

Feeding Your Way to the Top

I think we can all agree on one thing, horse lovers probably care more about what their horses eat than what they eat. There is only one problem with that, many owners are not feeding their performance horses correctly. It is a myth in equine nutrition to have to have a high level of protein intake for performance horses. I'll take you step by step through some basics of equine nutrition.

During my time at the University of Findlay I took an equine nutrition class that literally changed my life. I decided I wanted to pursue animal nutrition as a career and making changes to my horses' diets really changed their performance. Originally I fed a 14% crude protein and 6% fat sweet feed mixed grain. The mare that I had was running well, but not her best, so I started to make some changes.

I learned that mature working horse only need 9-11% protein in their diet, any excess protein is excreted through their urine.

Unlike cattle horses cannot use the excess protein to build muscle. Horses are mono-gastric with hindgut fermentation, meaning one stomach with fermentation that occurs in the large intestine and beyond. Cattle have four stomachs and have fermentation before the large intestine, which is why they can use the excess protein more effectively.

Horses get their energy from carbohydrates fat as opposed to protein. Most horse's carb intake is more than enough, so what I focused on for my horses was increasing their fat intake. One gram of

fat has about 9kcal of energy. By providing excess fat in the diet you can increase the energy amount without having to increase volume and also spare the use of glycogen for energy. Energy from fat is used aerobically, where glycogen is used anaerobically, so by providing fat you keep more glycogen in store for that last run home from the third barrel.

Photo credit to Hannah Russell



Horses can handle about 20% of fat in their feed ration; I like to keep mine between 14-18%. You can add fat to a diet by adding vegetable oil, rice bran, or flaxseed meal. An added benefit of increased fat is that the horse's hair coat improves and it is easy for them to digest. I use rice bran added to the sweet feed I currently feed them which is 12% crude protein and 8% fat out of the bag.

I know that every person has different ideas on feeding their horse, and that every horse has different needs, and I'm not saying you need to change your horse's diet. I found that

I was feeding my horses all wrong and after I started feeding her correctly she went on to run a lot better. She actually won me the Novice Amateur Pole Bending class at the All American Quarter Horse Congress this past October. Hopefully this breaks everything down a little bit and makes feeding your horse easier to understand, and maybe help improve their performance.

Hannah Russell