From Seizure to Adoption

A guide to rehabilitating the starved horse

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Introduction

Over the course of the last ten years, the Equine Cruelty Investigators at Habitat for Horses have handled thousands of cases of reported neglect and abuse. In 2006, we handled over 500 calls related to "skinny" horses, with 30% of those being unfounded. Usually, the reasons for those calls are neighbors who don't want the horses around, or someone trying to get someone else in trouble. About 60% of the calls resulted in a visit with the owner and a discussion about their thin horses and what might be done to restore them back to health. Education is our most powerful tool, and most owners are more than receptive to helpful advice. We've made a lot of friends through those visits, mainly because we don't go in with guns blazing, but with a smile and a handshake.



It's that last 10% that forces us to call law enforcement and, through them, inform the owner that unless corrective action is immediately taken, laws can be enforced that might result in the legal removal of the horses. Most of the time that gets their attention and the owner starts following the suggestions. In a few cases, it takes

legal action. In 2006, we went to court 17 times and obtained custody of around 200 horses. In the last ten years, Habitat for Horses never lost a case.

The word "equine" used throughout this pamphlet simply means a horse, donkey or mule. We'll use the term "horse," but understand that for our purposes, it also refers to horses, donkeys and mules.

How all this relates to you depends on your involvement with the rehabilitation process. Someone might call to tell you about a skinny horse or it might be because you're a member of a large equine organization, or maybe you just take in a few "rescue" horses, but for whatever reason, you're about to start in a new venture with an animal in true need of all you can give. While no one can predict all the situations you might encounter, this booklet is designed to give you the basic knowledge to participate in a legal seizure, rehabilitate a skinny horse and bring it back to a state of health. It isn't an easy path to follow, but the reward comes from seeing your rescued horse walk back out of your gates and into a new life.

Our primary focus has always been to do everything we can to educate the owners in areas that not only are in violation of the law, but in the minimum standards of equine care. For the most part, that's all that is needed. The majority of the people we call on have every intention of doing the right thing for their animals. The biggest failure is because they simply don't know what it takes or how to do it.

Understanding the Terms

One situation that points this factor out is a call I went on to back up an Animal Control Officer doing an investigation on a reportedly skinny horse. We pulled up to the home and immediately saw a horse in a small paddock next to the house. The horse had a lot of ribs showing and the hip bones were very noticeable. A young man stepped out and started talking with us about his new horse. As the story unfolded, he had just graduated from high school, rented the house and proceeded to do what he always wanted to do – own a horse. On the porch was a new saddle, part of his investment in his dream. He bought the horse at a local auction, had the vet give it all the vaccines it needed and brought it home to a newly built pen. The horse had been going downhill every since.

The young man was deeply concerned and had the vet visit several times. Blood work and fecal exams showed nothing wrong, he had the best feed money could buy, excellent hay, both stored in a room next to the paddock, the water tub was sparkling clean and the paddock and shelter spotless. The young man was almost in tears at this point. "I know my horse is getting worse," he said, "but I don't know what to do. I feed exactly how the feed store told me, a scoop and a half in the morning and the same in the evening. He eats all of it. I give him hay just like I was told, three flakes twice a day. I've been increasing that and the horse eats all of it. I don't know what else to do!"

"Let's go feed and let me watch," I suggested. I followed him into the spotless feed room and immediately saw the problem. He was feeding just as the feed store recommended, except his "scoop" was a small coffee cup and the "flakes" were handfuls of hay. No one had ever said anything about pounds of feed or hay. The young man just assumed what scoops and flakes meant, and the vet

and feed store assumed that he knew what they meant, yet he was literally starving his horse to death.

"Scoops" and "flakes" are common language in the horse world, but to those new to horses, we need to speak in terms that are clearly understood. When we talk about "green broke" and "halter trained," "snow-shoe" hooves and "dropping feed," we need to make certain that others understand exactly what we mean.

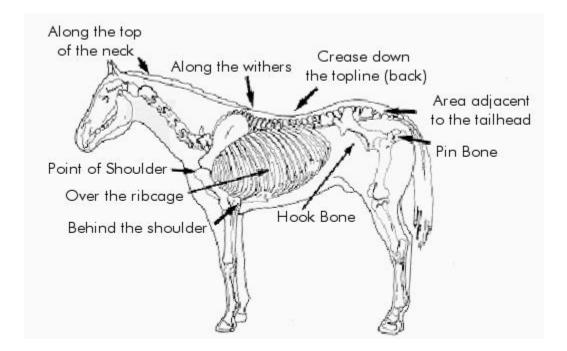


The Henneke Body Score

"Starving" and "skinny" are two such words that mean entirely different things to different people. A thoroughbred racehorse looks like skin and bones to someone that has been around working Quarter horses most of their life. Show quality Arabians look emaciated next to a hard working draft horse, although both can be in excellent condition for their specific job. That's why those of us who deal with

thin horses talk about a system of measurement called the "Henneke Body Scoring System." This scale was developed at Texas A&M in 1983 and has since become the accepted standard in the measurement of body condition of the equine. The Henneke scale is used and understood by veterinarians across the country and can be presented in court when giving testimony, so it's important that it be fully understood.

To make a true measurement, you need to place your hands on the horse to actually feel the different points. A long coat can hide a lot of problems and, if you are going to testify in court, the actual hands-on measurement can aid in your testimony. In order to use the Henneke Score correctly, you really need to be taught by someone who knows the process and can work through it with you on several horses. While it is easy, once you know how to do it, reading about the process doesn't bring you to the level of being knowledgeable.



1. Extremely thin - This is the worst condition of all. When a horse gets to



this point, death is very close. The horse is extremely this, literally skin and bones. The backbone sticks up, the ribs and hipbones are easily seen, the neck is hollow and no fat can be felt.

2. Very thin – The backbone, ribs, pelvic bones and tailhead are all very noticeable. The stomach area may appear fat, but that area is not point of measurement and it might be caused by a heavy infestation of worms. This animal is also considered

emaciated.

- **3. Thin** The backbone can easily be seen but not the individual vertebrae, but a slight layer of fat can be felt over the ribs. The tailhead is sloped. The hipbones cannot be defined, but the withers are very sloped.
- **4. Moderately Thin** The backbone still sticks up a little (called a "negative crease"), and the ribs can be slightly seen. There is fat around the tailhead, but the hipbones cannot be seen. The withers, neck and shoulders appear normal and not thin.

- **5. Moderate** The back is level, with no backbone seen. The ribs can't be seen, but they can be felt. There is fat around the tailhead and withers, while the shoulders and neck blend in smoothly. Note that depending on the breed of horse, the tailhead and/or withers may still be easily seen.
- **6. Moderately Fleshy** The back will show a slight crease where fat has built up on either side of the backbone. There is a layer of fat over the ribs.
- **7. Fleshy** The crease down the back is even deeper and fat is felt between the ribs. Fat is easily felt along the neck and at the withers.
- **8. Fat** Looks like ribs are showing, but the cause is fat sticking out between the ribs. A deep crease along the back caused by fat buildup on either side. Withers and tailhead are obviously fat.
- **9. Extremely Fat** Obese, with bulging fat along backbone and forming in patches along sides and neck areas.

The majority of horses will be in the 4 to 6 group, with some hunter/jumper breeds scoring around a 7. Quarter horses and ponies may range in the 7 to 8 area, as should pregnant mares.

To arrive at a Henneke Body Score, a horse is measured in six different places, the six measurements are then added together and divided by six, to give a true and meaningful number that can be used in describing the condition with others. There is a vast difference between a "2.6" and a "1.8" body score, for instance.

Descriptions of Fat Deposition at Evaluation Sites										
Condition	Neck	Withers	Back/Loin	Tailhead	Ribs	Shoulder				
1 Poor	No fat tissue, bony extremely emaciated	No fat tissue, bony, sharp	Sharp, bony over spinous processes	Projects prominently	Project prominently	Skeletal structure is prominent				
very Thin	Faintly discernible Emaciated Animal	Faintly discernible	Transverse Processes are rounded, Spinous processes	Projects prominently	Ribs are prominent	Faintly discernible				

			prominent			
3 Thin	Neck is accentuated	Accentuated	Processes are prominent with slight covering	Prominent, hip rounded, but discernible	Easily seen & felt, ribs have slight cover	Shoulder is accentuated
4 Mod. Thin	Neck is thin, but not obviously so	Not obviously thin	Negative crease along back	Some fat may be felt	Faint outline discernible	Not obviously thin
5 Moderate	Neck blends smoothly into body	Rounded, not sharp	Level no +/- crease	Fat starting to feel spongy	Cannot be seen, but are easily felt	Blends smoothly into body
6 Mod. Fleshy	Neck blends into body, has minimal thickening	Rounded with some thickening	Level to slight crease	Fat covers area, fat starting to feel soft	Spongy fat, ribs can be felt	Fat starting to fill area behind shoulder
7 Fleshy	Slight thickening	Noticeable thickening	Positive crease likely	Well- covered & soft	Noticeable fill between ribs, smooth feel	Definite fullness behind shoulder
8 Fat	Crest present	Thick cover, well- rounded	Positive crease	Fat very soft	Thick cover, difficult to feel	Flush behind shoulder
9 Ext. Fat	Bulging fat, crest present	Thick cover, well- rounded	Obvious positive crease along top	Well- covered rounded	Patchy fat, thick cover	Well rounded, thick cover

On the Scene



Every state has different laws related to the care of equines, and the application of those laws varies greatly, even with each state. All the laws have one thing in common, however, and that is the definition of "cruelly treated." Laws require that animals be provided with adequate food, shelter and care to maintain them in a good state of health and within those parameters lays our ability to remove horses that are sick or injured and not receiving medical care and those that are starved and/or neglected. These actions are taken by law enforcement in most states. Your involvement will probably be limited to taking part in the actual seizure process by securing the horses and moving them to another facility.

Wither you are a member of an organization assisting law enforcement or the sole person removing one horse, many of these suggestions apply to your actions on the scene. Knowing your role and the role of others makes the highly stressful job of removing horses a lot easier.

Always plan ahead. When you know that a seizure will be taking place, you need to meet with all those involved, either through email or face-to-face, and plan out your actions. There are a lot of details to work out, and the time to plan is not when you pull up to the scene with a horse trailer.

For illustrative purposes, let's imagine that you are participating in a seizure involving one semi-



healthy stud, seven very thin mares and two nursing foals, with one dead horse in a small pen. We'll leave the legal documentation up to law enforcement, as that is a whole different action from your participation.

Prior to the arrival, your group needs to plan on exactly where the horses will go, who is doing the transportation, the photography and the documentation and who is actually catching, haltering and handling the horses. The job functions need to be very specific to insure that the response flows smoothly.

You will obviously need ten halters and lead ropes, preferably new as you do not want these horses exposed to viruses that may be on old halters. Mark these halters with numbers with a waterproof felt pen. These individual numbers will match your documentation throughout the process. The nursing mares and foals will need to travel together and the stud will need to be in a section of the trailer by himself. Even emaciated studs can cause problems so, although he might be upset at the loss of visual contact with his mares, for their safety and yours, he needs to be separated.



Your group will need at least two people to halter the horses and bring them to the area being used for documentation. One person will be in charge of the documentation process, including photos, with an assistant. Once the documentation is finished, one of the horse catchers will take the horse to the folks standing by at their trailers. When the trailer is loaded, the truck and trailer need to leave the area.

In this situation, only four people from your organization need to be on the property. Others may be crowded around, such as the owners, news reporters and neighbors. Do not ask them to help and do not get into conversations with them. If others are too close to your documentation area, ask politely for them to step away. If they fail to do so, ask a law enforcement officer to restrict them from your area. Too many people and too much excitement is not good for the horses and makes them hard to control.

Try to keep your group on one side of the horse rather than crowded around. When the person taking pictures is on one side, the person holding the horse and the person doing the documentation should be on the same side. This not only helps the horse, but it affords a measure of safety for you as well should the horse attempt to break for it.

Catch and document the horses so that the majority of them can be quickly removed. In this case, the two moms and their foals should be the first to go.

Depending on his ability to be handled, the stud may be the last to be loaded.



Photographs have proven themselves important in practically all situations. Either for court or simply as a record for you to look back on, it's very important that you take pictures of all the horses. The photographs should be taken before you load the horse in a trailer and another set upon arrival at your property. This provides a layer of protection for you by preventing anyone from saying that the horse did not look bad before you took

possession of it, or that you caused the cuts or wounds.

You will need large, white papers and a black marker for these pictures because, in each picture, you need to show either the name of the horse, or an identifying number, and the date. While this system should be used even if you are picking up one horse, it is vital if you are part of a group picking up a number of horses. Record the information on a notepad, have someone hold the paper so it can be seen in every picture, and take a photo of all four sides of the horse. On the picture of the rear, ask someone to pull up the tail, as often the anal cavity will be sunken in and you will need to document it. Take extra photos of any exceptional areas, such as long hooves, cuts, swollen legs, damaged eyes, and be certain to have the paper with the identifying number in the picture.

During a large seizure, try to determine if any of the horses have close mates. If you can keep these horses together, it helps by keeping them a lot calmer. At our ranch, there are times when we've brought in a large number of horses. We can identify those who are close because they are constantly calling out to one another. Stalling them together or close to one another always helps.



If law enforcement wants you to remove the dead horse at this scene for a possible necropsy, you need to make arrangements to have that done immediately. While not pleasant to think about, if the case can be built that the horse died of neglect, it's well worth the effort.

The goal at a seizure is to remove horses as quickly as possible. That's why an organized approach needs to be practiced before such a seizure actually takes place. Law enforcement must stay on the property with you during the entire process. Be completely professional at all times and make no comments to anyone other than law enforcement about the condition of the horses. Do not offer any opinions, do not condemn the owners nor get into a conversation with them. You are there to do a job, which is to catch the horses, document, load and leave.

Only one person within your organization should talk with the media. That person needs to be very careful about any statements made that might be brought up in court as prejudicial to the owner. The guilt or innocence is

determined by the court, not your organization. Once the decision is made to do a seizure, leave it to law enforcement to handle the details of the case.

Unless you are a veterinarian, do not make statements about a diagnosis of condition, wound or treatment plan even if you believe what you say is the truth. You might be confronted with such statements in court if you are called to testify. That large lump on the side of the horse that you loudly claimed was caused by the horse being hit with a pipe might turn out to be a tumor, so your theory of physical abuse will fall apart in court. Let law enforcement and a vet make statements about their condition.



One more thing, you will see some horrible scenes at some seizures, things that most people cannot even dream about in their worst nightmares. You are expected to keep all your emotions to yourself until you leave the property. Cops deal with a lot worse than what you are seeing and must follow the same rules, so respect them and be completely professional in all

you do. Save it until you are back in your truck; then you can explode. The last thing they want and you need is to have a member of your organization breaking down in tears. If that happens, they will probably never want to work with your organization again.

There have been numerous times when I've had to pull off the road somewhere after leaving a seizure, just to let the emotions explode. Cops do it too, so don't feel that they can handle it when you can't.

Returning to Your Facility

Each horse needs immediate access to clean water. Starvation and dehydration seem to go together. The lack of water can be determined by simply pulling the skin away from the body between your index finger and thumb. A slow return of the skin means the body is seriously depleted of water.

The next step is to call a veterinarian out as soon as possible, preferably as soon as the horse steps off the trailer. The vet will look at skin condition, such as lice and ticks, eyes, teeth, treat open wounds and swollen joints, take blood for lab work, fecal material to determine worm infestation and can advise you on the specifics of medical care for each individual horse. A detailed exam is vital to the recovery process. Make notes of the horses body temperature, pulse and respiration rate as given to you by the vet. Also make a note of heart murmurs and their severity, a common problem among starved horses.

Horses in the 1-2 body score range should not be given vaccinations. Their systems are far too weak for the additional stress.

Documentation is the key to rehabilitation, so document everything – the people who were there, instructions, vet's recommendations, height and weight of the horse, take plenty of pictures, including close-ups of wounds, swollen areas, hooves, marks or tattoos, and your own impression of the horse's attitude. What seems important on the first day fades as the days pass, and your documentation will serve as a reminder of what came through your gate on the first day.

When the intake work is finished, put them in their designated stall or paddock and ask others to leave them alone until they adjust to their new environment. Now comes the real work – starting them on the path to health.

Refeeding the Starved Horse

Over the course of the year, we've dealt with hundred of starved horses. The vast majority have been brought back to life through the use of a refeeding program designed specifically for equines and under the guidance of experienced veterinarians. We've lost a handful of them, some far too emaciated to recover, and some simply gave up on the will to live. The stories of those we've lost are heartbreaking, but the feeling of success comes from taking a very thin, neglected horse and changing it to a healthy, strong horse, ready to be adopted and start a new life.



Few people have actually seen a truly starved horse, but once you have, it is a memory that will be burned into you for as long as you live. In its last days, a starved horse truly looks like skin has been sprayed over its skeleton, with well defined hip bones, spinal processes and ribs just underneath the skin. Despite so many odds, the will to live often keeps the horse going far longer than it seems possible. We've seen

them eat fence post and rails, trees and dirt, just to stay alive a little longer.

There are any number of reasons why a horse might get into this condition, but the primary reason is either lack of knowledge or economic failure on the part of the person charged with caring for the horse. Help is available at every feed store and by a phone call to a vet, but we have repeatedly seen those who think that horses can manage for themselves in a grassless pasture or that they can go for weeks without food or hay is some dark stall. Starvation because of economic problems is also inexcusable, for if someone cannot properly feed or care for their horse they need to release it to someone better able to handle the financial burden. Horse care is not cheap, and while the thrill of owning a horse might sound wonderful, on the average it costs around \$200 per month to properly maintain it.

There are several serious medical reasons why a horse may become thin and those should be addresses by a vet. While a trip to a vet may be costly, it may also save the horse's life. A physical exam, including blood work, a fecal and a look at dental problems, may reveal an easily cured problem that will restore the horse to health in a very brief period if the advice of the vet is followed.

It's no secret, for instance, that horses get worms. We are seeing more and more cases when the normal worming medication is ineffective in the removal of the worms that can cause a horse to become thin. Worms can cause internal bleeding and even blockage in the intestines and unless corrected, can cause



the horse to die. A quick exam, called a "fecal" by a vet identifies the worm is causing the problem and the proper worming medication to kill that worm.

Starved horses should not be immediately wormed. Certain worming medications can cause a heavy die-off of worms and massive internal bleeding. In the case of a rescued horse, such worming needs to be done under the guidance of a vet, who will consider the condition of the horse, its age and the type of

worms involved.

What eventually kills the horse isn't what you see on the outside, it's the effects within the horse's system that brings a horrible, prolonged death. When access to feed and hay is denied, the body starts using both carbohydrates and fat to produce the necessary energy. These are naturally stored in a healthy horse, but can be depleted fairly rapidly and once gone, the system will turn to protein to keep it alive. It isn't specific, either, drawing protein from muscles, the heart, and all the other organs. That's when the real damage occurs.

Refeeding a starved horse requires knowledge of not only the systematic damage that has occurred to the animal, but a specific understanding of the requirements to slowly restore the horse to health. Done wrong, a well meaning

person can kill a horse by causing a "refeeding syndrome" – the effects of supplying too many concentrated calories to a system that cannot handle the load, and will cause either the heart, respiration or kidneys to fail, usually within a few days. The refeeding syndrome happens when caring people try to do something good, but without the proper knowledge, end up killing the horse they wanted to save.

Many studies have been done to research the best diet to bring a starved horse back to health. A number of those studies are available on the internet, with a detailed analysis of the effects of different feed combinations on insulin and electrolytes. In the process of refeeding the starved horse the balance of phosphorous and magnesium is extremely important. While a detailed study is educational, it's far better to know what works and to stick to a very specific guideline as recommended by the success stories in these studies.

The following guideline applies to all cases, with the exception of those horses with bad or missing teeth and we'll discuss them later.

Alfalfa is now available in all parts of the country, either in bales or in cubes. These studies showed that initial feedings of small quantities of alfalfa and high quality grass hay, fed many times over a day, should be the initial reintroduction of food. During the next ten days to two weeks, the quantity can be slowly increased and the frequency can be decreased until, at the end of that time period, the horse can eat as much hay as it wants. It is only then that small quantities of high quality feed can be introduced, gradually increasing until, at the end of a month, the feed intake should be about 1% of the normal weight of the horse you are rehabilitating. With a high quality feed from a major manufacturer, vitamin and mineral supplements are not needed and should be avoided because of the possibility of throwing off the calcium, phosphorous and magnesium balance. This even applies to healthy horses.

The amount of a 50/50 mix of alfalfa and quality grass hay can easily be figured by knowing that a horse needs 2.5% of its ideal body weight of the mixture every 24 hours. Do not base your calculations on the current weight, but on the ideal weight for the breed. As an example, let's use an ideal body weight of 1,000 pounds, which means that the horse should be receiving 25 pounds of the mixture per day. Because of its condition, we're going to start with half of that and divide it into six feedings, or a pound of hay and a pound of alfalfa per serving.

In a week, up the amount to $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of each six times a day. At the end of two weeks, the horse should be on ready to eat a full ration, being 2 pounds of each six times a day. At that point you can start decreasing the frequency, but increase the amount so that the 1,000 pound horse is still receiving 25 pounds of the hay/alfalfa mix each day. By the end of three months, you can reduce the number of feedings to three per day.



If the horse is to be pastured, only allow access for a brief period at a time until the digestive system can adjust to the grass intake. Unless the horse has poor teeth, decrease the hay intake by one pound for each hour in a pasture with high quality grass.

There will be a slight weight loss during the initial week, but weight should start building rather quickly. Initial weight gain is usually slow, with few noticeable

signs for about a month. Certainly the horse will be more responsive and may show signs of increased energy, but the restoration of fat and muscle tissue will be slow. Within two to three months, those that have not been around the horse will notice a big difference, but it may take up to nine months to restore a horse to its full normal weight. Photos are important during this time as a permanent record of the improvement because of the work you are doing. In the years to come, you will treasure those pictures and the memories they hold.

Once again, it's extremely important to note that a starved horse may not be able to handle any vaccines, including certain medications. Normal vaccines should not be given until the horse is healthy enough to handle them, nor should worming medications be given except under the guidance of a vet.

Starved horses should not be pastured with healthy horses, but should be individually stalled until they return to a better state of health. They are easily susceptible to diseases that a normal horse can fight off and they are not able to compete with other horses for feed or hay. In addition, stronger horses may become too aggressive and injure the weaker horse.



Medical Issues

Hoof care is often a very big issue with rescued horses. The major reason for the lack of proper hoof care exist side-by-side with the reason for the original cause of starvation – lack of knowledge or finances. The pain factor can be devastating to a thin horse

attempting to regain his health while dealing with cracked hoof walls, abscesses, founder, and excessive hoof growth. While a vet can attend to other medical problems, a farrier will be needed to slowly readjust the hoof to its proper form.

Dental problems are very common in starved horses, since the owner probably seldom if ever took the horse to a vet. Starved horses should not be sedated, so the repair of dental problems



added to the mixture.

Once the horse has gained enough weight, it is very important that it receive a dental exam. The teeth need to have good occlusion in order to chew hay to the point where it can be ingested and the nutrients withdrawn in the digestive system.

Cushinoid Disease, commonly called "Cushing's" is another problem that may might need to be delayed until the horse is stronger. Should the starved horse have bad or missing teeth and cannot eat hay, you will see "hay balls," wet globs of hay that have fallen from his mouth. In such cases, water soaked alfalfa and hay cubes will provide the answer. Fed in the same proportion as given above, the cubes are soaked in water (warmed in winter) until they form a mash with a consistence of oatmeal. Later, a high quality pelleted feed, again from a major manufacturer, can be



cause weight loss. It also causes long hair coat, even in hot weather, excessive water intake, urination and founder. It's caused by a dysfunction of the pituitary glands and such cases need a special diet. The initial vet exam, plus

blood work, will give your vet a true indication that this may be an issue. Chronic kidney disease will also have the same indicators and only blood work can show the true difference.

Horses suffering from chronic pain from founder, abscesses, arthritis or any of a number of reasons, will stop eating, just as humans often do. These problems need to be addressed by a veterinarian well versed in the factors involved in rehabilitation. Again, the initial vet exam should include blood work to determine if specific medical reasons exist for the starvation.

The cause of weight loss always represents the basic fact that far too few calories are being consumed. The problems that cause this, from the lack of education or financial resources on the part of the owner, or a specific medical issue, still needs to be handled in such a way that the dietary imbalances are corrected and more calories are given and used by the horse.

Retraining

When the horse finally has a body score of 3 to 4, it's time to start a true evaluation of its training. Once the effects of starvation have declined and the horse is feeling better, both physically and mentally, you will know only a



couple of things about its true talent – that it's calm or it's wild. Starvation can have a powerful effect on the mental health of horses. They can be either be very forgiving and place full trust in those that have healed them, or they can carry the distrust of humans around for the rest of their lives.

Normally, we have no knowledge of the occurrences in a horse's life before they came through our gates.

We're taken in horses that have had a lot of excellent training in hunter/jumper skills, barrel racers, cutting horses and those who are easy riders on the trail. How they end up in the situations they do is a mystery, but the fact remains that until the evaluation starts, the skills are completely unknown, and might remain unknown until a skilled trainer puts them through a few paces.

Prior to any introduction of physical exercise, it's best to have a vet do a brief exam to determine any lingering effects of the starvation, such as heart murmurs. Sudden exercise in horses, just as in humans, can cause death, so take it slow and easy, just as you would if you had been through the same experience yourself. A few turns in the round pen should be enough the first few days, slowly increasing the exercise time as the days pass.



To start, look for the obvious signs. It he easy to halter or does he toss his head and avoid you at all cost? He might be trained, but if he had ear problems when you brought him in, such as mites or ticks, he could be trained but scared of more pain. If he lowers his head for you when you approach with a halter, you know he has something going for him. Are there signs of aggression, like trying to swing his butt to you, ears penned back? That could mean that either there is little to no training, or he was treated very harshly before he came to you. Does

the horse stand still when you approach, or turn to constantly keep an eye on you? Does he try to escape? Is he better with a woman than a man?

The variations are endless, but by watching very closely you'll notice the signs of previous training that will tell you what to expect when the horse has a saddle on his back.

That first ride is a big day, and I hope you realize that you need someone very experienced with riding to take the first trip. One horse that we rehabilitated at the ranch acted totally at ease as we slipped on the saddle. Nothing happened when we tightened the girth and he was as calm as could be when he was mounted. We walked him first, someone holding the lead rope, as the person in the saddle tried neck reining. He seemed to understand and respond to the pressure, so we unclipped the lead rope. One little click sound from the rider and the horse went ballistic, throwing the rider far over his head. The final analysis was that the horse was untrained, but trusted us enough to saddle and mount. When the lead rope was unhooked and the person in front of the horse walked away, there was suddenly the realization that a monster was on his back. Again, you never know.

One hard, fast rule we have at the ranch is that under no circumstances will there ever be any screaming, angry outburst, nor will a horse ever be struck in anger. When you get to the point that anger and frustration become that strong, it's time to walk away. Gentle training is the only acceptable method we use, and it's proven itself time and again. The days of beating as a training method are long over, but it still exists in those who refuse to change or recognize the difference. The senseless feeling of power over a living creature is slowly being replaced by the feeling of mutual respect born out of gentle training.

Two More Important Items

Finding the proper veterinarian is especially important. Many are very easy to work with, while others have a difficult time communicating. Even more important is their sensitivity to what you are attempting to do – bring a very thin, neglected horse back to health. A very quick answer for a few vets is simply to put the horse down and, "Put it out of its misery." That isn't the goal here, nor should it be the goal of a vet. As we depend on the advice and medical expertise of



our vet, we need to make certain that our goals match and that our vet can see beyond today and look towards the possibilities that the horse holds once he has recovered. Don't be afraid to find another vet if all you hear from your current vet are negative comments.

There are times, however, when even the best vet will look at you seriously and say that you've done all you can. None of us have the ability to heal everything, no matter how hard we try. When there is no cure medically possible, when there is no possibility for relief of the pain, when a possible cure is beyond your financial capabilities, it's time to hold the horse tight and say goodbye.

Over the years, I've held over a hundred horses as they closed their eyes to this world. Each one has been harder than the one before and the first was the hardest thing I have ever done. If it ever became easy, it would be time for me to walk away from this business, but the reality is simply that we should never hang on to a suffering animal for our own selfish reasons. We tried, and that's far more than most people would do. There are others, just like the one that slipped away, that need your help. Certainly the tears will fall, but the need for the skills you have, and the love you hold, will draw you to another horse very soon.

Graduation!

Perhaps it's only been three months or maybe as long as a year, but your once starved, neglected horse is fat and healthy and someone, somewhere, is looking for a horse just like the one in your pasture. You rehabilitated horse might be a highly trained show horse or a companion only horse, but you've done all you can to bring it into top condition. It's time for him to move on to a forever home so you can make room for the next skinny guy waiting just beyond your gate.

Most rescue organizations have very strict guidelines for adoption, and there are compelling reasons for them. Experience has proven time and again that you will never find a con man that you don't like, and many of those folks are

after your perfect horse. Promises are cheap, and all the talk in the world will not prevent your horse from slipping back into the hands of those who place no value in the animal you brought back to health.

Legal adoption contracts are vital. They should be very specific about what you expect and what obligation the adopter must fulfill before you will release the horse to him. Some rescue organizations state that the adopter can never sell, give away or move the horse. Others set a specific time limit, usually more than two years, before full title is given away.

You will want to do a background check on the potential adopter. I strongly recommend that you not adopt to someone who has any criminal history of abuse, assault or physical violence or who, in the past ten years, been found guilty of any form of theft. Visit their property where they intend to keep the horse. Would you want the horse to be there? Is there proper shelter? Do they know a vet? A farrier? Do they truly know what it takes to keep a horse?

The dollar value of your horse is a difficult subject. After nine months, you have probably invested over \$1,500 in feed, hay, vet bills, medications and farrier work, but you know that realistically you will never get back your investment, with the exception of a highly trained horse. Check on the website of other rescues and try to match what they are asking for the same type and quality of

horse. That will give you the best indication of your adoption fee.

Many folks will try to talk you down in the adoption fee. Don't listen to them, and raise an eyebrow if that is the attitude they take on acquiring a horse. You've put your heart and soul into the recovery process, plus your finances. If you decide that



your horse is worth \$800, stay with it. For that price, they will never find a horse that has been totally evaluated, received all its vaccines and had all of its medical issues attended to. Whatever you do, never give the horse away to anyone. The value so many place in the animals they own is reflected in what they pay for it.

Check the horse at the new home every few months. Make certain they are treating it correctly. If there is a problem, educate them as much as possible. That's one of the primary reasons for a legal adoption contract. If they refuse to follow your advice, under your contract, you should have every right to pick the horse up. The goal is to never let the horse sink back into the condition it once was, but to continue to be loved and respected for all it represents.

Conclusion

Over the last ten years, Habitat for Horses has returned over a thousand horses to a state of health at both the ranch and through our system of foster homes spread over six states. Most of these horses have been adopted into forever homes and are enjoying their new life. Sadly, our Investigations Division brings more in with each passing day and the process starts all over again. It's a job we are committed to and we'll continue to do it as long as there is a horse in need. This organization is but one of many working for the same goal.

As you have read, there is a substantial amount of knowledge required to effectively return a thin horse to a state of health. It's a passion for those who do it, and this country is filled with organizations, rescues and individuals who actively seek out an opportunity to show their devotion to these animals. It is a skill, and in many ways an art, that is born within the heart and soul of those who care enough to take what others might have thrown away and return it to a thing of beauty. Your reward comes neither from the dollars spent nor the hours invested, but from a soft nicker of one of the noblest creatures to ever walk the face of the earth.