

# Winter *Blanketing* Basics

*with Tips from Top Eventing Groom Emma Ford*



PHOTO: HORSEWARE



As the year gets further into autumn and the temperatures continue to drop, it is time to get out the winter blankets. To keep your horse comfortable during these colder months, blankets must fit properly and be appropriate for the climate and your horse's needs. Emma Ford, the head groom and barn manager for Phillip Dutton Eventing, offers some insights into winter blanketing that she has learned over the years.

#### *Blanket Fit*

A blanket that fits properly is of the utmost importance. To find out what size your horse needs, grab a measuring tape and helper. Have your helper hold the measuring tape at the center of your horse's chest while you run it along the widest part of your horse's shoulder to the point of the buttock, keeping the tape as level as possible and pulling it tight. Blankets are measured in inches, and once you have determined your horse's true size with the measuring tape, you will know what blanket size you need to get.

However, just like with your own clothes, some blanket brands can run a bit small or large. Certain blanket brands, or lines of a brand, may be designed to fit a certain body type, so do some research and ask some of your barn friends what they have found so you can determine what blanket will fit your horse best. Ford agrees that there are a variety of different blanket styles. She stresses paying attention to the belly surcingles when trying a blanket on your horse. "Once you know the correct size for your horse, you should look at the



## Blanket *Fit*

### Blankets *Should:*

- lie flat along your horse's shoulder.
- allow you to slide one hand between it and your horse's withers.
- reach the bottom of your horse's barrel and just below the elbows and stifles.
- have the back edges reach the tail, with no more than two inches of skin between the edge of the blanket and the tail.

### Blankets *Should Not:*

- be tight on your horse's shoulders or withers.
- show your horse's barrel.
- reach down close to your horse's knees or hocks.
- have back edges that cover your horse's tail or do not cover the points of your horse's buttock.

PREVIOUS: This Rambo Original with leg arches is a good example of a properly fitted blanket. It wraps around the horse's body nicely, covers the horse's barrel, and reaches past the horse's elbows and stifles.

LEFT: A heavyweight blanket, like this Rambo all-in-one heavyweight blanket, has the most polyester fill and provides the greatest amount of warmth in the winter.

positioning of the belly surcingles. Some blankets have them set very low. On horses that do not have a deep girth, these styles can sometimes be unsafe because the straps cannot be shortened enough to prevent a horse from getting a leg through the strap."

Trying a blanket on your horse will ensure that you have found the right fit. Most tack shops will accept a return on a blanket purchase if you try the blanket on your horse when he/she is clean and/or wearing a thin stable sheet. When trying a blanket on your horse, watch him/her walk and graze to determine if it fits while your horse is moving around.

Not only does an improper fitting blanket look funny on your horse, it can wear out sooner or cause harm to your horse. A blanket that is too big is more likely to shift around on a horse, which could result in rubs, being stepped on, or getting caught on something. A blanket that is too tight can restrict a horse's movement, cause rubs, and put undue stress on seams and fasteners. A blanket should smoothly follow the contours of your horse's body without pulling, bulging,

or sagging. All straps and closures should be fastened correctly, with most belly surcingles crossing underneath your horse and allowing enough room to slide the flat of your hand between them and your horse's belly. Hind-leg straps should loosely loop through one another but not to the point where they are drooping near your horse's hocks.

Ford offers suggestions for two common blanket fit issues. For blankets that slide back slightly, she recommends "positioning a folded towel or leg quilt between the horse and the front closures. This helps prevent a pressure point on the chest and sometimes prevents the blankets from slipping back." This tip is best for stabled horses or those who are quiet in the field. To avoid your horse's mane getting rubbed by a blanket that has been worn for extended periods of time, Ford explains, "I like to use blankets that have high necks, sometimes referred to as 'wugs,' and my blankets with full necks are all in one so there is no seam around the wither area that can cause chafing."



The climate that you live in and amount of winter coat that your horse has will determine his winter blanketing needs.

### ***Your Horse's Winter Wardrobe***

Blankets come in a variety of weights to give your horse different levels of protection during the winter months. Lightweight sheets or blankets have 0-100 grams of polyester fill and act mostly as a waterproof layer, providing little added warmth. Medium weight blankets have 150-225 grams of fill and supply extra warmth for when the temperatures begin to drop. Heavyweight blankets have 250-420 grams of fill and give the most warmth and protection in the dead of winter.

Determining what blankets you need for your horse depends on the climate that your horse lives in. Horses in the northern states will need to have a full wardrobe for anything from mild to bitterly cold days, while horses in southernmost states will not need a heavyweight blanket. Ford says, "Having a good-quality lightweight, medium weight, and heavyweight blanket is suitable for areas that experience a true winter." No matter where you live, it is important that you know each day's forecast so you can blanket your horse accordingly. Ford agrees and stresses, "Know the temperature! Whether in Pennsylvania or South Carolina, my horses are blanketed according to the temperature."

Like most top competition programs, Ford and the Phillip Dutton Eventing team head south for the winter, but the principles are the same at both locations. "The main difference between north and south is how I layer the blankets. Obviously, in Pennsylvania during the winter, it remains

cold throughout the day, and horses tend to stay in the same blankets. In Aiken, I have to look at the next day's temperature. To save time and be efficient, lighter blankets are placed as the first layer so that as the day heats up, staff only has to strip off the top layer rather than keep switching blankets."

Another important factor in making winter blanketing decisions is your horse's individual needs. The amount of winter coat that your horse has will determine the amount of added warmth he/she needs during the winter months. Horses that have a full body clip, or barely grow any winter coat, will need more protection than a horse that is unclipped or grows a winter coat similar to that of a woolly mammoth. Additionally, some horses are more comfortable in cooler temperatures than others. Ford emphasizes, "Know your horse; does he/she run hot or cold?" Senior horses often run a bit cold and do better with more added warmth. However, overblanketing can cause a horse to sweat and get chilled. Pay close attention to your horse as you assess his blanketing routine and adjust accordingly. With the right blanketing formula, your horse will be at just the right comfort level for whatever the winter months have in store.

■ Kathleen Landwehr



Ford uses blankets with high necks, often called “wugs,” instead of standard cut blankets to prevent a horse’s mane from getting rubbed.

## Winter Blanketing Guidelines

Use the below chart as a guideline for what blankets to use in which temperatures. Remember that each horse is different and has his/her own individual needs.

Temperature	Clipped	Unclipped
40° - 50°	Lightweight sheet or blanket	No blanket
30° - 40°	Medium weight blanket	Lightweight sheet or blanket
15° - 30°	Heavyweight blanket	Medium weight blanket
15° and below	Heavyweight blanket with liner	Heavyweight blanket