





KATRIEN VAN MIERT

HORSE essentials

Insights from top stables on

CARING FOR AND
MANAGING HORSES

Lannoo

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What we would like to share

What moves me most about horses is their authenticity. They show themselves as they are. They respond to what you do, how you care for them, and the attention you give them. They clearly let you know when something feels right and when it does not, and in doing so, they also hold a mirror up to you. In return for that authenticity, horses ask that we truly learn to observe and continue to expand our equestrian knowledge, no matter how experienced we are.

Both my professional and private life revolve around horses. That has taken me to all sorts of stables over the years, in different countries and at every level of the sport. I meet children who have just got their first pony, families who care for their horses together, recreational riders, and professionals who perform at the highest level. Everywhere I feel that same love for horses, but at the same time, I notice how knowledge and experience are passed on differently.

Sometimes it seems as if we are losing sight of what really matters, and not because we love horses any less. On the contrary, it is because good horse care is increasingly drowning in a flood of opinions, trends, and random tips. That is why this book came about. We want to help prevent valuable horse knowledge from being lost by gathering it, expanding it, and sharing it.

IF YOU NURTURE SOMETHING, IT WILL GROW.

You cannot expect a horse to give its best when you only start to pay attention to it once your feet are in the stirrups. Taking good care of your horse starts with simple, daily actions. Checking how your horse is doing before you start your daily tasks. Feeling its legs, scraping its hooves, ensuring light, fresh air, exercise, and a rhythm that suits your horse. Noticing if it looks at you differently, eats less eagerly, or does not react as usual, and knowing how to respond to that.

This book brings together insights from seasoned horse people, including some of the best riders, grooms, and experts in international equestrian sport. They may not have a ready-made answer to every question, but their strength lies in observing, feeling, comparing, and continuing to learn. At the same time, they possess an enormous wealth of knowledge and experience.

Horse Essentials brings that wealth together for everyone who wants to take the best possible care of horses. Our love for horses is then not only evident, but is reflected every day in the care we give them.

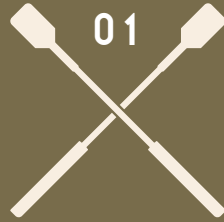
Thomas Tuytens

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HORSE ESSENTIALS



DAILY MANAGEMENT



A day at the stables

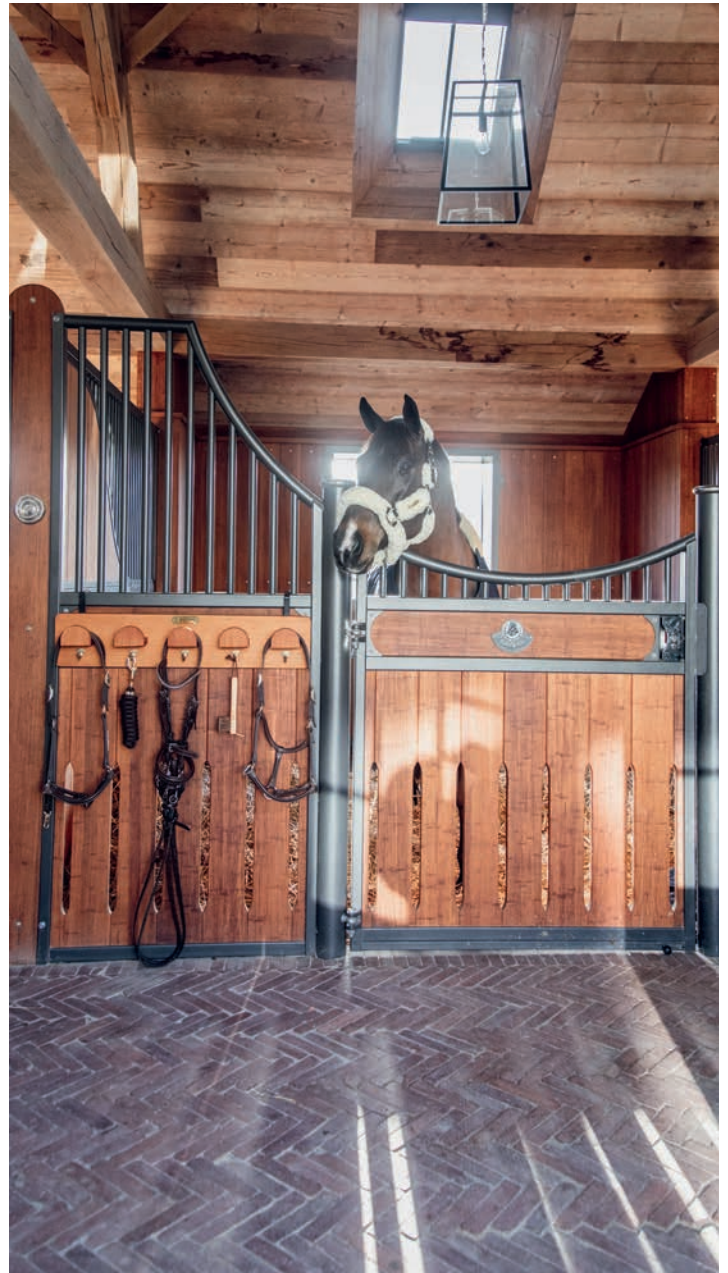
THE STABLE IS ALIVE

The shuffling of buckets, the rustling of hay, the soft snorting of horses that turns into whinnying when they hear their carer approaching – the stable is alive! It is a world with its own rhythm, with established habits and silent signals that are nevertheless heard.

Horses live in tune with that rhythm. They know when the stable wakes up, when the feed is coming, when they are allowed outside, when it is time to work, and when peace returns. This sense of familiarity gives them confidence.

This rhythm also affects us. Anyone working with horses every day feels the difference between stables where calm and order prevail and stables where everyone is constantly playing catch-up. A good routine does not make the work less intense, but it does make it clearer, safer, and more effective.

In this chapter, we look at a day at the stables as the basis of good horse management. We follow the rhythm of feeding, turning out, exercising, grooming, resting, and winding down, and take a look at the daily operations of various top stables.



A ROUTINE CREATES CALM

Horses love fixed patterns. Feeding, grazing, exercise, and rest are all anchor points in their day. When those moments are predictable, it creates calm and stability.

Claudia Weber has extensive experience as a groom at Olympic level. She learned how to give horses the best possible care and keep them happy at various top stables. She still brings what emerged as a constant there to her own stable today: horses need structure. 'Horses are very aware of what normally happens and when,' says Claudia. 'If a horse is used to going out first and suddenly another horse is given priority, it will often not be happy about that. With some, you notice that only subtly in their gaze. Other horses start calling out or even rearing in their stalls.'

For Claudia, a routine is not about blindly following the same schedule. A fixed order of doing things does make the day calm and familiar, but only if you always keep the horse in mind. Your fixed schedule should never become more important than what your horse needs at that time. Claudia: 'A good groom notices not only when a horse needs grooming, but also when it is not quite itself or when its needs and preferences change over time.'



JANIKA SPRUNGER



King Edward trains in the morning

Janika Sprunger also acknowledges how much horses rely on fixed routines. She says they are a bit like children in that respect: a clear approach provides peace of mind, but you must also be able to adapt when necessary.

'King Edward, my husband Henrik von Eckermann's top horse, is normally the first horse scheduled to be trained in the morning. And he knows that very well. If someone else goes first as an exception, he makes it clear that he does not agree. Still, it's good for him to learn to cope with changes like that. After all, you can never completely rule out unforeseen circumstances.'





CLAUDIA WEBER



Everyone knew Sam's fixed rhythm

During her career as a groom, Claudia also got to take care of Michael Jung's Sam. Sam is considered the best eventing horse of all time and won every championship on the calendar, including the World Championships and the Olympic Games.

She learned how important a fixed routine can be from Sam. Claudia: 'Sam would go out at around seven in the morning to eat grass for half an hour. After that, he wanted to go back inside to sleep. Other grooms thought that was very strange. It would also have been more logical to let him enjoy the paddock or pasture for three hours, but he didn't want to.'

Claudia thinks that was precisely the secret to his success: 'Horses like that perform not only because of their talent or the rider's work, but also because everything around them is right. Their carers give them what they need every minute of the day. And for Sam, that was the stubborn routine of his own choosing. After a while, everyone around him knew his schedule too. He had his fixed rhythm, and that was respected.'



FROM A MORNING NEIGH TO NIGHTTIME HAY

Every stable has its own rhythm. Some get up to cruising speed with sport horses worked early, while others move gently along with grazing herds or a few horses at home behind the house. Nevertheless, every stable day has its fixed anchors.

MORNING

The day usually starts with feeding. Horses are generally given roughage first and/or concentrates according to their established routine. A horse behaving differently than usual is often the first thing to stand out in the morning, whether they are stabled indoors or permanently out in the pasture. How is everyone doing? Is everything working? Is everything as you would expect it to be?

At many stables, the morning is also used to review the rest of the day's schedule: which horses will go out, who will be ridden, which appointments are planned, and what needs to be taken into account. A good daily schedule is not an end in itself but rather a tool to give horses rest, routine, and sufficient attention.

MID-MORNING

Mid-morning is often the busiest time at the stable. Horses go outside, are ridden, lunged, walked, or get exercise on a horse walker, a treadmill, or other facilities available at the stable. Meanwhile, horse owners, grooms, or stable staff ensure that the stalls are mucked out, the aisles are tidied up, watering and feeding areas are clean, and all equipment is returned to its designated place. The sooner the stable is organised again, the more peacefully the rest of the day can proceed.

NOON

Noon is a time for a break for both horses and staff. The animals eat, drink, doze, relax outside, or get some time without all the hustle and bustle around them. For the team, this is often the time to catch their breath, grab a bite to eat, update notes, and discuss practical matters.



Sometimes the schedule is adjusted: a horse might come in earlier due to the weather, a training session might shift, or an appointment does not go as planned.

AFTERNOON

In the afternoon, there are often very diverse activities on the agenda. Some horses still need to be ridden, exercised, or groomed, while others get a second time outside, go for walks, graze on a lead, or come inside. At breeding farms or stables with young horses, this might be the time for an extra round of the groups to give supplementary feed, check water, or move horses. The practical work also continues: clearing the washing area, tidying up equipment, letting blankets or protection dry, and preparing the stable for the evening.

EVENING

Towards evening, the energy level drops again. Horses receive their last feed or roughage, water is checked, and horses that stay outside receive one last visit from their carers. At many stables, a late or night check follows a few hours later, especially for sport horses, broodmares, foals, or horses requiring extra attention. The day is only truly over when all the horses start the night well-cared for, calm, and safe.

A DAY AT THE STABLES WITH



EMILIE CONTER: STEPHEX STABLES



Emilie Conter grew up among the top riders of StepheX Stables, and she works based on the routines she saw there from a young age. Nevertheless, she continually adjusts her approach. 'I'm really happy that I could grow up here, at one of the best stables in the world. I've learned an incredible amount from the riders and grooms around me. But no horse is the same, and the world doesn't stand still. You have to keep observing, learning, and adapting.'

A quiet start

For Emilie, the day always starts quietly, at around 7 or 7.30 a.m. The horses are given hay (roughage) first, and only then pellets (concentrates). Subsequently, they are given sufficient time to eat and digest before the first work session starts.

Exercise and food throughout the day

Next, Emilie ensures that every horse comes out of the stall several times a day. That does not always have to be for training under saddle. Pasture time, the horse walker, walking on a lead, or grazing for a while are also part of the daily routine. Which combination is chosen depends on the individual horse. Character, fitness level, weight, and the training programme all help determine what the day looks like.

For example, horses might be on the horse walker for 45 minutes to an hour, whereas grazing can last two hours or longer. These times are also adjusted to the individual

horse. Horses that recover quickly, for example, spend less time in the pasture or are turned out at times when the grass is less rich. For Emilie, it is not just about how much a horse moves, but also about variety. Working, walking, grazing, and being outdoors combine to make for a varied day, both physically and mentally.

In addition to exercise, Emilie's horses are also fed several times throughout the day. She wants them to have hay available almost constantly so that their stomachs can remain active, even at night. After the morning feed, they are offered another small portion of concentrates in the afternoon, often in combination with a grass mix so that her horses consume the feed a little more slowly.

Evening shift

Emilie's team's workday ends around 5 p.m., after the evening feed. Another night check follows late in the evening when the horses are given hay again, and a check is made to ensure everything is calm. If necessary, rugs are also adjusted to suit the temperature.





Rugs & temperature regulation

A HORSE'S NATURAL THERMOREGULATION

HOW A HORSE REGULATES ITS TEMPERATURE

Human intuition is not a yardstick for horses

Humans and horses do not experience temperature in the same way. When we might reach for a coat, a healthy, unclipped horse can still feel perfectly fine. The temperature zone for a healthy, unclipped horse to feel comfortable is lower than for humans, especially in temperate climates. A horse can also regulate its body temperature well within a wider range of temperatures. This is not a fixed rule for every horse. Just like people, some horses are real cold-blooded creatures, and other horses are little radiators by nature. But one thing is certain: your own intuition is not always a reliable measure.

Staying warm and losing heat

The body temperature of a healthy, adult horse averages between 37.5 and 38.5 °C. Horses use various mechanisms to keep that temperature stable. Coat, skin, fat layer, exercise, nutrition, condition, acclimatisation, and housing all play a role.

Its coat is an important natural insulation system in this process. Air remains trapped between the hairs, and these small air chambers help to retain heat. When a horse can raise its hair, that insulating effect becomes even greater. That works especially well when the coat stays dry and is not pressed flat. If the coat gets wet, or a heavy or ill-fitting rug is placed on it, this natural system does not work as well.

At the same time, a horse must also be able to dissipate heat. During exercise, its muscles produce a lot of heat. A thick winter coat can actually be a problem, because the horse cools down more slowly and stays wet longer after work. That is why sport horses are often clipped. They dry faster and cool down better after exertion, but at the same time some of the natural protection is removed. A clipped horse therefore requires adapted temperature management, tailored to the situation: in the stable, outdoors, during transport, during training, and at competitions.



More than a calendar and thermometer

The time of year and the temperature should never be the only factors in your temperature management. A horse might be warmer on a dry, cold day than on a milder day with rain and wind. Sun, shade, humidity, movement, shelter, and the time of day also make a difference. In addition, the actual horse plays a major role. A horse with a full winter coat, sufficient roughage, and shelter can often maintain its body temperature well in the cold. An older, thin, sick, clipped, or sensitive horse needs help with that sooner. Breed and type also play a role. Hardy breeds and pony types with a dense coat are often better equipped to withstand the cold than finer sport and show horses. However, they may start sweating more quickly and have more difficulty dissipating heat during work, transport, or on warmer days.

The most important question to ask is not ‘do I think it is too hot or too cold?’

The better question is ‘can this particular horse regulate its temperature well under these circumstances?’

But how do you deal with all these factors? In this chapter, we will get you started and offer numerous practical insights from top groom Tanja Wiesinger.

RUG OR NO RUG?

There are many ways to help horses maintain their temperature: sufficient high-quality roughage, shelter, exercise, a dry resting place, and good stable management. But as soon as you want to offer extra protection against cold, rain, wind, insects, or drafts, rugs are the way to go.

Bear in mind that this is not an automatic reflex. If it is possible to do without, most experienced horse people just leave the rug in the cupboard. Many horses do fine without an extra layer, as long as they are healthy, have sufficient coat, and are kept in conditions where they can easily regulate themselves. But as soon as they are clipped, get wet, are difficult to dry, travel, work intensively, or react sensitively to cold, wind, insects, or skin irritation, for example, the right rug at the right time can make a world of difference.







TANJA WIESINGER



RUG MANAGEMENT

Feel and check

'I'm a real stickler for rugs,' laughs Tanja Wiesinger, show groom for show jumper Jos Verlooy. 'There are so many different types, materials, and thicknesses. I have up to fifteen different rugs per horse, which is a tremendous luxury, I know. But I use them all. It gives me the opportunity to do exactly enough every time.' No schedule, calendar, or weather forecast app can make the final decision for her in this matter. For Tanja, the horse is the most important yardstick.

No standard formula

'Every horse is different,' says Tanja. 'You can compare them to people. Some are always hot, others always cold.'

'Obviously, I always check the weather forecast, especially for the night, because I can't monitor the horses then like I can during the day. But if it's five degrees, for example, I don't automatically apply a specific amount per gram. You really have to feel the horse. Fifteen degrees in the summer feels different from fifteen degrees in the winter.'

She believes that where a horse stands also makes a big difference. 'Some stalls are warmer than others. A horse standing closer to a door, exterior wall, or drafty spot can feel different from a horse in a fully enclosed stall.'



Feeling remains the foundation

She feels a lot. 'I check quite a few different spots under the rug, because they all feel different and I want a complete picture. I pay extra attention to the parts where the rug lies most directly on the horse. I always check their ears as well. They often give a clear indication.'

Under the rug, Tanja seeks a light, comfortable warmth. The horse does not need to feel cool or neutral, but may be pleasantly warm. If it feels almost too warm for your hand, that is an indication for her to adjust something.

'You really do not want a horse that is clammy or starts sweating. That can make them sick. Covering too warmly can cause just as many problems as not covering them enough. Incidentally, some horses then want to get rid of the rug and bite it to pieces or pull it off.'



Grooming

FINISHING TOUCHES

A nice grooming session does both you and your horse good. Grooming is so much more than a mandatory chore to make your horse shine. If you can completely lose yourself in brushing, braiding, and applying lotion to your four-legged friend, that is absolutely fine. But also know that your horse does not have to parade through the stable or pasture looking fabulous every day. Grooming can also involve relaxing, spending time together, and giving your horse the care it needs.

In this chapter, FEI Best Groom 2025 Sanne Melsen takes you behind the scenes of international showjumping. Drawing from her daily work with Gilles Thomas' horses, she shows how a well-designed grooming routine contributes to a well-groomed appearance, but above all to the comfort and health of your horse. She also shares plenty of practical tips along the way.







DAILY GROOMING

CARING, PAMPERING AND CHECKING

A horse does not have to shine constantly when at home. For top groom Sanne Melsen, it is more important that it receives the care it needs, is checked regularly, and feels comfortable. 'I make time for a grooming session every day, but not necessarily to make my horses shine. When brushing, you automatically go over the legs, hooves, skin, and areas where they've worn tackle. So you'll more readily notice a small wound, a swollen leg, a lump, a stone in the hoof, a twisted nail, or that a horse is reacting more sensitively than usual somewhere.'

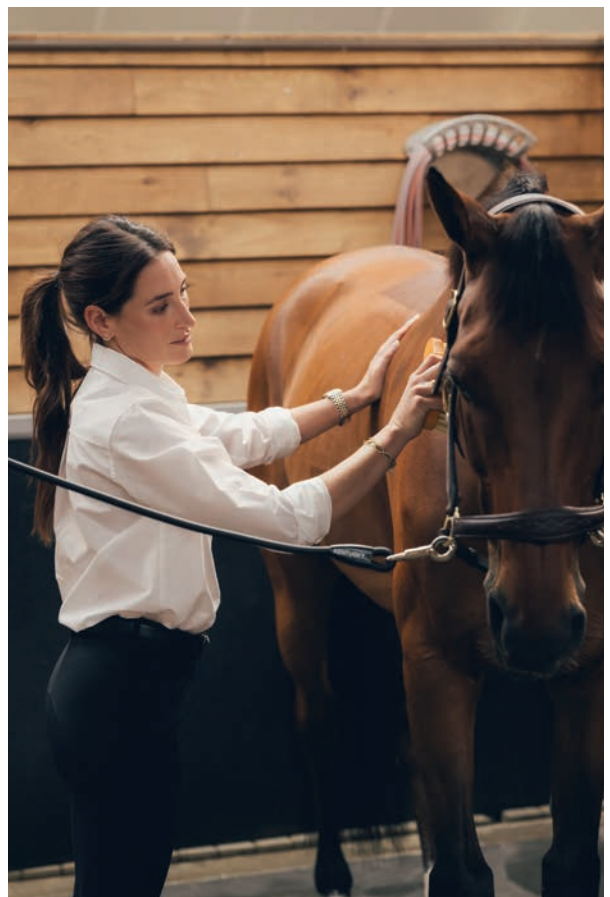
Grooming is also a quiet moment together, without pressure to perform. You will gradually learn better what your horse likes, where it reacts sensitively, and how it behaves on an ordinary day. Sanne feels that even more strongly at competitions. 'I usually only have four or five horses to take care of there, so you're working more intensively with each horse and naturally build a stronger bond.'

LEARNED YOUNG

For young horses, a daily grooming session is especially valuable. They still need to learn that touching, brushing, and lifting their legs are normal parts of their care. 'You don't need to turn that into an extensive session. Simply gently brushing over their bodies already helps them get used to physical contact.'

ALSO FOR UNRIDDEN HORSES

Horses that are temporarily not being ridden are sometimes groomed less without this being intentional. Sanne thinks this is a shame. During a rest period, grooming sometimes takes a bit of a back seat. 'Even a horse that is not being ridden deserves some daily attention. Five minutes with a brush can be enough to connect and check on your horse.'





EMILIE CONTER



Emilie Conter's training routine

For Emilie, the warm-up is not preparation for the training session, but a fully-fledged part of it. 'I like to walk for about ten minutes before I really start riding. I do that with a long rein and preferably outside the arena, so that my horse has plenty of time to loosen up.' This is followed by a few relaxed rounds at a trot, left and right, still keeping the neck sufficiently extended. 'That way, I notice immediately if the horse reacts the same way as on other days.'

Emilie also regularly incorporates short walking breaks during work. This means her horses constantly have the opportunity to recover both physically and mentally. At home, she rarely jumps high. She prefers working with gymnastics exercises and low jumps, focusing on rhythm, alignment, and body control.

After the actual work, she lets her horse canter with its neck extended low, so that it can relax and stretch its back. She then walks the horse out for a long, gentle walk, often on grass or on firmer ground.





VARIATION IN MOVEMENT

The chapter *A day at the stables* already explained how top stables offer their horses a different form of exercise three times a day. They also deliberately seek variety within the training.

VARIOUS SURFACES

In his homeland of Sweden, Henrik von Eckermann had an abundance of pastures, forests, and trails at his disposal. 'That was much appreciated because my horses could move over lots of different surfaces there.' A hard, soft, or springy surface absorbs the impact of the hoof differently each time and also places different demands on the muscles, tendons, and joints. I think that variety helps keep the body strong, especially the legs and feet.'

At his current location in the Netherlands, that space is more limited, but the same philosophy remains intact. 'That's why we've invested in a horse walker, an aquatrainer, a high-quality arena surface, and good pastures. Together with the team, we ensure that the horses regularly get different surfaces under their feet here as well.'

AQUATRAINER

In addition to arena training and time in the pasture or paddock, there are many ways to provide horses with extra and varied exercise. Walking on a lead, walking in the horse walker, lunging, or a session on a regular treadmill or aquatrainer. The latter, in particular, appears remarkably often in the routines of top stables.

Laura Collett uses the water treadmill primarily for horses competing at a higher level. 'Walking through water helps build the core muscles and supports the legs at the same time. It's not a standard part of the training for young horses. I usually only introduce the water treadmill when a horse is approaching four-star level. We only bring a young horse in earlier if it's facing a specific challenge.'

Henrik von Eckermann also uses the aquatrainer to support tendons, ligaments, and lower legs. 'Anyone who trains daily and then stops completely for a few weeks quickly loses fitness and strength. It's the same for horses.' If a horse cannot fully train temporarily, the aquatrainer offers a way to keep the body moving without immediately creating the same load as during regular work.

At Nicola Philippaerts, the aquatrainer is used both for maintaining muscle and fitness and during rehabilitation. 'Sharp turns are out of the question in many rehabilitation programmes,' he says. In an aquatrainer, the horse moves continuously in a straight line, while the water resistance puts the muscles to work. 'This means it can be a useful tool for rebuilding muscles and gradually getting a horse back to work after an injury.'

During rehabilitation, always coordinate the programme, water level, and duration with your vet. Obviously, not everyone has the luxury of an aquatrainer at the stable. However, you can also incorporate movement through water in other ways, such as walking through shallow water in the sea, a suitable pond, or a safe water trough.





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