

Establishing a Game Plan Helpful At Feeding Time

Submitted by:

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Are your horses fed in a group? It is a common practice for horses to be fed in a “herd” situation. In fact, in some scenarios, it can be difficult for horse owners to feed their horses’ any other way. Often, when horses are out on pasture, or housed in a dry lot with other horses, they also stay in these groups when fed. In some cases this may not pose a problem in regards to an individual’s nutritive needs. However, more often it seems that there are horses in the group that are being driven away from the feed source and not getting the groceries they need to maintain a desirable body condition score.

Horses housed in a group will establish a social hierarchy. This hierarchy will determine who gets preference at the feeder, and who has to stand back and wait their turn. It is not at all uncommon for there to also be a direct correlation between the hierarchy and the level of condition on the horse. Most often, the horse at the top of the pecking order will be higher in body condition score than the horse at the bottom of the group.

There may be certain instances where a group of horses all “play nice” and allow each their fair share of the feed and hay. However, in cases where this is not true, it may be necessary for the owner to take special precaution for those horses not getting their nutrient needs met. Sometimes, it may be as simple as providing hay and feed in multiple locations. Other times, it may become necessary for the horse at the bottom (or the top) to be removed from the group and allowed to eat alone.

With nutritional needs and horses, it is important to remember that there are many comparisons that can be made to humans. Not all horses have the same caloric requirements. However, all horses do have the basic needs of water, protein, energy, vitamins and minerals. Just because a horse is at a healthy weight does not necessarily mean their nutritional needs are met. Do you know people that are at a healthy weight yet they do not eat a balanced diet? With group feeding, it becomes even more important to recognize the differences in each horse to ensure their health within the group. Horses being driven away from feed may be lacking in several areas, while horses that are getting more than their “piece of the pie” may suffer down the road with weight related issues.

Watching group dynamics can help to establish a game plan come feeding time. If a particular horse eats much faster than the others, cleaning his own feed up and then “stealing” from others, perhaps this horse could be tied up or removed during feeding time. Another option may be to introduce large rocks (big enough they cannot be ingested) into their food pan or bucket. These rocks will slow the horse’s eating as they will have to maneuver around the rocks to clean up their feed. This may simply provide the other horses in the group enough time to finish their share before being pushed away. On the other side of the coin, if a particular horse eats much slower than the others in the group, it may be necessary to separate this horse and simply provide him more time.

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