

To Clip or Not to Clip?

Decide on the best way to handle your horse's winter coat.

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Unless you live in the tropics, winter riding means dealing with frigid temperatures, icy footing and frozen extremities. And oh yes, did we mention that woolly mass of fuzz that replaces your horse's once slick and shiny coat? This layer is Mother Nature's way of providing horses with the protection they need to survive winter. Depending upon your plans for winter riding, this could be good news or bad news.

Allow a horse's coat to grow naturally through the fall, and he'll grow hair capable of protecting him through most winter conditions. Horses do need some sort of shelter to protect them from the combined forces of wind coupled with rain or snow.

As veterinarian Elizabeth K. Stanley from Stonefield Equine Clinic in Winsted, Conn., explains, "The oils and hair in a horse's winter coat will shield him from wet and cold, but add wind to that scenario and an unprotected horse will get into trouble." This is why horses in the wild naturally seek shelter under trees or outgrowths, and why a wild herd stays banded together, rump to rump, to provide protection from wind in a storm.

Stanley keeps her 31-year-old retired eventer, Floyd, at her farm, and notes that "he hasn't worn a blanket in years." She provides Floyd with a three-sided run-in shed for winter housing which, in conjunction with his heavy coat, allows him to live comfortably outdoors all winter. Provided you give your horse winter shelter and proper care in harsh conditions—available fresh water, generous nutrition and appropriate shoeing as determined by your particular footing conditions—he will make it through winter just fine without added blanket expense or worry on your part.

The bad news? Just try to ride with all that hair. Exercise your horse enough to work up any amount of lather, and you'll spend hours drying him off. In winter you can't just let a horse get sweaty, then leave him to fend for himself in the cold.

Clipping your horse gets rid of that unwanted hair, but once you make the cut, you're committed to blanketing him—a routine that gets both expensive and cumbersome.

So you're faced with a dilemma: to clip or not to clip? Would you rather deal with hair or blankets? Or some of each?

Weighing Your Decision

There are a few factors you should consider when deciding how to manage your horse's winter coat. [Read more >>](#)

The author trains event horses out of her Setter's Run Farm in Duxbury, Mass., and is one of Horse Illustrated's English Training Talk columnists.