

Why the Horse Rug?

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From a horse's perspective, rugs may be a very strange thing indeed. From some humans' perspective, horse rugs are an acceptable thing to cover a horse's body with. Not only do these people think that rugging is a good thing for the horse, they spend considerable amounts of money and time fulfilling their own needs for the horse's supposed wellbeing. By contrast, other horse owners do not go through the daily routine of putting the rug on, taking it off, getting it repaired, adjusting it and treating the rub sores and bare patches on the unrugged horse. And the horse survives – amazingly enough. Confession time: I am one of those horse owners who does not see any advantage, from the horses' point of view, in rugging them.

One sign of a healthy horse is a natural shiny coat. A natural shiny coat is quite different from a shampooed or rugged shiny coat. The horse in the photo doing his yoga stretches is called Roly. He is named Roly because rolling is one of his favourite activities; in the dirt, in the mud, in the water and in the grass. Under that 'shine' is a nice healthy layer of dirt. I reckon I'd have a revolt on my hands if I even attempted to rug him. He wears his shine and natural coat all year round too. From forty degrees in the summer to minus six in the winter. He is also partial to sunbaking in the winter and seeking shade under trees in summer.



Roly is not a one-off case. The other horses here do much the same as he does, to condition their coats, to scratch and rub their itchy spots, to cover their skin with a layer of fine clay from the dam and to protect themselves from the weather extremes.

Have a look at these shiny bums!

No rugs, no shampoo and no humans thinking that they know better than the horse. This was taken in the middle of summer. Do these horses look 'faded'? The white and grey ones may but that also may just be an illusion. Do they look like they need another layer of 'protection' to keep them looking nice? How much 'better looking' could they get?



Horse rugs may be appropriate for a really ill horse in cold, wet and windy weather. But if the horse needs extra protection that much, would it not be more appropriate to house them in a shed instead? An open shed so they can choose,

if they wish, to go outside or stay indoors. With a rugged, sick horse outside, their heads are usually left exposed, as are their legs, hooves and bellies.

Are rugs appropriate for healthy horses just because the human thinks they look cute; or if humans like to have 'clean' horses or 'unfaded' horses or whatever other reasons ruggers use to justify this unnatural clothing of horses?

Some of the healthiest horses on the planet are those found roaming the wilds of such places as the outback desert in Australia, the Sierra Nevadas in the USA, the high country of the Australian Alps and many other homes to nomadic wild horses. Who rugs these guys? What extreme conditions do they thrive under? Do they come up looking sun bleached or faded? According to Brian Hampson, who is doing PHD research on the wild Australian brumby herds, www.wildhorseresearch.com " I have not seen any feral horses in poor condition, with the exception of serious drought conditions. Most brumbies, even on 4 % protein feed, are fat, healthy, have a moderate worm burden, and a high foaling rate. Foaling rate for 4 yr old to 10 yr old mares is 70-80% in most studies. Coats are generally shiny and healthy".

So if horses in the wild can survive without rugs and domestic horses can survive without rugs, why do some people insist that they "must rug their horses"? In a 'chicken and egg' scenario, some people say that their horse will not grow a coat to protect them in the colder months - so they put a rug on them at the first hint of cool weather. And guess what? The horse doesn't grow a winter coat - because it cannot. Placing an artificial layer on the horse actually disables the very biological mechanisms that stimulate the growth of a winter coat as well as the built-in thermo regulatory system that controls the horse's body temperature during the daily temperature variations. Rugs shut down the natural bodily systems of a horse.

Some horse owners justify rugging their horse because they have shaved or clipped the horse's hair from all or just parts of its body. They do this to either make the horse look 'nice' or because the horse is asked to do exercise that makes it fairly sweat up - and all that sweat under an unclipped coat is I don't know. What is it? Is it unnatural? Is the amount of exercise too much for the horse? Is sweating not good for the horse? Whatever the reason, the horse is made devoid of its natural coat (its whiskers, its feathers and ear hair as well in many cases), exercised till sweaty and then rugged with often several layers of heavy material. If that seems strange to me I wonder what the horse thinks about it.

If ruggers could get over their fear of freezing horses (or faded or dirty horses) and leave the rugs off (as well as provide natural shelter from weather extremes) they may find that the horse can actually survive the cooler months. They will also save time and money too. Ten minutes a day to rug and to unrug over four months is twenty hours. Over six months it's a whopping thirty hours or sixty hours over a year for the crowd that rug for all seasons. That's a lot of extra time to actually spend with the horse doing more constructive things in anyone's language. And there will be more money saved too.

If in doubt about all this discussion about rugging horses at all, why not ask the expert. Ask the horse just what he or she thinks about all of this. Ask them too if the paddock they live in satisfies their needs and if they have enough shelter, company or stimulation to make their lives comfortable and interesting. Their answers may surprise you.