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To Blanket or Not to Blanket...

This is the question of the season! And my answer is... it depends. The four conditions that help me make this decision are: the horse's body condition, use, natural hair-coat and living conditions.

Body condition – Staying warm requires energy. Hard keepers such as horses in heavy work or older horses don't need that extra calorie drain can benefit from a blanket and the amount saved in hay and grain may even pay for the blanket! In addition, feeding these hard keepers lots of high quality hay will also keep them warm. Digestion of forages creates a significant amount of heat, in addition to preventing boredom, ulcers, etc. Turn on your horse's inner furnace!

Use – Contrary to many "old wive's tales", blanketing does NOT prevent a winter coat from forming. The winter coat starts developing in late summer and early fall, long before we even pull out our own sweaters. However, even though blanketing doesn't affect the quality or thickness of the hair coat, it has been shown to affect the length. This is why horses that over-winter in Florida tend to be sleeker than those in New York. Horses that are ridden heavily during the winter months may benefit from blanketing as they won't get as sweaty during heavy workouts and their coats will dry quicker with shorter hairs. Remember, once you start blanketing at a certain temperature, don't stop! This doesn't mean you need keep your horse wrapped up all winter but if you blanket at 32 degrees, your horse will become accustomed to it. Be consistent!

Natural Hair-coat – Some horses will not grow a long, insulating coat even if we leave them unblanketed all winter. As long as these horses have adequate body condition (preferably even a little chunky!), a dry place with a windbreak and adequate forage they should be OK in even the coldest Virginia winters. However, providing these light-coated horses with a little extra insulation on the coldest nights is always a nice treat!

Living Conditions – The easiest way to chill a horse is to get it wet! Winter coats work by laying flat to cool or standing on end to use air as a natural insulator. When the hair gets wet, no insulating air can infiltrate the hairs and even the fuzziest ponies will get chilled. The same occurs to a lesser degree in heavy winds. If your horses have easy access to run-in sheds or are stalled during these conditions a blanket should not be needed. However, I have seen many situations in which there is a gorgeous, large run-in but the hay is out in the elements, or the bully is keeping everyone else out. A waterproof sheet can go a long way in these situations. I recommend sheets with high-necks to prevent the rain from dripping inside the blankets at the shoulders. Remember that air is an insulator so having a properly fitting sheet is important as if the coat is laid flat by a tight-fitting sheet your horse may actually not be as warm as without it!

Finally, an important rule of thumb for blanketing is to check under the blankets daily. This will allow you to be sure no rubs are occurring as well as to keep tabs on the horse's body condition. Most importantly, don't over-blanket! Not only will your horse be uncomfortable in too many layers, but a sweaty horse can get easily chilled when the cold sets in for the night!

If you have more questions about blanketing, feel free to drop me a line!