

What's Up with All the Skinny Horses?

By Cindy Hale

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Quite frankly, I am fed up with people who aren't feeding their horses. Lately it seems I've been exposed to the ugly side of horse care gone wrong. I've encountered far too many painfully thin horses.

Not long ago I was judging a local show. All was going well until about lunchtime, when a large rig pulled in and out hobbled three very thin, ill-kept horses. I was disappointed that the show management took entry fee money from these people. The horses had no business being strutted before a judge, on public display. They didn't need to work up a sweat. They needed lunch.

During the day I had opportunities to approach each of the three riders. I was discreet as I inquired about the horses' care, and asked why they were so thin. I learned that none of the young girls who were riding the skinny horses were the actual owners. They belonged to their "trainer" (I use that term loosely and without respect) and were used as school horses. Needless to say, I was appalled. So this "trainer" was making money off these scrawny beasts, yet not bothering to spend much of it on their welfare? How special.

I wasn't exactly in a position to do much about the situation, since I was stuck in the middle of the arena most of the day with a clipboard in my hand. Luckily a couple of western trainers took matters into their own hands and chastised the entire group associated with the boney horses. Following their scolding, they packed up their stuff and left.

Since the horses weren't emaciated to the point of starvation, and since they were still able to perform, there wasn't much of a point in calling animal welfare agents. Sadly, horses have to be on the brink of starvation before anything is actually done to rescue them. Yet perhaps the public scorn the "trainer" faced will push her to feed her horses more. I can only hope.

But that incident led me to keep an eye on a little sorrel horse that lives a few blocks from me. The poor creature is squeezed into a small makeshift corral in the back half of a parched acre of land. There isn't any kind of shelter or shade, not even a tree, and it was over 100 degrees for days at a time this summer. Often I'd ride by on Wally or Joey and the red horse would be covered in crusty flakes of dried sweat. And each time I rode past, the horse was thinner.

Another time, I rode past on Wally. This time the actual owner was in the backyard, gardening. I decided to chat her up. Once we got to talking, I mentioned that her horse was awfully thin.

She seemed to acknowledge her horse's condition, and even added that the horse was for sale. It was as if she wanted to get rid of it, get a better facility, and start all over again. While portions of that mindset are rather admirable, it's a little askew. Hadn't she considered taking proper care of the horse she currently had in her midst?

On the days that I rode past, and saw the horse eating, I noticed its meals were nothing more than the cheapest grass hay, certainly nothing with any added nutrition or calories. By last week, all of the sorrel's ribs were showing and his hip bones were prominent. All of the fat from his neck was gone, so his head seemed far too large for his body.

I had my sister ride past that house with me.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

Jill said, "I think it's time to make the call."

So I went home and called Animal Control. I explained that I had watched the horse become thinner each week until it was obvious that something needed to be done. The officer took the report and promised that someone would visit the house and inspect the horse's condition.

I'm still waiting to hear what happened. Usually they inform the owner that there had been a complaint, and why. If they also think the horse is too thin (trust me, it is too thin), then they'll make precise recommendations on its care and schedule a follow-up to make certain the suggestions are being followed. We'll see. I'll be keeping an eye on that little red

horse. I won't let him down.

I realize that a lot of horse lovers have different opinions of what makes a horse too thin or too fat. I freely admit that my two horses are forever on the brink of being Butterballs. But I don't think that influences my perception of what constitutes a properly fed horse. No one should feel pressured to bloat their horses into Butterball status. But ribs that resemble a xylophone and hip bones that stick out like angular anvils are inexcusable. I simply can't stomach it.

[<< Previous Entry](#)

[Back to Life with Horses](#)