

DRESSAGE TODAY

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EXTRA

Tips to
Break 70
Percent

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MYTHS

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FEED GREATNESS®

BREAKING 70 PERCENT

These exercises add quality to test movements so you can take calculated risks that pay off in competition.

By Shawna Harding with Hilary Moore • Photos by Susan J. Stickle

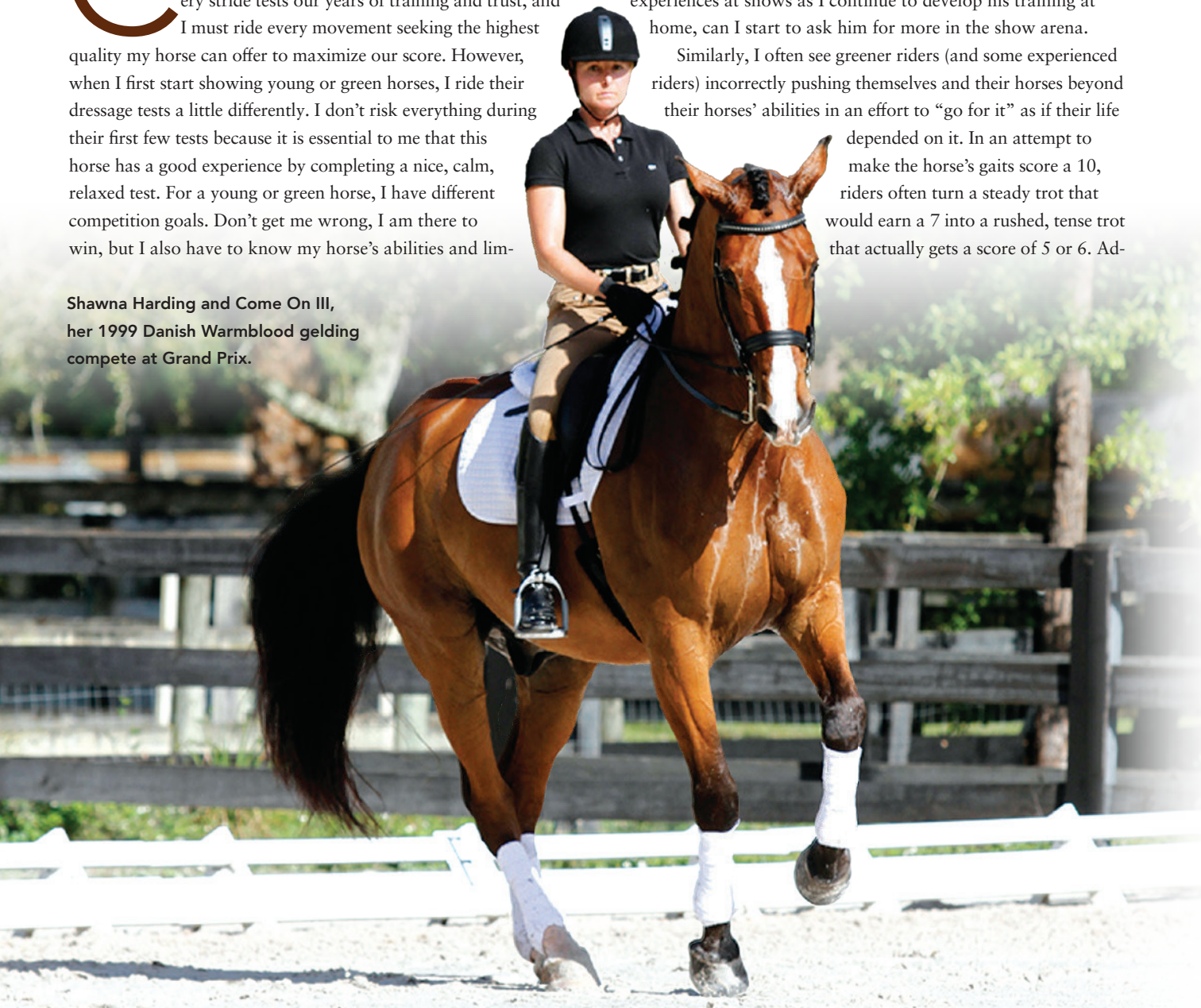
Coming down centerline during an international competition, I have to be very focused and secure in what I'm asking of my horse to push him to his limit. Every stride tests our years of training and trust, and I must ride every movement seeking the highest quality my horse can offer to maximize our score. However, when I first start showing young or green horses, I ride their dressage tests a little differently. I don't risk everything during their first few tests because it is essential to me that this horse has a good experience by completing a nice, calm, relaxed test. For a young or green horse, I have different competition goals. Don't get me wrong, I am there to win, but I also have to know my horse's abilities and lim-

itations at that time. Pushing too much too soon and overfacing him at this level usually leads to negative experiences in the ring with lower test scores. Only as a horse continues to have positive experiences at shows as I continue to develop his training at home, can I start to ask him for more in the show arena.

Similarly, I often see greener riders (and some experienced riders) incorrectly pushing themselves and their horses beyond their horses' abilities in an effort to "go for it" as if their life

depended on it. In an attempt to make the horse's gaits score a 10, riders often turn a steady trot that would earn a 7 into a rushed, tense trot that actually gets a score of 5 or 6. Ad-

Shawna Harding and Come On III, her 1999 Danish Warmblood gelding compete at Grand Prix.



ditionally, if the rider cannot follow the bigger, faster trot, this can drop their rider score from a 7 to a 5. Instead of earning more points and turning their 65 percent into a 75, the rider earns a 58 percent with a major loss of the basics throughout the test.

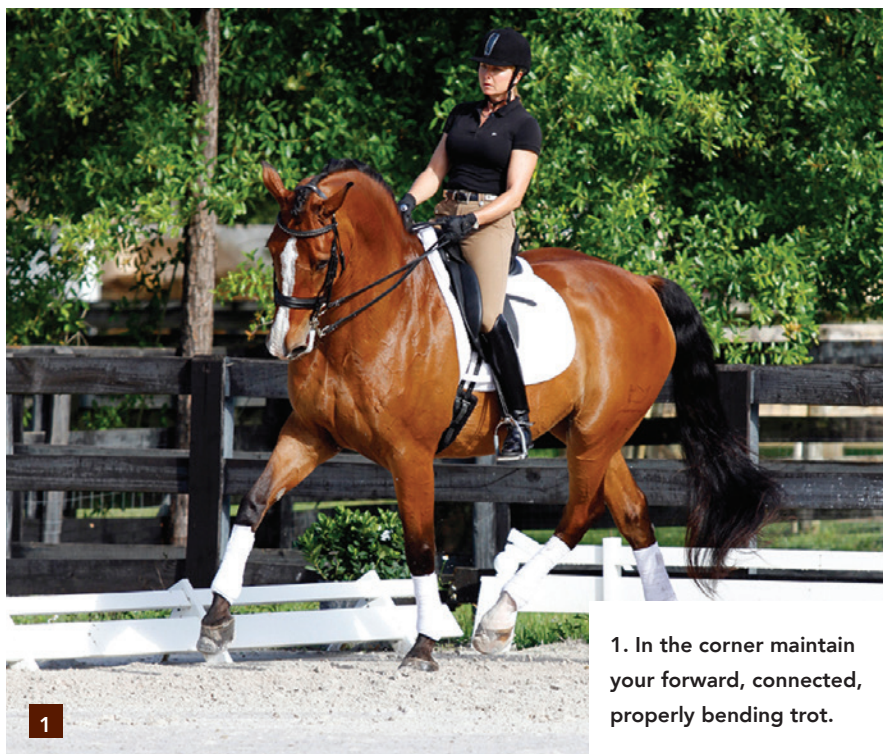
The riders who actually break 70 percent are the ones who build upon that steady test by developing better quality and taking calculated risks they have built into their training program at home. Instead of pushing themselves and their horses beyond their abilities, they first confirm that they are able to ride each movement of their test in a basic gait in a correct way. That's when you can start to increase the expression and the quality of the gait.

In this article, I will walk you through exercises I do with my own horses that systematically improve their dressage scores. The key is to confirm your basics so you can guarantee yourself a satisfactory note on the movement. Then build in exercises to develop the ability of both you and your horse to ride for more with calculated risks. This increases your chances of success and decreases your chances of earning a 5 or lower. Before we begin, I always like to say that riding is a science, but it isn't an exact science. I hope you will take these examples of my method and apply the theory to your own riding in a way that complements your current program.

Step One: Develop Your Baseline

The rider's position is essential to the alignment of the horse and the quality of every movement. As you go through your ride, remember that you have to be in control of your body in order to influence your horse. There are a lot of people who get disillusioned in their riding and the answer to their problems often comes back to their need to focus on improving their equitation. I believe that what makes Steffen Peters great is that his position doesn't change. I am always reviewing my videos and those of other top riders to make sure I don't need to make corrections in my position. Watch your videos

Ride for a 6



1. In the corner maintain your forward, connected, properly bending trot.



2. Ride a conservative shoulder-in, being careful to keep your trot steady and consistent.

Ride for a 7 or 8



and compare yourself to the best.

With that in mind, let us begin with your warm-up. Hubertus Schmidt said it best, “You warm up as little as possible but as long as necessary.” The goals I have for the warm-up are having a plan to get my horse relaxed but responsive to my aids and establishing a fundamental base gait. Ride your horse in walk, trot and canter in a forward way that is into the connection with straightness and evenness between both your legs and both your hands. Note your horse’s base walk, trot and canter. It should be forward without rushing, relaxed with energy and responsive to your aids. As you begin, keep your baseline in mind so that you are warming up a horse that is correctly forward, balanced and straight (bending properly on a circle/bending line). Pay attention to his submission—how he responds to your leg, seat and hands from your secure position. This is a big deal to me. You have to be totally in control of your position and your aids. If you skip these basics, your dressage training and tests will be without a plan and erratic.

As you start, gauge how much you push. If you can’t keep up with a trot that is too big, start with one that is smaller but still swinging and responsive, and build from there. I would prefer to see someone ride a steady, controlled warm-up (and dressage test) than one that is not in control and is herky-jerky.

Step Two: Ride for a 6

When you have confirmed your horse’s base gaits, you can move on to incorporating basic test movements. The goal is to maintain his base gaits with the same

quality as you train each movement. Try this basic shoulder-in as an example of riding for a 6 (see photos p. 4):

1. Pick up your base trot.

2. Prepare to ride a small shoulder-in: Start through the corner onto your line and apply pressure with your inside sitting bone to your outside rein with a small, suppling inside bending rein. Keep your inside leg close to the girth and your outside leg connected. It is important that you maintain your base trot and the swing in your seat keeping your horse even underneath you as he steps his hind leg up and under his body to your outside connection.

3. After riding a few strides of shoulder-in in your base trot, make sure you haven’t slowed down or sped up and that he feels balanced underneath you.

4. Repeat on the next long side, confirming you can maintain your base trot.

5. If your horse loses the base trot, straighten him and ride a few strides to get it back and then ask for shoulder-in again.

As your horse is able to maintain the shoulder-in in the base trot, you can incorporate different movements on the long side with several strides of travers (haunches-in), renvers (haunches-out) and trot–walk transitions. When he can maintain that base trot throughout, you know you’re ready to start to challenge him a little more and start building his gaits.

Step Three: Ride for a 7 or 8

Train intermediate elements that will increase your horse’s ability in a way that will let you go for it a little more in the

1. On the long side, develop a steady, conservative shoulder-in.
2. Straighten your horse out of shoulder-in, preparing for the transition to a lengthening or an extension.
3. Ask for several strides of extended trot or lengthening. On the next long side, you can repeat the same sequence, asking for more angle, bend and ground cover in the shoulder-in. Next, try replacing the extended trot portion with travers or ride quick transitions to walk or straightening before returning to the shoulder-in.

Ride for a 10



1. Work in passage for a few strides on the long side.



2. Work a few strides of piaffe before transitioning to shoulder-in.



3. Go for it in the best shoulder-in you can get.

test and know you can earn an extra point or more without losing quality and getting flat in the movement. Try this exercise:

1. Pick up your base trot.
2. Out of the corner, ride a conservative shoulder-in with your base trot.
3. After riding several strides of shoulder-in, transition to walk for three strides and return to trot. Maintain your balanced shoulder-in throughout the transitions and the activity in the hind leg. Again, if you cannot maintain your base trot–walk–trot in the shoulder-in, ride straight for a few strides to get your horse's gait quality back and return to your exercise.

4. On the next long side, ride shoulder-in and replace the walk transition with several strides of travers. Return to shoulder-in for several strides and then straighten before the corner.

As you are able to transition between the shoulder-in and other movements, try replacing the walk and travers with renvers. The key is that you can maintain your base trot throughout the exercises. Try doing a long side of travers–renvers–travers. Or to check if he is enough in front of your leg, incorporate a few quick collected trot–extended trot–collected trot transitions. It is worth noting that I prefer not to do so many transitions into travers, so I work the travers to renvers instead.

Step Four: Ride for a 10

For those horse-and-rider combinations that are ready to ride for a 10, I suggest playing with a full spectrum of movements in a controlled but quick combination as long as

you are able to maintain your base gaits where appropriate. The sequence I am about to suggest will increase your ability to push without taking unnecessary risk:

1. Work passage for a few strides on the long side. Once you are comfortable with your passage, stay in a passage-y, lofty trot through the corner.

2. On the next long side, push forward into shoulder-in.

3. After several steps of shoulder-in, ride a few steps of piaffe in shoulder-in and transition back to passage or a more forward lofty trot.

4. Straighten before the corner, and down the next long side, ride quick transitions between trot and one to three meters of piaffe and back to trot.

As you develop your horse at this advanced level, you will notice that your base trot (that you have noted in your warm-up) is different from the base trot you were getting when your horse was working only shoulder-in. As long as you are maintaining quality in your gaits, working these exercises will only improve your horse's adjustability and create more lift, loft and quickness in his hind leg. These fun strengthening exercises will keep him sharp and improve his gaits and dressage scores. You will progress from a horse that can perform a steady, conservative movement that receives a score of 6 to an agile, supple, correctly moving horse that is off your aids in a way that makes him capable of effortlessly transitioning between movements for an easy 7 or higher. Through correct training, you will be able to make calculated risks that consistently and predictably improve your scores as a result of a structured training program. 🏆

Shawna Harding is a United States Dressage Federation (USDF) gold medalist who spent eight years working, riding and competing in Europe, including two years training with the late Reiner Klimke. She has accumulated numerous achievements through Grand Prix. In 2011, she and Come On III placed third in the Special at the World Dressage Masters 5* and in the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) National Grand Prix Championships. The pair also competed that year at the World Cup Final in Leipzig, Germany, and the World Dressage Masters. Harding is based in Aiken, South Carolina.



A photograph of two riders on horseback in a snowy forest. The rider on the left is on a brown horse, and the rider on the right is on a black horse. Both are wearing dark winter clothing and helmets. The background is a misty, snow-covered forest with bare trees.

FROM THE DRESSAGE TODAY ARCHIVES

Baby, It's Cold Outside!

Answers to frequently-asked winter horse-care questions.

By Jennifer M. Keeler

Ah, winter: a season of refreshingly crisp days that are so short that it's almost impossible to leave work in time to arrive at the barn before darkness falls. Unless you're one of the lucky riders who gets to escape to Florida for several months, your priority now becomes figuring out how many layers you can possibly wear while still being able to pull on riding boots. But what about your horse—how can you also help him adapt to the frozen landscape that is now your farm? *Dressage Today* asked a few professionals to give us their advice when it comes to weathering the winter. Here's what they had to say:

"If I'm cold, my horse must be cold."

Not necessarily. Millions of years of evolution have provided horses with a digestive system that generates body heat as well as a natural thermal blanket: their hair coat. As the fall season approaches, a horse's coat increases both in length and density and also has the ability to fluff out in cold weather, trapping a layer of air in the coat, which provides

an extra layer of insulation. Dr. Tim Strathman knows cold. Prior to joining Equine Medical Associates in relatively temperate Lexington, Kentucky, he formerly practiced veterinary medicine in northern Illinois for three decades. "Horses have a tremendous ability to acclimate to their environment when given the opportunity," he said. "Unfortunately, many of the things people do with show and sport horses interfere with that opportunity to acclimate, such as locking them up in barns, clipping and blanketing, feed routines, etc. All of these things can contribute to potential health issues."

Strathman explained that for most horses, if the basic requirements for adequate food, water and a shelter option are provided, they are often happier and healthier outside even in harsh winter conditions. "Here in Kentucky, you will see bands of broodmares outside in all weather and the horses are better for it. You'll occasionally see a blanket on one, but usually it's a special-needs case," he noted. "Even when they have access to large run-in sheds, more often than not they choose to stand outside, even when it's 20 degrees below zero. That's

what they naturally choose as being best for them."

"To blanket or not to blanket"—that is the question. Want to start a firestorm on Internet chat rooms? Ask whether or not you should blanket your horse. While opinions vary widely, the bottom line is to figure out what is best for your horse and his situation.

In the most general sense, several scenarios where blanketing should be considered include: if a horse is bodyclipped; isn't acclimated to a cold environment (such as shipped north from a warmer climate); is underweight, unhealthy or a senior and/or if the weather will cause the horse to become wet and no shelter is available.

"If possible and if a horse is only ridden occasionally, I personally feel they're better off growing hair," said Strathman. "On the other hand, you're limited by your expectations for the horse. If the horse is regularly worked in cold weather, there is a distinct advantage to him having a short hair coat. It's not healthy for a hairy horse to be standing around wet with sweat in cold weather, taking hours to dry."

But Strathman emphasized that



While some owners choose to pull shoes during the winter months, there are horses who may need the support or protection of their regular shoeing regimen regardless of season.

Ariad Bronkhorst - armd.nl

putting a blanket on a horse with the best of intentions can backfire. “By far the biggest mistake I see people make is not taking their horses’ blankets off to look at them,” he explained. “It’s one thing if they’re in a regular training program where the blankets are removed each day for riding. People may mean well, but when they put a blanket on the horse for weeks or even months at a time, yet don’t ride that often due to the weather, bad things can happen. I’ve seen pressure sores from poor-fitting blankets, nasty skin conditions, even marked changes in body weight that go unnoticed because the caretaker doesn’t see the horse—they only see the blanket.”

With or without a blanket, skin conditions can be a painful annoyance for your horse in the wet winter months. “We often see dermatitis issues, rainrot and scratches during that time of year, including on horses with long hair coats who are outside and aren’t groomed regularly,” Strathman added. “It’s just something that needs to be monitored. I don’t think it’s

something you can necessarily anticipate or prevent, but it illustrates the importance of regular grooming and careful observation of your horse regardless of season.”

“It’s really cold outside—I’d better give my horse an extra scoop of grain.” While digestion of food is a primary source of warmth for horses, increased caloric needs don’t necessarily mean owners should blindly throw extra grain in the feed tub. “First of all, the amount of food a horse needs in winter depends in part on his housing situation,” noted Strathman. “Horses who are left outside in a cold environment will certainly benefit from carrying a little more weight and having more food, primarily in roughage form. One of the biggest mistakes I see people make is simply not providing enough hay when it’s cold. But for many show horses kept inside, their environment doesn’t change so much, so they don’t necessarily need big dietary adjustments for winter.”

Instead of blindly “up feeding” in winter, Eric Haydt, former senior vice

president of business development at an equine nutrition company, explained that careful monitoring of body condition and making corresponding feed adjustments is most important. “Depending on how far north you live, horses will need to expend more energy staying warm. Obviously, the colder it is, the more calories the horse will need, which is generally about 15 to 20 percent more calories below approximately 30 degrees Fahrenheit.”

Haydt explained that while hard keepers may benefit from some alfalfa in the diet, most horses do well throughout the winter on a good grass hay, and added that even seemingly dead winter pasture provides some calories. “Generally, I think the best way to adjust for winter feeding is to adjust the amounts of what you are currently feeding in both hay and feed, but not necessarily change feeds,” Haydt continued. “But if you are using a ration-balancer-type of feed in the summer and need more calories in the winter, then switching or adding another feed may be necessary.”

Adding a flaxseed-type oil to a horse’s diet, Haydt noted, will provide calories and omega-3 fatty acids that are lost by

not having access to green grass. But using more supplements just because it's cold won't necessarily serve a purpose. "You can often avoid supplements just by feeding more, often just in hay, which is usually also a less expensive option," he said.

Haydt also advised that senior horses may have special dietary needs in winter. "Because of longer hair coats, horses can lose weight through the winter without the owner really noticing until they shed in spring, and this seems especially true with senior horses," he explained. "Fall may be a good time to switch older horses to senior diets especially if you notice them starting to have trouble eating hay, and, as noted earlier, blanketing senior horses in winter to help conserve body heat and expend fewer calories keeping warm may be a good idea."

"My horse will drink more if given warm water instead of cold."

Some studies have shown that horses will drink more volume of water if it is a lukewarm temperature versus cold. "It's all about what they are used to," said Strathman. "When people have heated waterers in their barns, that's what horses learn to like. It sounds like a no-brainer, but the single most important factor is don't let water freeze. Horses must have ready access to ice-free water all the time."

Strathman cautioned that horse owners may not realize the impact of the transition from summertime nutrition, where a horse will typically have regular access to grass (which has a high percentage of water), to winter's dry forage-only diet. "This is where I sometimes see people underestimate their horses' additional need for water consumption because literally everything they eat is now dry and it can cause major problems like impaction colic," he explained.

But in the pursuit of maintaining a horse's water supply in frigid temperatures, utmost caution must be taken with auxiliary heat sources. "It goes without saying that horses and electricity don't

mix well," Strathman noted. "Heated water buckets are a common sight around barns in winter, but people often don't do enough to conceal the cord and horses can't seem to resist chewing on them. Ground-fault circuit interrupter [GFCI] outlets are always a good idea." (GFCI outlets protect people and animals from electrical shock. For instance, if a horse chews on the cord, hopefully the outlet will trip to stop electricity from flowing before it electrocutes the horse.)

"I don't think my horse is drinking enough—I'm going to give him a bran mash." Hang on to that feed tub! While the thought of feeding your horse a nice warm bran mash may seem like a great idea, it probably won't help much in actually getting any quantity of water into your horse's gut or have any real nutritional benefits.

One of the biggest mistakes I see people make: not providing enough hay when it's cold.
—Dr. Tim Strathman

Since the amount of moisture even in a soupy bran mash is a drop in the bucket compared to your horse's daily requirement, the only real benefit may be in making you feel better about doing something to help your horse cope with cold weather. "It will help to get some additional water in horses, but it doesn't add much to the total volume of water intake a horse needs—most people who feed a bran mash typically don't feed enough to make a difference either with water intake or nutritionally," said Haydt. "In fact, wheat bran has a reverse calcium to phosphorous ratio and in larger amounts can have a negative nutritional effect by unbalancing the horse's diet. So in my opinion, concentrating on maintaining normal water consumption is more important than warm mashes."

Strathman agreed. "I honestly don't feel that bran mashes have any value regarding

water consumption. If you are concerned and want to get more water in the horse, I've found the best way to deal with it is to soak the hay," he explained. "Fill a hay bag, submerge it in a clean muck bucket of water and leave it for 30 minutes before hanging up. Then the horse is eating wet hay, and I've seen much better results with this than any bran mash."

"It's chilly in here—better close up the barn so the horses stay warm." While keeping the barn doors and windows wide open may be unbearably drafty in the winter months, closing the barn up tight can be just as miserable for your horse as adequate ventilation and fresh air are critical to his health.

International Grand Prix rider Jennifer Hoffmann noted that one of her bigger challenges in winter is keeping a balance of good airflow and climate control in

the stable. "With a busy competition schedule, even through the winter on the indoor circuit, I have to try to make sure none of my horses catch a cold or start coughing," Hoffmann explained. "Instead of

closing up the barn and having the air get stagnant, I like to keep windows open at night and blanket the horses rather heavily with multiple blankets. This allows us to keep the stable temperature cooler and therefore the air is much better," she added. "But during the day when we are working, I do tend to close the windows after the stable has been bedded and all sweeping is finished, as it's more comfortable for people working inside and also to avoid drafts when horses are coming in sweaty from work."

"Winter's here—time to either pull my horse's shoes or break out the borium." As with most aspects of equine health, making dramatic seasonal changes to your horse's hoof situation can be more detrimental than helpful.

As the days get colder and the athletic demands for horses often decrease, many owners recognize a time-honored



Courtesy, Jennifer Hoffmann

International Grand Prix competitor Jennifer Hoffmann lived and trained in Germany, where winters can be cold and windy. But she stills rides out when she can, and she is sure to use a quarter sheet on the horses who are clipped.

tradition of pulling shoes for the winter. But Central Kentucky farrier Donny Brandenburg noted that this practice isn't a one-size-fits-all situation. "It all depends on the individual horse," he said. "If they can be sound and comfortable without shoes for the appropriate level of activity during the winter, it never hurts to give them a break. But some horses may need the support or protection of their regular shoeing regimen regardless of season."

Strathman agreed. "I have had cases where people ride all summer and then ask their farrier to pull the shoes and trim them up to turn out for the winter, and then call me wondering why the horse is hobbling around," he said. "If you are going to pull shoes, I recommend not trimming them—leave the feet a little long so the horse can adjust before having your farrier come back to trim. It's an easy way to avoid any possible problems."

Horses continuing their athletic endeavors in the winter may need additional traction and snow protection, but again Brandenburg advised owners to beware of too much of a good thing. "Adding borium to shoes is great for grip on ice and snow, but it can easily be too much traction and over time place unnecessary stress on soft tissues," he cautioned. "More often I recommend using small tungsten drive-in studs on the shoes. I also use snow pads—both the rim and full-coverage types—and have found that they do help keep snow from accumulating into balls inside the bottom of the hoof."

"Am I doomed to endless rounds in the indoor?" It's time to think outside the box. Having lived in Germany from 1989 to 2000 and then again from 2010 to 2018, Hoffmann knows firsthand the challenges of trying to keep her Grand Prix mounts fit

and fresh for competition during the wet and cold European winters. One of her secrets is simply braving the elements.

"We had an amazing facility in Dorsten with super footing in multiple different types of arenas, so we would always make sure to ride the horses outside as long as it was not pouring rain or the ground was frozen," Hoffmann explained. "We also had a huge jumping arena that had a roof but was open on the sides so you could get the feeling of being outside. Even when it was cold, we would go out for walks in the forest and on the racetrack and all of our horses still got turned out, even in the snow. It is absolutely awful for me to be closed up in an indoor for all the winter months and I know my horses feel the same."

Hoffmann also utilized some additional tools to keep her horses in peak form even when the weather outside was frightful. "If it was very cold or windy, we always put quarter sheets on our horses who were clipped and sometimes our warm-up routine would be a little longer than normal," she said. "I had an amazing magnetic blanket that I used on some of my horses—some wore it before riding, some after. It all depends on each horse's individual needs."

"We also used our solarium [which includes a blow-dryer-like system] a lot in the winter," Hoffmann continued. "Some horses were put under it for 10 minutes before riding and almost all of them spent time there after riding. Last but not least, I made sure all my horses went back into their stalls completely dry and groomed with their stable blankets on."

In summary, winter horse care is mostly a matter of common sense and good horsemanship. "It's important to remember to try to treat horses like horses," Strathman concluded. "Within the limitations of athletic demands, allow them to live a little more naturally if and when possible, as this can prevent a lot of man-made problems that we unintentionally create." 🐾