are the **top of the middle of their neck and over their ribs.**
3. You should condition score your horse **every time you have your hands on them.**
4. Be aware of conditions like falling pasture or hay quality or a change in feeds **that can reduce energy intake.**
5. And **watch for conditions** like increased exercise, cold, wet weather and disease or pain that will **increase energy use.**
6. Both **reduced energy intakes and increased energy use** will result in a loss of condition and **a falling body condition score.**
7. When you have both **reduced energy intake plus increased expenditure** at the same time, your horse will **lose condition fast.**

Be sure to watch the video that goes along with this e-Book. Watch the section of how to condition score a few times and get started with scoring your OTT.

I promise it will take you 10 seconds once you have a tiny bit of practice and it is SUCH a valuable tool to have in your kit when it comes to keeping your OTT healthy and happy and in exactly the right condition!

ENJOY THE
JOURNEY