Clothes horses?



'After being ridden, the horse should be rubbed down with a handful of hay or sponged with cool water; it should then be curried, covered with a blanket, and walked until it is dry. If the mount is excessively hot and wet after being ridden, however, the rider should remove its saddle and bridle, cover it with a blanket, allow it to drink a small amount of water, and walk it until it dries off.'

'Possibly one of the most tedious aspects of riding horses in winter is the after-ride cooling-down process. Tedious though it may be, it is very important to cool your horse properly. Putting him away hot and sweaty will jeopardise his health by allowing him to catch a chill.'

Drawn from something akin to 'Beginner's guide to horse ownership – Vol 1' these two extracts of basic advice would seem to be self-evident – but apparently not to every horse owner or rider. Even in the coldest weather, a horse's metabolism will cause it to sweat during exercise, some more so than others. To a human, the necessity to 'warmdown' after activity is common sense – to a horse it's vital to the maintenance of good health and physical well-being.

For anyone running a commercial stables or riding school the potential problem is redoubled; not only does a sick animal incur veterinary bills, but it also means a loss in revenue. And there are customers who truly don't want to know about the tedious side to equestrianism and those to whom taking care of a hired mount is anathema.

To cool a horse after even a moderate period of activity is a careful process that begins, 'Following your ride or workout, walking him [the horse] for ten to fifteen minutes will allow the heat built up in the muscles to dissipate,' and finishes, '*…you can blanket him with a clean, dry blanket.*' The italics are ours.

Wickaway

Clothing for horses is a keenly contested sector of the equestrian market that generates enormously partisan feelings. Brands and competing products are defended vigorously, and all the more so since high-performance fabric technology has been applied to the problems of equine health.

Horse rug designs took a major step forward with the development of wicking fabrics. Prior to that it was a case of much rubbing down, natural fibres and absorption. Whilst some rubbing down is still vital, the fact that liquid water can be carried away from the animal's body by non-physical means leaves more time to be devoted to other aspects of its care.

Improvements in insulation materials offered warmth without weight – and the use of synthetic fibre waddings that absorb almost no liquid played a significant part in the process.

But, as with the development of outdoor clothing for the rider, it has been hydrophilic membranes and coatings that have proved to be the icing on the cake. The ability for a turnout rug to remove liquid sweat, prevent chilling and transpire has been of the most enormous benefit to both commercial and private owners.

Marketing all three attributes as a single branded package is an option that few manufacturers have chosen, but J W Wilkinson Ltd, based in Kendal in the English Lake District, has taken on board the success of the tactic when applied by other members of its parent group, AMG Outdoor. Almost the whole of its Kingshead series of rugs now has Tri-Max, Dual-Max or Uni-Max sub-branding – the differences being just how many of the three technologies are incorporated.

The other members of the AMG Outdoor Group include such brand names as Vango, Phoenix and Rossignol, so it's no surprise that the fabrics used for the latest Kingshead rugs rely heavily on past experience with high performance fibres. The same experience has been brought to bear on design criteria and a number of critical changes to both fitting and features have been the result. Product Development Director, Glenn Andrews commented: "As with outdoor clothing and similar equipment produced by the rest of the Group, we have tried to ensure that the horse wearing our rug is as comfortable as we would wish to be ourselves. We have used the same or very similar fabrics to those of our clothing products for the same reason."

UV protection

Textilene knitted polyester mesh is the fabric of choice for Horseware of Ireland's Flybuster rug. Designed to offer protection from head to tail against flies and UV radiation, Horseware says that prototypes were tested in the heat of an Australian summer before the final production go-ahead was given.

The company's emotively-named Rambo and Rhino series both use AquaTrans hydrophilic coatings on many of the products.

Horseware explains that the technology was chosen in preference to microporous laminates because it found that synthetic pores quickly became blocked in the equestrian environment.

This company favours acrylic fibres for lighter rugs – in the Rambo Armadillo, for instance, the yarns are woven into twill with polypropylene – and for a fleece model, Rambo Wug Teddy Fleece. Acrylic's wicking properties therefore have placed the fibre at opposite ends of the ambient spectrum, both warming and cooling as needed.

A double ripstop nylon in a silver metallic finish forms the outer layer of an eye-catching rug from Harry Hall's Masta series. Breathable, waterproof and insulated with 12 oz of synthetic wadding – Turnout 2000 is specified as a high-performance model for long-term use during the winter months. Surprisingly (to us) this rug has a cotton lining and the company, part of Stylo International, advises that many owners prefer the natural fibres because they are kinder to the animal's coat. Visibility during the hours of darkness can be important to owners, and all Masta products carry glow-in-the-dark logos.

Rarity

Value-added, externally created sub-brands are rare in this market sector for two reasons. The first is cost – there will always be a similar unbranded product or component that can create the function for less and horses can be very destructive animals - so it is preferable to keep the retail price at an acceptable replacement level. The second is consumer education; owners probably do not equate the product benefits accruing to their own clothing with the needs of their mounts. It is suspected that the relatively small size of the market dissuades international sub-brand owners from making overt displays of their wares and the benefits.

Sparring partners. Equine models show off the durability of their FAL rugs.



Kingshead's UltraMax turnout rug utilising the latest Tri-Max performance fabric technology.

Some companies do go against the trend. Shire Equestrian's Hurricane turnout rug uses Sympatex hydrophilic laminate for its outer shell, while the Kingshead brand makes a feature of DuPont Thermolite insulation as part of its Tri-Max and Dual-Max systems.

Where there's mud – there're horses

Stain resistance is an important product benefit to owners – healthy horses like nothing better than a good roll in the mud – and particularly for those who regularly enter competitions where appearance is a major factor.

A number of the rugs in the range manufactured by FAL Textile Industries, of Northumberland in the UK, carry this feature, which it achieves by the simple expedient of using a polypropylene textile in 1000 and 1200 denier weights depending on the intended end use.

Five products from FAL gained a Highly Commended award at this year's annual BETA trade show (British Equestrian Trade Association). The Goliath, Viking, Cavalier and Bulldog are all heavy-duty turnout rugs using a selection of nylon and polypropylene shell fabrics matched to appropriate weights of insulation. All of them are lined with Equitex nylon. The fifth commendation was given to the Godolphin Ultimate stable rug, which offers a choice of three specifications, all with polypropylene outers.

As has already been noted, horses are tough on their clothing. Whether it's rolling in mud, biting, rubbing against fences or trees, playing with other horses or protesting at the quality of stabling – they will do their best to destroy whatever is on their backs. Rug manufacturers have responded by specifying the toughest outer fabrics and webbing, and using appropriate stitching methods in assembly.

It is interesting to see that the industry was about ten years behind the outdoor clothing sector in the widespread use of high-performance textiles, although it is doubtful whether the same time lapse will ever prevail in future.

As an illustration, it is only in the immediate past that magnotherapy has become all the rage in many sectors of sports activewear. Magnetic therapy is already widely used by equine physiotherapists and chiropractors in the treatment of sore backs, stiffness and inflammation, bruising and soft tissue injuries.

Now a British company, Komar Design, has developed a magnetic therapy horse rug for use by owner riders, that enables them to apply the treatment in mild cases without recourse to full professional help.

The fabric is a cotton/acrylic knit known as Chevtex and the specification includes flexible magnetic pads that are positioned over the horses' muscle masses and acupressure points. Two models are available: General Maintenance features eight magnetic pads, and the Professional a full fourteen. These generate an oscillating magnetic field to stimulate blood circulation and provide an improvement in the efficiency of the oxygen supply system.

The process is non-invasive, of course, and is said to produce no side effects. The manufacturer suggests that magnetic therapy could also be used to relax an animal prior to, and during, travelling.

Derryck Draper





All the Horseware Rambo models feature 1000 denier nylon outer shells and breathable inners with three levels of insulation.