

Body Clipping

Before you shell out any hard-earned money, hold on: You can clip your horse yourself. All you need is a little patience and a few tools.

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6-1-2001

Your mind blissfully pictures your horse with a new image — one of a sheared equine sporting a full-body clip. Imagine, no more deep rubbing with a towel as you frantically try to soak up gallons of sweat from his coat before he catches a major cold. Think of it — a velvety-soft coat requiring little grooming. Yep, this is indeed the year — even if you have to hire a professional groom to do the job.

But before you shell out any hard-earned money, hold on: You can do it yourself. All you need is a little patience and a few tools. It doesn't really matter if you make mistakes, unless you clip him right before a big show. The only difference between a bad clip job and a good coat is a couple weeks of growth.

To Clip or Not

Horses grow tick winter coats for warmth, but it isn't the drop in temperature that triggers the hair to grow, as you might think. It's the decreased daylight of shorter days that stimulates the coat. That's why your horse will begin fluffing up even when it's still warm. That is also why some owners keep a lamp burning in their horses' stalls long after darkness to "trick" their systems into believing it's still summer. Since body clipping is frowned on with some breeds, such as the Quarter Horse, using lamps can help minimize shaggy coats.

However, using lamps can be more labor intensive: If you're boarding at someone else's barn, they may not want you to leave the barn lights on all night. You'll have to set up a safe lighting system in your horse's stall, then faithfully turn it on and off daily, or attach a timer — and you'll still need to blanket your horse. And of course, if your horse is in a pasture, night lighting is not an economical option. Body clipping, on the other hand, only needs to be done once or twice to last all season, and it's easy to do whether the horse is at your home, in a pasture or at a boarding stable. But before you grab those clippers, review the following points to determine if a body trim is right for your horsekeeping setup.

First, you must realize that once you clip your horse, you are responsible for making sure he is blanketed according to the weather. This means going out to the barn at least once every day to check on him, or twice a day if you live in a region that warms up during the day, and your horse only needs blanketing at night. If your equine partner is just a trail buddy that won't do much strenuous, sweat-producing work each winter, you may find it less work to leave him au naturel.

On the other hand, if you show your horse in the fall and winter months, you'll probably decide to body clip. Condition and muscles are more evident with a shorter coat and sweat will evaporate more quickly, so your horse will maintain his neat appearance after a warm-up. Plus, a heavy coat looks unkempt in the show-ring. Performance horses keep better condition with a clipped winter coat, and if you're an evening rider, you'll find that the clipped horse is easier to maintain, since you must get the moisture from sweating and baths out of your horse's coat before you put him up for the night. This is much easier to do with a short coat than a shaggy sponge. A wet coat doesn't insulate effectively, so your horse will be miserable and may even get sick. A clipped horse dries quickly and easily when toweled off, immediately ready for blanketing.

California and Florida are more temperate places for people and horses, but since winter-coat growth is governed by daylight, your horse will still grow a thicker coat when the days get shorter. People living in these warmer climates tend to favor body clipping, since a dense winter coat is not needed as much as in a colder climate. If you live in one of these regions, however, you still have to blanket your clipped horse when the temperature drops, such as at night and on windy, rainy days.

Top-Trim Tricks

The ideal months to clip your horse are between October and January. If you clip in September you may need to do it a second time, as his coat will grow in. On the flip side, clipping him too late, such as in April (when horses begin to shed), may interfere with his new coat growth. Remember, trimming does not help a horse shed his winter coat more quickly.

You want to make the haircut experience a pleasant one for your horse, so pick a sunny, calm day. Gusting winds will not

only make your horse more nervous, but also will make a normally messy job unbearable. Avoid wet days as well; dragging extension cords through puddles of rain invites disaster. If you have to clip on a cold day, make sure you have a cooler or rug available to cover up the newly shorn areas as you go.

One secret of the experts is to have your clippers professionally sharpened before every body clip. Sharp clippers cut down on clipper tracks and help prevent the dreaded "corduroy horse." Another trick to a nice clip job is to give your horse a bath the night before. Dirt inside his coat will catch in the clipper teeth and cause the blades to drag and cut unevenly. Also, the dirt will dull the clippers more quickly, possibly requiring you to interrupt the job to sharpen your blades. If the weather precludes a bath, you may have to make do with a thorough grooming.

If you're unsure of how your horse will react to the clippers, take time to get him used to them. Have a helper hold your horse. Turn the clippers on and hold them, blades facing away, against the back of your hand, and then place your hand on your horse's body. Your horse will feel the vibration. If he is relaxed, you can start clipping. If he is nervous about the noise and vibration, you may need to work with him until he accepts this procedure, and spread your clipping job out over a few days.

Once your horse is clipped, you will need at least three blankets to care for him: a light day sheet for mild days, an anti-sweat sheet or cooler for after workouts and a heavy blanket for cold days and nights. You may also want to purchase a Lycra undergarment designed to prevent chafing (or you can sprinkle baby powder or spray a coat polish around his chest and neck to keep his coat from becoming rubbed raw by his blanket). Clipped horses in colder climates may require hoods, extra blankets, quarter sheets or liners. Imagine what you would wear for various weather conditions, and dress your horse likewise. For instance, if you need a sweatshirt for the day, put a day sheet on him. If you need a heavy winter coat, put his heavy blanket on him. No matter what blanket he wears, a body-clipped horse should always be kept away from drafts and rain.

What You'll Need

For full-body clipping, you'll need large shearing clippers as well as small clippers. The small ones are for the face, ears and small spaces; however, trying to use these on the whole body will wear out the smaller motor. Also, the shearing clippers can clear a larger area, cutting down the time it'll take to finish the job. You'll also need clipper lubricant to keep the blades running smoothly and keep the clippers cool; a small brush or an old toothbrush to clean out hair and dirt from the blade teeth and small parts of the clippers; and clipper oil to protect the motor and teeth of the blades.

For best results, you'll also need: a blanket or cooler to keep the draft off newly clipped areas, white chalk for marking guidelines, a tail wrap, a body brush, clean rags, baby oil for the horse's body rinse water after the clip, a step stool and a heavy-duty extension cord.

Before you start, check your clipper instructions for guidelines on oiling and lubricating. Most large clippers have a small hole in the front to drop oil into. (Use a small dropper tube of oil for this purpose.) Apply a thin ribbon of oil onto the top of your clipper teeth and let the machine run for a few seconds. As you dip, repeat this procedure every 20 minutes or so.

Adjust the tension on your clippers by releasing the tension lever two rotations and then tightening it until you feel a slight resistance. Then rotate the lever one and a half more times. The tension mechanism holds the two blades together to allow the clippers to clip tightly and cleanly. As you clip your horse, brush your clipper teeth every 5 minutes or so and spray them with the lubricant (not the oil).

Further Reading

HorseChannel's Guide to Clipping Your Horse