

WINTER RIDING

by: Heather Smith Thomas

Editor's Note: This excerpt is from Chapter 7 of Care & Management of Horses by Heather Smith Thomas. The book is available from www.ExclusivelyEquine.com.

Give your horse longer warm-up and cooling-out time in cold weather to prevent tendon injury. Frozen ground, cold temperatures, and stiff tendons (not warmed up) can result in damage or even a bowed tendon. Remember that he must work harder traveling through snow than on bare ground. Don't work him really hard in temperatures below twenty degrees Fahrenheit. You may want to do more walking and less work at fast gaits to keep a horse from getting too hot and sweaty (which makes for longer cool-out time) and to cope with bad footing. Frozen ground increases the concussion on feet and legs, and fast work will accentuate it.

Pay attention to footing. Frozen ground can be treacherous, especially on a hillside. Ice or packed snow can be just as slippery. Some horsemen use shoes with spots of borium (tungston carbide) welded on for more traction on ice or frozen ground. Be careful when using any type of traction device (calks, studs, borium, etc.) as these can cause extra stress to feet and legs by grabbing too well.

A barefoot horse often has better traction than one shod with regular shoes. The bare foot's sharp edges cut into the snow or slick ground a little better than a shod foot (unless shod with calks or studs) and snow doesn't ball up so badly in a bare foot. However, if snow is wet and packing, it can build up quickly in the foot and the horse is soon walking on four balls of ice, which not only is extremely slippery, but also puts great strain on the feet and legs. To prevent this condition you may want to use snowball pads with domed centers that prevent snow buildup and ice balls. Another option is to grease the bottom of feet with butter, margarine, or petroleum jelly to create a non-stick surface on the soles.

When preparing for a ride, make sure the horse's back is clean and dry before saddling. A wet back will gall more readily than dry skin. An outdoor horse may be woolly and have mud in his coat. Make sure there is no mud or matted hair under a saddle pad. When bridling, an icy-cold metal bit can be unpleasant. Keep bridles in the house rather than an unheated tack room. You can warm a cold bit by wrapping a hot wet washcloth around it, then wrapping a hand towel on top of the washcloth to help hold in the heat and keep it dry until you bridle him.

Plan your rides early enough in the day to finish and get the horse cooled out and dry before sundown. Winter days are short and temperatures can drop quickly. If a horse is wet from sweat, he will take longer to dry than in summer. Make sure his body temperature is back to normal and his hair fluffed up and drying. If you put him away wet, with hair plastered down, he may become chilled.

Daily grooming is sometimes neglected in winter if you are not riding a horse and he is out on pasture. Keeping his coat free of mud and matted hair and cleaning his feet once a day can be very beneficial, however, and gives you a good feel of what's happening with his body condition, and skin and hoof health.