



THOSE MOODY EQUINES... EVER HEARD THE EXPRESSION 'FEELING HIS OATS' AND WONDERED...

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As far back as the 19th century, extra savvy horse owners noticed that their mounts had much more get-up-and-go in their demeanour after receiving an extra helping of oats from their dedicated grooms.

These days we are all aware that our horses are more active and bright when they have sufficient energy sources whether it comes from oats, maize or grain-based premixed feed and/or rich grass when compared to an underfed and energy lacking horse which is usually the 'quieter' one.

Many people will tell you about the magical effects that certain feeds or dietary additives have on the behaviour of their horses. As a result, the business industry has now developed a huge niche market for supplements that either calm your horse or provide it with extra energy and it is always very important to trial these products well in advance of a show if you feel that you need to use them. Some may not have the effects you are after...

You need to remember that horses are just like us humans in that they are all individuals. People each react individually to certain foods as a result of certain allergies or enzyme reactions and horses are just the same with their individual reactions. This is why you should be just a tad sceptical of any across-the-board statement involving feeds or supplements when it comes to enhancing behavioural effects.

When fed solely grain-based feeds, no matter what type of grain, there are individual horses that may get very hyperactive. This doesn't mean that every horse should never be fed grain again - you simply need to find different feed ingredients that won't affect that particular horse by producing adverse reactions you don't want, especially when training.

Attitude in our equine friends is often also affected by environmental stresses that we aren't always aware of. A horse with a bad attitude can be the result of a reaction rather than a personality trait. The horse's daily routine is full of different areas where he can react adversely such as a training situation, a management situation, a physical problem, an equine social problem or other disagreeable factors. So, you need to assess ALL areas of your horse's life BEFORE rushing out to buy the next magical potion that will transform him into Star the Wonder Horse.

In most areas of New Zealand, with somewhere like Central Otago or our sandy coastal areas being possible exceptions, climatically the good grass growth we have and therefore the richness of it can also cause behavioural problems in our horses. If you are aware of this, you can limit the grass intake and get soil tests of your land to highlight any



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mineral deficiencies, which will need to be corrected through the feed. If you provide your horse with protein rich grass AND high energy feeds, it can be a recipe for disaster. You can generally get away with it for young 'growing' horses and in-foal mares but, when requiring a trainable horse with a co-operative mind, all that kindness you have heaped on nedly may have him 'biting' the hand that feeds him in return.

Illness will affect your horse's behaviour too - how else can they 'tell' you what is wrong? A horse can display depression, lethargy or crankiness if they are ill, developing an ailment or are in chronic pain - just like us. Learn to read them.

If you are feeding supplements in an attempt to make up for a deficiency in management, training or handling - they just will not work.

In this fast paced modern world we live in today, many of us are guilty of simply forgetting to stick to the basics when dealing with our horses. When having what we perceive as 'trouble' with a horse's attitude, the first thing to do is to go back to the basics of equine behaviour and try and determine what is causing the adverse reaction. However, this doesn't mean the feeding programme isn't the cause for any behaviour problem in horses. Rather that we humans are too quick to place blame for a horse's bad behaviour on feed when it could be something else entirely. Horses thrive on an overall sound management lifestyle so be careful not to neglect any areas if you want top performance - their diet is just a small part of the whole picture.

If you deduce that your horse's bad attitude is actually the result of his diet, then there are several areas where you can start to correct the problem. When managing behaviour through diet, the big secret is to match what you feed with each horse's individual activity. Overfeeding of energy is the most common error that leads to hyperactive and therefore difficult horses. The reason for this error is that many people do not understand where energy comes from in a horse's diet so are not aware when they are giving their horse too much energy for its

activity level. Horses react in two ways when they have too much energy in their diet. They will either become fat and won't show much difference in their attitude/behaviour, or will become hyperactive and burn off the extra energy with nervous behaviour.

So how do you decrease the energy intake of a horse that is hyperactive and difficult after being fed high levels of grain and/or excess rich grass? If the problem is grass, limit this intake and replace with 'dry' bulk such as meadow chaff and meadow hay (be aware that Lucerne has a high protein level). You could also give the horse a diet that is high in fat or oil. Hyperactivity, from excess grain, is caused because horses are able to quickly digest and absorb the starch in grain that then creates a responding "high" in their glucose and hormone levels that produces over-sensitivity.

Since a horse's body cannot determine where a calorie comes from, it uses some as activity sources and others for growth or fat deposits. Whether the calories come from maize or oats, the cells in the horse's body use them indiscriminately. The main goal of most owners is to have a horse that is sleek, glossy and well padded with fat so that the horse looks in good health and well cared for. The issue here is that a horse needs an abundance of calories in their diet to get fat. It can look healthy by having a diet containing fat rather than a diet of grain, which is associated with hyperactivity problems.

You lessen the amount of grain and starch in a horse's diet as you increase the level of fat, which is usually recommended at 15ml per 100kg of body weight per day. The horse can get an adequate amount of energy to meet their activity level when you increase the level of fat content and decrease the amount of grain or starch that is in their diet. You avoid the "highs" in your horse's metabolic hormone levels by not feeding as much starch and as a result you can avoid the mood swings in behaviour and attitude.

A horse's behaviour can also be affected by nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and/or amino acids as a result of their specific roles in metabolism. When deficient in certain vitamins and minerals some horses can become hyperactive. However, other horses may have a decrease in activity when they are missing the exact same nutrients. They are all individuals.

Horse feeding is a science but our basic overall horsemanship skills should allow us to assess our horse's condition and behaviour every day and therefore notice little changes before they become large ones that get out of hand.