

# Transition time

Horses need help changing environments from racetrack or sales ring to quiet life on the farm

by **Robin Stanback**

THE WORD transition is getting a lot of use this year as the United States prepares to welcome a new president to the White House.

Just as careful attention to detail is required for that change, so too is it necessary to help horses adjust to new environments. This is the time of year when many horses move from the sales ring and the racetrack to a new farm to prepare for the breeding season. A safe transition not only assures healthier individuals but protects existing animals on the farm.

Carefully protecting horses being transferred from the sales ring or the racetrack begins with the shipping company transporting them. Reputable vanning companies will have a Department of Transportation (DOT) license number posted on the vehicle, and many large carriers will be members of the National Horse Carriers Association. These memberships assure a client of certain basics such as background checks, stringent drug and driving tests for the drivers, and other safety aspects.

"Before a horse gets onto one of our trucks at a racetrack or sales venue, our drivers check for accurate health papers," said Nicole Pieratt, president of Sallee Horse Vans Inc. "The drivers also look over every horse before it is loaded to assess its general health. We spend a great deal of money disinfecting and cleaning every surface of our equipment, especially those a horse might nuzzle, and we employ a service that pressure washes and disinfects our trucks every evening. Our drivers use spray solutions of disinfectants between runs during the day."

Catherine Hudson, a veteran consignor and buyer with ties to England, the U.S., Australia, and South America as a bloodstock consultant, sees many of the horses she buys for her international clients take lengthy trips to their new homes. Hudson said it is imperative to choose a ship-



**CHANGE OF ATTIRE**  
Horses making the transition from the sales ring to a new farm home must deal with a variety of changes, including not being blanketed during turnout

ping company that is meticulous about every aspect of its service.

In an effort to further protect some of the horses she ships, Hudson often will use a mild tranquilizer such as acepromazine. She thinks it seems to help settle a fractious horse prior to putting it on a van.

"Once they are on a van and moving, most horses settle in just fine," Hudson said. "For those that are nervous, a mild tranquilizer seems to take the edge off and allows them to relax."

Some advocate the prophylactic use of antibiotics prior to shipping horses, although theriogenologist Michelle LeBlanc, D.V.M., does not recommend the practice.

"It's controversial whether one injection of an antibiotic is helpful or not," said LeBlanc, a reproductive specialist at Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital in Lexington. "It is just like giving a human one injection of antibiotic one day. If you are harboring something, one dose usually will not in any way protect you."

## Separate on arrival

While it might not be possible to totally protect horses from viral or bacterial problems, it is essential to keep horses that may recently have been exposed to them separate from a farm's existing herd until the new horse's good health has been established.

Quarantining horses for a brief period of time when they are brought into a new environment is highly recommended.

"Any horse that comes to the farm should be quarantined for a minimum of 14 to 21 days," LeBlanc said. "The horses coming off the track or from the sale should have their temperatures taken every day. If they have a snotty nose but do not have a fever, many times we just watch them, because frequently they have a taint of viral infection. However, if their temperature goes up or if they have a change in their complete blood count indicative of a bacterial infection, they will be put on antibiotics for a minimum of five days but preferably seven to ten days."

LeBlanc said it is essential to institute other careful quarantine practices.

"Wash hands, wear gloves," she said. "Viral particles can be spread very easily from clothes and hands. Humans tend to be the ones that spread them quite readily. People need to have biosecurity measures in place and maintain protocol."

Many of Hudson's horses have to go directly into quarantine in order for them to be shipped to their new foreign homes.

Quarantine regulations differ from country to country, so part of her job entails keeping abreast of any changes in requirements as well as preparing her charges for an even longer transport. One important aspect of that is putting a bit of weight on the horses.

"Some of the horses will have lost weight at the sales," Hudson said. "It is just a nervous time for them. Then they get shipped to a new home. It can make them fall off. You do have to be careful, though, not to push too much food at first. The key is to get

the horses to relax and then slowly increase the food. Most will gain weight that way."

## Feeding issues

Weight problems are a particular challenge for young mares coming off the track and entering the breeding ranks.

LeBlanc often sees these mares and one of the first things she does is to body condition score them. Ideally she wants a mare to be at least a 4.5 on a scale of one to nine (see sidebar).

"They do have to have a certain body condition to cycle," she said. "If they are below 4.5 and their ovaries are very small, it is highly likely they will not begin to cycle early in the spring."

While it would be advantageous to wean the horses onto the feed at their new home, it may not always be possible. Feeding small quantities of any new feed multiple times per day usually will allow the horses to adapt to the new feed and gain weight.

LeBlanc encourages her clients to use high-fat pelleted feed supplements.

"It is high energy; it is nine calories verses five per unit size," she said. "It is digested in the hindgut so you are less apt to have a colic. There is some preliminary work that suggests that it has a calming effect on these nervous fillies. They digest it very well. So, if I have a thin filly, I recommend that it be put on that, but I also tell the client that they sometimes don't like to eat it, so don't immediately give them two cups a day. Give them small amounts and add it to their diet slowly so they can get used to the palatability and the taste. If you start out right away with two cups, the horses just won't eat it. It is not that the compound doesn't work, it is just that you haven't adjusted them to it over a period of time."

Persistent weight loss issues might indicate a different set of problems for some horses, particularly young mares coming off the track. Nervous young mares may have difficulty set-

ting into a mare band.

LeBlanc suggests watching the herd dynamics to see if a particular mare is being bullied or is unable to defend herself or her food. If that is the case, it sometimes helps to turn the mare out with an older, quiet pasture mate until the new mare gets better acclimated to pasture life.

## Other issues

Another issue for some horses is cold weather. Many of the weanlings and yearlings coming from the sales ring have been blanketed. When they get to their new homes, they are often turned out, but without the benefit of the blanket they were used to or the winter coat they need.

For some of the racetrack fillies with slick coats, cold weather is a real challenge. Wind and wet weather add to the insult. Shivering to stay warm consumes a lot of calories. These horses may need a good shelter from the weather if they are to stay outdoors, but some may need the benefit of a stall and a blanket if they are to maintain or increase their weight.

Pregnant mares coming out of a sales ring can be especially challenging. LeBlanc believes in putting these in-foal mares on Regu-Mate.

"They can be stressed, and while there are no scientific reports, I get many phone calls after the sale about mares coming from the sale and aborting," LeBlanc said. "I recommend that they go on a double dose of Regu-Mate for at least two weeks. They need to be evaluated before they are taken off the Regu-Mate. If anything is abnormal, then you should do an ultrasound exam, possibly measure some hormones to see if everything is normal. If everything appears normal, then wean them off the Regu-Mate one [milliliter] at a time."

LeBlanc attributes the problem to the stresses of being in the sale and believes it decreases the immune system for some of these mares.

"We know there are lots and lots of bacteria in the vagina, so if the stress decreases their immune system, does that allow bacteria that are normally in the vagina to penetrate the cervix and institute a quiet subclinical placental infection?" LeBlanc said. "It is tough to say why these mares abort, but, by the phone calls I receive, it is not an uncommon occurrence."

"Quarantine those mares for sure. You always have to worry about [equine] herpesvirus, and stress is the number one cause of that. I would also be very concerned for mares that have been bought at the sales and have had a very long trailer ride. It is very difficult for some of them."

Transitioning horses from the highly stressful environment of the sales grounds or the racetrack to the relative quiet of a farm environment requires attention to detail. Keeping newcomers separate from the established herd is important, but so is keeping a watchful eye out for subtle weight loss and acclimation issues. ■

## Condition scoring helps monitor weight fluctuations

IT CAN BE easy to miss seeing the first 50 pounds a horse might lose. By the time the next 50 pounds is lost, it might become more difficult to help the horse recover.

Weighing horses on a scale is the ideal method of keeping tabs on a horse's weight. Horse owners also can use a weight tape to gauge weight fluctuations. They are not always as accurate, but if used consistently they can be helpful. Making a conscious effort on a regular basis to observe the horse's weight and feel for fat deposits along the body may be of greater value.

The Henneke Body Condition Scoring System was developed by Don Henneke, Ph.D., at Texas A&M University. Based on a visual examination and manual palpation,

it allows people to assess the six major points of a horse that are most responsive to changes in body fat—the neck, withers, shoulder, ribs, loin, and tailhead.

The ratings for this system run from a one with a horse that has easily noticeable bone structures across its whole body being rated as poor, to a nine with a horse that has bulging fat deposits across its body being considered extremely fat.

A rating of five represents the ideal weight for most horses. The neck and shoulder should blend smoothly into the body. The horse should have rounded withers. The ribs should be felt but not seen. The back should be level and there should be a layer of fat around the tailhead that is just beginning to feel soft.—Robin Stanback



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