

## **My Fur Coat**

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Horses are wild animals, albeit domesticated. Part of that 'wildness' in horses is about having all the necessary biological functions and systems that allow them to operate quite happily, in fact very happily, outside in the elements. And horses are not human. This may be obvious to most of us but sometimes I wonder. More accurately, I wonder if some humans who treat their horses like humans can see and understand the actual differences.

Apparel is one issue of horse/human difference that comes to mind. We like to be dressed. Dressed up that is, not dressed down. Strangely, fashion often precedes comfort (and good taste) with some humans too. With fashion, the latest colours, materials, styles and themes are all regularly hashed and rehashed to keep the clothing designers, material suppliers, manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers and customers happy. There is also a large segment of the magazine industry that thrives due to the demand of the avid fashion conscious reader as well many worthwhile charities stay afloat via the funds raised in Op Shops because of changing fashion.

Not being a fashion aficionado myself; more of a jeans and shirt for the task type, I often wonder what goes on in the minds of those who strongly believe that clothes maketh the woman or man as the case may be. Yes I do understand that in many circles a well-dressed person can make very real impacts on those they wish to impress. One of the fascinating aspects of human nature, I guess.

Anyway, recently I had cause to buy a horse magazine that contained an article about one of my pet subjects - horses' feet - bare hooves in fact. It was an Aussie magazine and the article was about the barehoof movement in Australia and featured a Victorian barehoof trimmer I had recently spent a day with. I watched her trim and we chewed the hoof, mainly about barefoot horses (of course). One of the things she and the article's writer covered in detail was horses' living conditions as well as examining where and how they lived and how this had a direct impact on their feet and their total health and well-being. A big point stressed in this story on barehoof horses was the need to keep them undressed. No rugs! Naked!

The ironic thing with this magazine was that it was the pre winter special edition on; you guessed it, horse rugs. Every shape, colour, material, style and accessory of horse rug imaginable was featured. Page after page after page featured clothing items for an animal that has no real need for any of them. There was also the definitive 2007 horse rug buyers' guide too. And of course there are the 'fear' tactics used by the advertisers. Words like 'chills', 'shivers', and 'cold snaps'. Or how about 'indulge your horse', 'the ultimate solution' (to what?), 'perfect for the rainy warmer days', 'rainsheet', 'blanket', 'aquaproof', 'polar fleece', 'winter rug fashions' huh? Then there are statements like 'keeping your horse warm and dry' and 'your horse will stay warm and cozy'.

But really, the horse has no need for any rug under the vast majority of circumstances, especially in Australia. In fact in a lot of cases where a horse is rugged, it is detrimental to the horse as well as being uncomfortable and perhaps unhealthy too. Or is unhealthy already detrimental? Often the human does not see this though. It is the human who thinks the horse should be rugged for a variety of reasons we shall look at later.

One horse in the magazine bucked the gist of this story though. The horse is a chestnut. It has a thoroughbred look about it, a white blaze, four white socks and four black hooves of dubious quality. It had a very unnatural shiny, almost slick coat and a strange look in its eye. A plastic or fibreglass horse. Synthetic it was.

If ever a horse needed a synthetic horse rug then this was the one. The horse did not sweat, its skin didn't breathe, it needed the protection from the elements because it couldn't thermo regulate, it had no natural ability to protect its outer with bodily secretions and skin and hair oils. And fibreglass or plastic will break down under sunlight containing ultraviolet light rays too. And if this horse did fall over in the mud, then the synthetic apparel may have protected its glossy exterior. Fibreglass can scratch. Quite a difference from a real, live, living and breathing horse though.

A horse that has recently rolled can look less than pretty to our way of thinking. But I have never seen a horse get up from a good roll looking less than really pleased with him/herself. They love it! The muddier or dustier, the better. And if they can get their faces in the dirt, then it's *even better*. It seems the more mud, dust and grime the horse has on his/her skin the happier they are. Do you think the horse cares if the saddle blanket gets filthy? Rolling with a horse rug on is an act of desperation. The horse really wants to get down and get dirty. But 'we' don't want our horses dirty, now do we?



I like looking at natural horses. Is there any other type, you ask? Well yes, I have seen some pretty unnatural looking ones. But the horses with a good healthy coat, a natural shine, a length of hair/fur to match the season and feathers to boot, look proper to me. Compare this picture with the clipped version or the patterned version. The horse with all the 'extra' hair removed. Brazilian horses. The mane gets clipped in various styles from crew to mullet, the tail is shortened and the dock trimmed to make it look like a fat handled, short

bristled broom (useless on flies), the pasterns are shaved to within an inch of their lives (unless it's a Clydie or Friesian) so that the feathers cannot direct water away from the rear of the hoof, facial whiskers are removed from both girls and boys (they are there for a reason) and then that fad of trimming part of or all of the horse's body in various designs. I mean! Oh, then the horse 'needs' a rug. If someone shaved you to within an inch of your life you'd need a bloody rug too! Or a beanie. Cause and affect, I guess.

In what I thought was a daring move, two winters ago, I chose, for my horses' benefit, to go rugless. Instead of having horses die in the paddocks, the numbers multiplied. Instead of having horses shivering in the wind and rain and getting colds and losing weight, they are all a picture of woolly health during the colder months. Despite all the fears of 'fading' horses in summer, they look great during the warmer months too with their short hair, some tree shade and a dam to swim in or splash around in with their mates. The downside is that I now have three slightly worn horse rugs collecting dust and harbouring wasps' nests. Gone is the daily ritual of unrugging and rerugging. Gone are the regular visits to the local saddlery to get the straps sewn back on or the holes patched and no longer do I have horses with rubbed shoulders, rubbed lower throats and rubbed hips. And besides, as the herd grew to its current excessive number, I couldn't afford to dress them all if I remained a 'rigger'.

It is ironic that through lack of value and mild neglect, the baby factories in the horse world, brood mares, generally go rugless. And barehoof as well but that's another issue in itself. Not many brood mares are rugged!

Given that they are growing a healthy foal inside them, that they need to be healthy themselves, they need to process nutrition into a new life and after giving birth, provide milk in large quantities to meet the needs of the foal, isn't it amazing that, generally speaking, they do it fairly naturally? Food for thought.

So just what is it about Australian horse owners and their almost fanatical need to rug horses, summer and winter, autumn and spring, day and night? In Australia we are (you are, I'm not) a part of one of the highest per horse-rugging populations in the world, if you choose to rug your horse. What this means is that there are probably more rugs per horse in this country than elsewhere on the planet. Great for the rug makers; but is it so good for the horse?

So let's look at the human's needs regarding horse body cover. Why do so many 'horse lovers' put rugs on their horses?

- As mentioned before – 'so he keeps his saddle blanket clean'. This one is for the human, not the horse.
- 'So he looks nice'. Ditto as above.
- 'I save a feed a day'. I used to use this one to justify rugging my horses. Are we that stingy that we can't afford another biscuit of hay to keep the horse fed properly?
- 'Because he's been clipped for the show/competition/whatever'. Again for the human, not the horse.
- 'He looks good in his matching combo'. So does he have a mirror in his stable? Is this what the other horses think? Or does the human think he looks good? (I reckon rugged horses look pretty silly really, but then I could be biased).
- 'He's cosy and warm'. Yeah right! Except the rug is on all day and night. The temperature has gone from six degrees overnight to twenty three degrees during the day. Warm? I'd say he's bloody hot! Cosy? I'd say he's sweating like a pig. And why don't humans rug pigs for that matter? They don't have the luxury of a fur coat like our horse friends.

- 'Saves me washing him'. That statement raises the issue of hosing horses down. After a big ride or session with our horses, when they are all hot and sweaty, some people take great delight in cold hosing horses down. All over too! (Just what would athletes and footy players say if you took a cold hose to them after a competition or match? They probably wouldn't say much as they tried to kick you head in). Warm water please! Or no water at all unless the horse chooses to swim. If he will not stand in the wash bay at liberty while you hose him, perhaps he doesn't like it. Food for thought.
- 'I can't stand the white hair everywhere'. Get a bay horse!
- 'It looks like it's going to rain today'. Right! That's why we have a national drought. Put the rug on 'cos it looks like rain. And it doesn't. Have you also noticed that because we are not allowed to wash our cars, it won't rain either? Wash 'em and down it comes.
- 'I won the rug'. Lucky you, but does the horse care?
- 'It stops his coat being bleached by the sun'. Blondes have more fun!
- 'It keeps his hair smooth and flat'. Well put a rug on your own head then. Or, is it fair to have a rug on for twenty-four hours a day so you can feel his smoothness for perhaps a minute a day?
- 'I don't have a stable'. Yeaah! Lucky horse. You mean, all you have is a paddock? Perhaps we should check the animal welfare groups and see if that is fair on the horse.
- 'I don't know'????????????? Yes, some people actually say that when you ask them why they rug their horse.

Now we should look at the (live) horses' needs regarding body cover then.

At the beginning of this story I mentioned that the horse is a wild animal. Part of that 'wildness' is having all the necessary biological and physiological tools and abilities to not only cope with living outside, but to actually thrive.

Air, as you may know, is a great insulator of heat and cold. There's not much in air to transfer heat or cool from the elements to the underlying body. Unless the air itself is hot or cold, you and I and the horse will be fairly well protected if we can create a layer of stable air around us. It's the principle behind the fibreglass batts and other insulating materials in our houses and, for that matter, in our clothing.

In a horse's natural clothing, his skin and coat, there is an amazing mechanism that can actually regulate the insulating layer of air depending on the needs of the animal and the weather conditions prevailing. Apart from growing the necessary length and thickness of hair to match the season, a horse can fine-tune the way the hairs stand or lay to micro manage the air layer close to his body and in turn the insulation factor to suit his needs. If it's cold, he stands up the hair to create a thick layer of air-powered insulation. When it warms up, the hair is layed down. All this is done by a network of fine muscles and nerves attached to the root of each hair. And he doesn't even have to think about it. It all comes with a built-in automatic thermostat to keep the body at the optimum temperature. Truly amazing really! The sad thing though, is that by rugging your horse, you can actually disable or damage the self-regulating temperature system. The muscles and nerves that run the system, like all the rest of the biological functions of the horse need to be worked to be healthy. In other words, use it or lose it.

Another of the horses needs is the ability to run. To escape the ferals and perils that abound in his paddock (although sometimes I reckon my guys just run for the fun of it). They often kick up their heels too, just like country folk used to do

at country dances in a bygone era. And we have already looked at rolling. They also like to lie down on the grass and take in a bit of sun on their tummies too. All the above activities are done better naked (apart from the country people dancing). Rugs are truly restrictive of natural movement and freedom. (Have you ever seen a country dance where they were all naked? The mind boggles!) We must let the horse express him or herself as they really were meant to. If we are being truly natural that is.

Another really great reason for not rugging a horse is that in all of history, a horse has never injured him or herself with his or her coat. However there are a squillion stories around of horses that have been tangled up in rugs, had rugs come half way off and chase the horse through a fence, of horses being cut by leg, surcingle and neck straps on rugs, of overheating and of getting numerous hard to treat and painful skin conditions.

So if any of this tempts you to release the rug, great! Great for the horse, but not so great for the rug makers, the magazines publishers and the retailers. Such is life in a natural world.

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