

Winter's coming.

by Kimberley Elliott,
Greenhawk, Winnipeg

Bundle up; or go naked?

The science of blanketing horses.



A hardy draft cross mare is content to stand alone, while the two blanketed horses shelter their naked buddy.

The time of year is rapidly approaching when temperatures drop and the frost decorates the landscape. Cooler weather brings with it the demise of our insect nemesis (YAY!) but the end of long sunny days. This time of year, a horse enthusiast's mind is consumed with thoughts of blanketing – the “when”, the “with what” and the “is it really necessary?” questions. It can be very overwhelming. You need to make an informed decision.

The short answer is, no a horse does not need a blanket. Mother Nature has provided horses with all the physiological adaptations required to survive the winter season. The thing, however, is that while Mother Nature prepared the horse for all old man winter could throw at it, she did not anticipate the variables that we, the human domesticators, could do to derail her fine workmanship. A horse begins to develop its winter coat in August. As the days become shorter the photosensitive horse begins to

shed out its summer coat and the fluffy undercoat begins to make a gradual appearance. By the first snowfall, your horse is well prepared to insulate itself against the elements with its pasture mates. This system depends on the horse's natural existence of being in a herd and turned out twenty-four hours a day with varied landscape, daylight and shelter to assist it.

Humans interfere with this natural process. A domestic horse's lifestyle is adapted for the comfort of its human companions. A horse that is brought in to an insulated or heated stable that is lit until 10 o'clock every night is going to have a much harder time adapting to a change of season than one that is not interfered with. Stabling, riding and showing is a way of life for our domesticated equine friends, so the question of whether or not to blanket becomes slightly more specific to the horse and its living situation.

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Let's divide horses into 4 categories:

Category A:

Horses that are young, old, thin skinned, hard keepers (thin body), turned out separately or easily chilled are candidates for blanketing.

Category B:

Horses who will be shown early in the spring season who don't want to develop a fluffy over coat and dandruff insulating layer. This category includes horses that are clipped because their winter coat comes in too early, causes them to sweat and renders them impossible to cool out.

Category C:

A horse kept in a heated barn and turned out in -40°C weather is definitely a candidate for blanketing.

Category D:

An easy keeper housed outside with excellent hay and access to covered shelter will be just fine without a blanket, whether it is working or not.

Blanket size

Now that we have established who may require a blanket, let's discuss blanket strategies. First you will need to know the size of your horse. Blanket measurement is taken by measuring from the center of the chest to the center of the tail on one side of a horse. The measurement in inches will be your blanket size. Most average horses fall in the 76" – 80" range. Most blanket manufacturers have sizes in even increments of every 2". If your horse falls in an odd measurement (say 75"), round your size up to the nearest even number (76" for our example). Blankets that are too small will be uncomfortable for the horse and may cause rubs, blankets that are too large pose a potential danger to the horse due to shifting or the opportunity to get a leg stuck in a strap. Proper blanket fit is essential and should not be taken lightly.

Choosing the type

Your strategy is the next issue to consider. You have to decide what you are trying to accomplish by blanketing. You will want a blanket that is appropriate for turnout, high denier, waterproof, wind proof and then, based on



Ripstop with gusset

requirements, what you will need for fill – the insulation.

Denier measures the linear density of fibre mass. The higher the denier, the stronger the fabric. For horses turned out in rambunctious groups the higher the denier, the better bang for your buck. An excellent feature to look for is "ripstop". Ripstop is a strong fibre woven in the opposite direction to the rest of the garment. This handy feature will stop a full body tear from occurring in a blanket. You can usually (not always) see the ripstop feature in a blanket if you look closely at the weave and there appears to be little squares woven into it. Always look for waterproofing. Most blankets today are treated with a DuPont or similar-type coating. This coating will need to be renewed every year. This can be reapplied with a simple spray available in most tack stores. Nylon lining in the shoulder area will reduce any rubbing if your horse is sensitive and shoulder gussets are a must-have for ease of movement.

Your basic types of blanket include light weight, medium weight and heavy weight. Light weight blankets are very useful in autumn or spring before it gets cold and you don't need to worry about overheating your horse. They are designed to keep the rain off your horse without insulating him so it won't make him hot. Middle or medium weight (shell) turnout blankets offer weather proof protection with a little bit of fill to insulate. They are warm. These are frequently used as the top layer of a layering blanket strategy. A heavyweight blanket is a suit of armour against the prairie winter. It is completely waterproof and can be too warm for some horses. These blankets have a lot of fill to insulate and are excellent for thoroughbred types or horses that are clipped.

Stable blankets or quilts are used between a blanket liner and the shell. These are not suitable to be worn for turnout but are fine for stabling or tailoring.

Every blanketed horse should have either a proper blanket liner or fleece sheet under whichever blanket strategy is selected. A well fitting blanket shouldn't rub, but it is more comfortable for the horse to have a buffer between its body and what covers it. If a heavy weight blanket is chosen, a lycra shoulder guard is usually enough to protect the shoulders from rubs.

So now that we know the ins and outs of what blankets are out there, you need to establish what is right for your horse. Please refer to the categories discussed above and choose the one that best describes your horse and situation.

Strategy for Category A horses:

These horses are usually the types that are blanketed year-round or they suffer weight loss, stress etc. These are the ones that need fly sheets for summer, rain sheets for spring and fall and these horses benefit from a winter layering blanket strategy. When the cold weather comes, it is best for these horses to have an insulating liner or fleece sheet under a medium weight shell. When the -30°C temperatures come, adding a quilt to this mix or taking off the shell and putting a heavy weight blanket over the liner or sheet will keep this horse very happy. This category of horse is the most intensive to blanket because adjustments

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need to be made as the weather changes. A cost effective strategy for horses like these is to have a liner or fleece sheet under a heavy denier rain sheet or light shell for early fall and spring, then adding a heavy stable blanket/quilt for the colder weather. You will own a total of four blankets (Shell, quilt, liner, and flysheet) to keep this horse happy year round. The other benefit of this strategy is that if your horse wrecks a piece of his blanket, you are only replacing one piece, not the whole system.

The other way to blanket these horses is to have the rain sheet in the fall and then when the colder weather comes, to have a heavy weight blanket replace it until the warmer weather returns.



Shell with gusset

Strategy for Category B horses:

Your show horses should start the cooler season with something heavier than a rain sheet to keep that hair from getting too thick. A medium weight shell by itself, early in the season (late September perhaps) is a great way to curb the horse's coat from coming in. Adding a liner or fleece sheet in early October would be the next step. These horses can't have a heavy weight blanket too early in the season, as they will overheat.

If layering is not your thing, then when the snow flies you are moving to a heavy weight blanket. You may find that the liner and the shell are good enough, especially if your horse has very few hours of turnout in the winter months and you didn't need to clip. If you are the horse owner who has to clip, the heavyweight blanket for turnout is perfect. Please make sure you have a quarter sheet on your horse when you are riding if your arena is not heated and insulated.

These horses are usually well worked and do sweat in the winter. A cooler should be ringside so that your horse does not catch a chill when the work is over.

If you are doing a full body clip for a show that is very early in the season (Brandon Winter Fair, for example), hold off on clipping for as long as you can. When clipping is done, a liner, belly band, heavy weight blanket with the most fill you can find and a hood will be in order. Keep this horse warm!!!

Strategy for Category C horses:

These are by far the most difficult to decipher – especially if your stable does not offer a blanket service.

Keep this horse naked for as long as you can. If you can get by without a blanket – do it. The hot stable to the cold pasture is a very big shock to the horse's system. Ideally, a stable should be no more than 2-3 degrees above freezing to keep a horse healthy in the winter. Warm stables are for the comfort of the humans, but can be problematic for horses.

If you do need to blanket wait until the weather hits -25°C, then a medium weight shell is great. The horse has a well established winter coat and by using the shell will benefit from a little bit of insulation. Keep the him dry and out of the wind then when returned to the stall, the horse won't overheat. Ideally, if your barn is warm, find out if the facility offers a blanket service, and have the shell put on for turnout and removed for stabling.

If your stable does not offer a blanket service, pay attention to your horse. If he is sweating while inside the barn with a shell on then a liner under a rain sheet might be a better choice for you. Your horse should not be going outside with nothing on though. It is too shocking to the system.

Strategy for Category D horses:

These hardy friends will likely be just fine without a blanket. Even if they are stabled at night in a barn that doesn't get very warm the natural way is the only way to go. Horses' coats develop a nice undercoat, an insulating layer of dandruff and long hollow heat retaining hairs that keep our equine friends nice and toasty all season long. Please keep in mind that horses all need good quality feed and access to water to keep their systems working great and warm.

The only time you might want to blanket a horse in this category is if he is turned out by himself, is very old, very young, thin skinned and not stabled. Horses in groups stick close together for body heat retention. This is not available to a horse that is turned out by itself. If this is your situation, wait until it hits -25°C and then pop a heavy weight blanket on this horse – he'll thank you for it.

For horses turned out year round – be mindful that even they don't feel so great when the mercury drops to -50°C. If there is no option to bring them in and you are not blanketing, increase the amount of feed they have access to. Ideally there should be a covered shelter for them as well. In extreme temperatures the pasture horse requires a lot more food to keep warm.

Remember, when blanketing you need to have an objective suited to your horse's needs. Just because you are cold does not mean you need to cover your horse from poll to dock. He might be just fine and not appreciate your well meaning gesture. Other horses will go out of their way to have their blankets put on and if they could figure out how, they would outfit themselves without any help from you at all! Always seek the advice of a qualified professional if you are unsure. Most tack shops are more than happy to take time to listen to your needs and find you the best option for your horse.

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