

Weight Gain Takes Time

“You mean it’s going to take couple of months for this coat hanger to look like it belongs on this farm! I thought you guys had all this researched and tested feed and all.” One of the most frequently asked questions in the field has to do with the horse that just can’t maintain its bodyweight, especially under the stress of competition or training.

Unfortunately some of the supposed remedies for this situation have more to do with clever marketing and name recognition than with scientifically formulated solutions. One of the difficulties is the fact that horses are very individual both in their personalities and their metabolisms. What works for the bay Quarter Horse may not work for the Thoroughbred cross. However researchers are constantly gathering data to determine how to achieve healthy weight gain without risky side effects. The first thing to emphasize is that weight gain takes time. It’s reasonable to expect a change of 50 pounds to take at least 3 months. Here’s why.

Research has estimated that it can take 8-10 Mega calories of digestible energy over the horse’s maintenance level to put on a pound of weight gain. That could represent an additional 6 pounds or more grain/day as well as an increase in hay consumption compared to the current ration. Of course some horses come along much faster than others but where a horse already requires significant energy to perform its daily routine it becomes difficult and risky to add that much more grain to the ration. Even for a horse that is not particularly active it becomes very challenging when you add that much grain to the ration and still hope to get on its back occasionally.

Consider a horse ridden fairly regularly but not hard on the following ration.

15 pounds of average mixed hay 12 Mcals/day
6 pounds concentrate 8.00 Mcals/day
Total 20.00 Mcals/day

If we wanted to say put on a pound per day of weight here’s what the ration would need to look like. Lets assume we can get the horse to eat 5 more pounds of hay.

20 pounds of average mixed hay 16 Mcals/day
10 pounds concentrate 13.33 Mcals/day
Total 29.33 Mcals/day

This would accomplish the weight gain alright, but you need to ask yourself if you’re doing the horse a favour by nearly doubling its grain ration and by the way, who’s going to be the first to get on him? We are also assuming the horse will eat the extra hay we’re going to give him.

Let’s set a more moderate goal of say a $\frac{1}{2}$ pound gain per day. This would probably take 4-5 Mcals of additional calories.

15 pounds of average mixed hay 12 Mcals/day
8 pounds Phase V
 $\frac{3}{4}$ pound Flax Appeal
Total 24.6 Mcals/day

On this ration the horse will reach the desired weight gain but it will take a little longer depending on the breed and the horse's metabolism. However the ration is safer and unlikely to cause any undesirable side effects. If the horse will consume more hay, that's a bonus and will speed up the weight gain.

Here are some reasonable guidelines to consider when dealing with a weight gain situation.

1/ Avoid feeding more concentrate by weight than forage

2/ Use concentrates with good quality high fibre ingredients and added fat. Fit & Fibre, Phase V, Leading Edge and Brooks Un-Ti are good choices for safely adding weight.

3/ Utilize fat supplements like Flax Appeal or Equi-Jewel to increase the calorie intake.

4/ Avoid piling on the starch based grain mixes. They'll add calories all right but the side effects can be "not good"

4/ Allow a thin horse time to reach an ideal weight.

5/ Weight gain requires calories in excess of what the horse burns to perform its daily routine. The effectiveness of a feed in producing weight gain depends on the quality and the type of ingredients.

On a properly formulated diet a thin horse will start coming around such that over maybe 6 weeks you will start to see a difference. But to reach your ultimate goal it might take 3 months or even longer. It does require patience and a commitment to maintain as safe and natural a diet as possible.

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Weight gain takes time and patience