

# HORSE CARE MYTHS & TIPS

By: Ruthann Smith

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## Clothing Your Horse

### Part 1: Working in the Cold

**Y**ou know the feeling. Cold and wet. What is worse than being chilled to the bone?

Riding horses sweat. When cold, they can't go in for hot cocoa and to change their clothes. So, we need to tune in and think ahead to avert problems. It is not only easier to do things correctly the first time, it also saves us money.

Soundness experts say 85% of lameness could be prevented by warming up and cooling down properly. Cold weather only exacerbates the potential for injury. Chilled muscles get stiff and prone to injury. Plus, how can you ask your horse to bend if he is frozen? Let's make it easy for him to be a willing partner.

You want to warm up and cool down very slowly. Walk and trot lots to loosen up. After work, keep walking until the horse's breathing has relaxed and sweating subsides. When the horse is damp and hot, don't let him get a chill. If it is cool, be prepared to throw a cooler over the horse's back as he comes out of the show ring or walks to cool down. Keeping the kidneys warm is most important.

To best assess the horse's comfort, feel the loin. If the ears are cold, the horse is already very cold. If the kidneys are cooler than his shoulder, you would do well to adjust the clothes and/or conditions. Cold backs get injured. On the flip side, if your horse is sweaty from the clothes, he may colic.

Drafts can be trouble, but you also want to keep the air fresh. Ammonia, an offgas of urine, is a poison. Old school masters opt for extra layers and plenty of air circulation.

#### Dress for the Job

If you have a horse in work, it is important to have proper clothes. One need not be a fashion plate, but keeping your horse warm and dry is crucial to good health. Your horse deserves quality care. Appropriate articles of clothing are



**The Irish knit cooler offers a pivotal layer of air pockets that act as insulation under a heavier cooler to help horses stay warm and dry.**

readily available at consignment and tack shops. A friend may even have some that are not being used. For sure, if you make it your mission, you can take good care without spending a lot of money. In fact, it will help you avoid vet bills.

#### The Wardrobe

Here are layers that will serve your horse well:

**Wool or High-tech Cooler.** Needing to keep an athlete's muscles and organs warm is a given. Otherwise, you'll have problems. More than a cover, you want a fabric that will draw moisture away from the horse's body. Wool is a wonderful fabric that wicks naturally. On extra cold days or right after being clipped, you may want to use two coolers while you work on the aisle or walk outside.

**Holey Cooler or Irish Knit.** These prized thick weave, net-like covers with big holes in them, create a layer of insulation. The air pockets create a toasty insulation that also lets the steam rise and get wicked away, keeping the horse warmer as it dries.

Holey coolers and Irish knits are not to be confused with the lighter scrim or fly sheets. These are designed to keep the sun and bugs off a horse's back. They are



**To avert injury, always leave the end out of the keeper. If the cooler slides, instead of the horse stepping on it and flipping out as it pulls on his neck, just pull the tab. The cooler releases and a mishap is avoided.**

not thick enough to create insulating air pockets.

**Surcingle.** Walking with a cooler on can be tricky. A surcingle around the heartgirth or saddle will keep it from sliding off and getting caught under a hoof. That will allow the horse to stay quiet, focused and confident. If the horse is wet, he'll dry faster if walking. A surcingle will let him stay warm all the while. So, the surcingle not only keeps your horse comfortable and safe. It keeps coolers from getting ripped.

**Rain Sheet.** When in need, you'll be very glad to have a rain sheet.

**Quarter Sheet.** This wool cover for the kidneys very conveniently keeps the horse warm and dry (wicking) before, during and after work. Riding in a quarter sheet on cold days is great care.

#### What is Cold for Your Horse?

It depends on your horse's norm and whether he is clipped. Remember that shortly after being clipped, your horse likely needs an extra layer. Regardless of amount of hair, unless it is hot, I'd cover a wet horse's back. When I am reaching

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for a sweater or jacket, I am sure not to let the kidneys get a draft. Remember, they are especially vulnerable when damp.

While grooming, before and after work, keep the horse warm. By folding the cooler(s) back to work on the front end, and forward to work on the back end, you can keep your mount from stiffening up. Certainly, be sure the horse is dry before putting his sheet or blanket on. Towel dry if need be. Heat lamps are another option. You never want to put a horse to bed in damp clothes. It would surely get sore and likely sick.

Properly clothing your horse is paramount to his ability to perform well and stay healthy. Top trainers are very fussy about keeping horses comfortable. Routines for cooling out horses have everything to do with how successful our relationship with horses can be, as well as how many bills we pay. So, you should at least be equipped with two wool coolers



## Heads-up

Protect the kidneys. They are very sensitive and vulnerable. Keeping the horse's back warm, especially behind the saddle and over the flank, where the barrel meets the hip, is most important. If cool, be consistent about keeping the back covered. Riding in a quarter sheet, which is essentially a wool cooler that extends from under the saddle to cover the rump, can make it easy. Or, be sure to throw a wool cooler behind the saddle when walking. Tuck the cooler under your legs to help keep it from sliding off and keep an eye on it.

and a holey or Irish knit cooler. They will allow you to effectively adjust in order to promote your horse's comfort and soundness.

*Stay tuned. Next month, Ruthann will share rarely-discussed aspects of your horse's bed clothes.*



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This is not a stallion.

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