



On the conditioning of horses (hippocomia)

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ON THE CONDITIONING OF HORSES.

HIPPOCOMIA.

CONDITION, *applied to Horses*, is used to signify that a horse is well fed and of good appearance; it also has another signification, that of his being brought by suitable treatment into a state of body that gives him the fullest use of all his faculties in performing any very difficult or arduous exertion or exercise, as for hunting, racing, trotting, or the arts of the manege.

A horse that is moderately fat may be said to be in good condition, and so he is for sale, or for slow heavy draught service; but such a one would be totally out of condition for any of the above exercises. To condition a horse for these, a proper share of clean nourishing food and exercise is necessary, as much only as would confer the utmost point of strength and power, without adding any useless incumbrance of matter to the body that might clog the freedom of respiration, or increase the weight and bulk of the animal, and impede rather than assist the functions of the organs, viscera, and limbs. This art, if properly understood, should impart the greatest facility of wind, and join to lightness of the body the greatest possible elasticity and strength of the muscular system. Such is properly the art of *training*, to which we refer the reader; and in which, though great things have been done, more wonderful might be yet effected, if to a well-founded view of nature in these animals was added all that consummate and well-placed art could bring to her assistance; for nature, we are led to believe, has been but too often thwarted instead of assisted by the arts of stable-men, jockies, and smiths. For though mere practice alone will teach much, yet when combined with a just system or knowledge of cause and effect, the art, whatever it be, may be carried to much higher perfection than it can otherwise.

For the present, however, we shall only treat of condition in horses, for the common and ordinary purposes to which they are applied.

To stable servants is left in general the physicking, dieting, and conditioning the horse; and a mystery has often, with the ignorant, more charms than the clear face of truth herself. The effects of drugs upon horses are very little known; perhaps, except the purgative effect of aloes, and the diuretic effect of soaps and turpentine, and neutral salts, we have scarcely any medicine whose effects we really know upon the horse, or that appears at present likely to be known, yet are grooms ever physicking their horses with some drugs or other; * good clean food in plenty, dry lofty stables, gentle exercise, and attention to the skin in keeping it clean, will bring almost any horse that is out of condition into condition, unless there be some lurking disease; yet nauseous drugs are added to their food, and they are pleased to fancy that the effects they experience result from these, though it is more probable, as far as they go, and in the uncertain and often idle doses in which they are exhibited, that they prevent, rather than assist, the purpose they have in view, and rather disturb their digestion, and weaken the stomach, than assist it; or more certainly render nauseous and loathsome the food they could otherwise relish; antimony, nitre, brimstone, elecampane root, &c. are among their secrets for this purpose. Antimony is, however, believed, by better judges than these, to affect the skin of the horse, and promote perspiration; this it may possibly do. We may, however, just remark, that where it affects the skin, it has the power of affecting the stomach; but with pigs, horses, and a variety of other animals, it does not affect the one, and one should doubt whether, in these cases, it would affect the other; for in no quantity whatever, and we

* Although trifling medicaments for horses I much object to, I shall except the use of stimulant powders composed of the warm spices and metallic salts, a formula for which is given in the *Pharmacopœia Equina*, p. 28, of whose beneficial effects I think I can with undoubted confidence, and that of several of my friends, vouch for; bringing hide-bound ill-conditioned horses, and the debilitated from over labor and ill-feeding, into a better state and appearance, and without doubt by giving a gentle fillip to the digestive and chylo-poietic organs.

have given 4 oz. at a dose, does it appear to affect the stomach; nitre, in larger quantities than they are used to give, will increase the urine; but how this promotes condition, we have not yet been informed. The rest of their nostrums are obviously inert, at least their actual effects, when pushed till they become externally sensible, have never been exhibited; and unless they are, we cannot know them. There is, however, another, and a more certain purpose answered, in the administration of their drugs, and to which the science of medicine, in ignorant hands, is but too frequently made subservient; and without which, we believe, there would not be so much anxiety about the administration of them.

There is one instance, however, in which we rejoice to have it in our power to concur with these men in the use of medicine, and that is on horses coming from grass; this appears to be a really useful practice, and we think, from sufficient experience, we can vouch for the fact, though to give medicines without a direct indication for their use, would at first appear repugnant to reason, yet it is usual with grooms to give one, two, or more doses of physic, on the horse being brought from grass "to clear him out," as they say; but if such were the only effect, there would be no occasion for it, as the grass would very naturally come away from him without.

Of its good effects we shall give a very different account by the sudden change of life, from green relaxing watery food, as grass, to dry hay and more stimulating corn; from free open air and nightly dews, and all kinds of weather, to a close, low, foul, and crowded stable, the air of which is heated to an excess, and filled with stimulating exhalations from the dung; the water which had been received in quantities unrestrained, is now portioned out (though it is really more necessary) in miserable pittance. The body, before exposed, is wrapped in rugs and cloths, and the whole system becomes heated and inflamed by these sudden changes, inflammatory complaints of the lungs, eyes, palate, throat, intestines and feet, are produced; and it is therefore useful on this account, in keeping off these attacks, to lower the habit by physic, after the horse has been a few days in the stable, and to pass by slow degrees to the excessive use of these vigorous stimuli. Dealers like to mix carrots with their corn, and bleed occasionally, and give bran mashes, which has the same effect.

In turning out also, grooms are again for physicking their horses, and under the same pretence of clearing them out, and preparing them for grass. They will however, be sufficiently lowered and reduced by the grass itself, without any additional reduction by physic. It may not be an useless precaution, however, to withdraw by degrees the use of corn, previous to turning out, and the removing all sort of clothing, to give water in greater abundance, that the change may not be too suddenly felt, and bring on broken wind, farcy, and the diseases induced by too great debility.

In Arabia, where the finest horses of the world are produced, a late traveller in those countries, (Mr. Barker), informs us of the extraordinary simplicity of their treatment of them. They do not use any instrument for dressing or cleaning them. They merely fasten them to a picket by the leg or a halter, to give them their food, which, during the spring, consists only of grass, and when the earth no longer produces that nutriment, they supply the want by camel's milk, which, he says, is most assuredly preferable to any kind of grain.

Beans, malt, oats, clover-hay, and meadow-hay, are the general food of horses in England, and are supposed to be stimulant or invigorating to the system of the horse, in the order in which we have placed them. Barley was the ancient food for horses, the discovery of oats being comparatively of modern date.

In the north of Holland, they feed their horses principally on the black sour bread called *bumpnickle*, made of buck wheat, and there it is eaten also by a large share of the inhabitants; for this purpose, they alight from their vehicles, and without taking the horses out of their hempen traces, cut it in slices, and give them to eat. We observed that they appeared relaxed by it, but apparently without much debilitating them, as they seemed to do their work very well.

In the "Museum Rusticum" is a proposition founded apparently on actual experiment of feeding horses on carrots, vol. i. p. 333. The following remarks we think worth recording from that communication: "I have a couple of hunters which I value as being very good horses, and these I feed in the season with very little else besides carrots well cleaned from the dirt, and loaves made of the meal of barley and oats, mixed sometimes with a small admixture of coarse but good wheat meal; and if they require to be loosened in their bodies, I now and then give them some bran. As to hay, they eat at this season but little of it, of oats none at all, yet they go through their work to admiration."

Furze or whins has been found useful food in sustaining horses, after it has been bruised, and the spines, or prickles crushed; this some horses will naturally do with their feet. Dr. Darwin relates, that on one particular common, all the horses do it; and that fresh comers starve, till by imitation they learn this practice, as the common, in other respects, is very barren. In Wales, mills, we understand, have been used for crushing the furze for cattle.

Saintfoin is a food that horses are very fond of: but as they eat it very greedily, too much should not be allowed at once for fear of indigestion, and it serves better for horses of slow draught, being a coarse heavy food.

Salt is imagined an useful addition to the food of horses. Salt marshes have often a preference given them over other ground for horses and cattle; whether it is the salt that in itself operates beneficially, or whether the herbage itself is altered by it, and is rendered more salutary to the cattle, is not known. The same correspondent, in the Museum Rusticum, says that salt in substance is abundantly distributed in the mountains by the Swiss, for the use of their cattle and horses, who become excessively fond of it, and more healthy in consequence; it is conceived to be an antidote to worms and other formations in the body, and the long continued use of it to cure them when formed; vol. i. p. 99. Horses, he observes, are fond of it with their oats.

Horses when at liberty are almost ever feeding, therefore long fasting must be injurious to the stomach, and should be as much as possible avoided; they would also naturally, there is reason to believe, feed principally during the night, and sleep during the day; their sleep, however, is hardly ever, in health, profound and fast, but is a state of watchful dozing.

Horses are naturally gregarious, and though they will do very well alone, company, where there is an opportunity for it, is preferable for their health. The stable should be lofty, so as not to confine an atmosphere about them, loaded with exhalations from their own bodies and their dung: the loftiness alone of the stable is their best airing; all partial draughts from doors, windows, or holes into the loft, as far as they affect them, are injurious; for we have often remarked, that though they bear the coldest weather of our seasons when turned out, yet they easily take cold from partial draughts in stables, inso-much that persons not attentive to these effects would hardly believe their facility.

In cleaning the skin, the curry-comb is considered as a necessary implement. In warmer climates, where the scurf comes away more freely, this instrument is not so much used; and here it is often used to horses whose skins are particularly thin and sensible, yet no difference is made; and though the animal expresses, in every way he can, the excessive torture it occasions, yet is it persisted in, and violence is often had recourse to, to enforce it, and is frequently a source and cause of some of the noblest of this race becoming miserable crib-biters, and horses are thus rendered vicious and untractable. Where this is found to be the case, it would save much trouble and inconvenience to use a milder kind of comb, or to lay it aside altogether, and use a stiff brush made for the purpose. It is more easy by violence and punishment to create vice, than to overcome a natural dislike by it.

Warm clothing, on account of its keeping up a free perspiration, tends to render the skin cleaner, makes the coat lie better, and have a more glossy appearance, and saves trouble. It is too often, however, carried to an excess, and two or three hot rugs keep

the horse in a perpetual fever; and as they are all taken off when he is most exposed, on going out, the sudden check given to the perspiration by the elements without, lays the foundation of disease, and occasions inflammation of the lungs, catarrhs, and coughs, that might as well be avoided by more moderate and judicious proceedings, besides the weakening effects of such violent perspirations.

There is a principle in feeding them that ought not to be overlooked; which is, that good food may be carried too far, till, instead of condition, it produces fever and disease, and destroys the condition it is meant to promote. Green vegetable food fills out the body, and from its weight and watery nature weighs down the abdomen, giving it an unsightly appearance. Some horses, however, can work with this, that more stimulating food would not suit so well. The dry diet braces the system, and draws up the abdomen. This kind of food is longer retained in the large intestines, which occasions the flanks to appear full and rounded, and greatly adds to the beauty of the horse's make in these parts,—that is, when it is duly administered.

Some horses we have noticed have voracious appetites, and devour great abundance of corn, and whatever is set before them, yet always look meagre and out of condition. When this has been the case, we have been led to believe that by too much food, and of too heating a quality, the stomach and intestines have been paralysed, and lost their powers of forming chyle, or of absorbing it. Turning out to the green pasture will often bring such into condition, and they fall off again in the stable. Horses of small make and fiery temper are, we have thought, more particularly subject to this disease.

Water, like the food, should be given often, and not in too large quantities: stinting horses is a dangerous custom; it induces them, where there is an opportunity to take enough at once to break their wind, or otherwise injure themselves. See art. *Broken WIND*.

The skin, to look well and be healthy, should be smooth, supple, and easy upon the muscles, free from knots, and by no means tight about the ribs. The hair clean, bright, and glossy, lying to the skin, and not distorted, or turning away from it, or twisted, dry, or thready. The effect of cold draughts of air on the skin of the horse, in setting up the hair, is well known to the grooms, who cautiously avoid it.

Exercise to animals by nature born to be fleet, is particularly necessary; besides the good it does in moving and forwarding all the secretions and excretions. This should be gentle or vigorous, proportioned to the strength and state of the horse, without distressing or too much fatiguing him. A gentle perspiration loosens the scurf, and makes him clean better. The hide soon gets foul, and a groom that has much pride in the appearance of his horse, is almost incessantly currying, brushing, and hand rubbing the coat.

It is a customary thing with the dealers in horses, in forming a judgment of the actual state of the horse, and whether his condition will admit of farther advancement, to handle the crest, chine, or upper part of the neck which carries the mane: if this be lax in the hand, and easily pliant, it is presumed the condition may be carried farther; if, on the contrary this part has a stiff tense feel, it is considered that farther improvement is not to be expected. Among the acknowledged indications also of poverty and good condition, is the poor mark in the buttock, that is the channel or depression running down the buttock, at its posterior part; being a depression formed between the muscles. If this channel be very visible and deep, the horse is out of condition; if obliterated, so as to be hardly visible, he is considered in condition.

Blood horses are more easily cleaned than the common coarser kind of horses; their coat is not so thick, nor does it retain the perspiration so much, and the hair is harder, and takes a better polish, which makes an experienced groom always prefer them: they recover their fatigue also more quickly.

Too great excitement from the food, and undue fever, may be known by the heat of the mouth, the fulness of the vessels of the eyes, the strength of the pulse, and the diminished appetite; the skin also, and extremities, are found too hot or too cold, languor and weakness follow: the remedies are before stated.
