TOP TIP!

Not an ex-racer owner or rider? No problem! Other breeds and types can have sensitive coats, too, so this advice applies to all.



A brush WITH SUCCESS

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PHOTO: FLYSTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK

From grooming and clipping to rug fit, turnout and sun protection, caring for an ex-racehorse's fine coat requires a little thought. Catherine Welton finds out how to keep their skin healthy and avoid rubs, rashes and other common problems

SLEEK, SHINY AND immaculately turned out, a racehorse in the parade ring is a sight to behold, the epitome of health and vigour. Yet they're also renowned for having thin coats and sensitive skin, making them prone to grazes, rubs and rashes. So, what can you do — and what should you avoid doing — to keep your ex-racer looking the picture of health?

Philippa Gilmore, head of welfare at the Retraining of Racehorses (RoR), says first and foremost, try to find out as much as possible about your horse's management routine while they were still in racing.

"Whether coming directly from a racing yard or having spent time with a retrainer, finding out what the horse is used to provides a useful starting point and helps owners avoid making unnecessary sudden changes," she says. "For horses coming directly from training, the transition can involve significant changes in turnout, diet, exercise, rugging and general routine."

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Groomin' marvellous

As well as helping to manage changes, this information can also give valuable insights into what they may or may not be used to when it comes to grooming and handling.

Beth Crozier has been a groom in the racing industry for over 10 years and currently has two ex-racers of her own. She says the first thing to bear in mind is that a racehorse is not likely to have been groomed as regularly.

"We'd always groom for the races, but not on a daily basis at home," she explains. Introduced carefully, however, most will come to enjoy the experience. "Mine prefer a softer brush or an itch with a rubber comb," continues Beth. "It's a massive thing for your bond, spending time with them in the stable and getting to know them, what their likes and dislikes are, and even a bit of mutual grooming."

Some racehorses may be familiar with strapping, which Beth explains is vigorous brushing. "In The Pony Club, we called it 'a good groom to make your arms hurt'! It's great for muscle stimulation and to keep the blood flowing."

Sprayers beware

When it comes to using sprays, Beth advises approaching with caution. "They might have had spray on their manes and tails, but probably not on their bodies, so with fly sprays, for example, just be cautious on your first go."

Although a long pamper session might be a bit alien to a former racehorse, they're likely to be used to being washed off.

"A lot of yards have the overhead hoses and boom hoses, so the horses are used to being washed that way," she reveals. "After a race, you'd hold them with one hand and hose with the other — they wouldn't be tied up."



The shape and fit of a rug is important for preventing coat rubs

Plaiting is something else Beth says a former racehorse is likely to be familiar with: "They're always plaited for the races; I can just pop the headcollar on mine and plait them with the lead rope over their necks. On the whole, they've got lovely thin manes, which are a lot nicer to plait."

At the races, they're likely to have had hoof oil applied, but once they're out of racing, Beth believes a foot dressing can be a better option, "to keep every ounce of moisture in — that makes a massive difference".

Clipping considerations

Clipping is something else a Thoroughbred will have experienced in training. However, with their thin coats and skin, they may be more sensitive. Trying to find out whether they were comfortable with being clipped or had particularly sensitive areas is a good idea before you clip them for the first time.

Clipped areas can be more prone to rubs and cuts, so think carefully about how severe a clip your ex-racer really needs. Just because they had a full clip in racing, doesn't mean they require one for the work they're doing now. Generally, the more hair you take off, the more rugging required to keep them warm in winter — and some riders report they feel sharper to ride when they're cold, too. Many Thoroughbreds struggle to hold their weight during winter, which is another reason to prevent them feeling the cold.

"I clipped one of mine's legs out the other winter and it was the worst decision I ever made," confesses Beth.

After a clip, she recommends hot clothing. "It brings out that shine, because no matter how often you bath and brush them when they've got their coat, you never really get down to the base of the hair."

FINE COATED? THEREIN LIES THE RUB

Preventing rubs means paying close attention, as Beth knows all too well. Common causes include rugs, tack and even the heel of the rider's boot, which is why you'll often see a clipped horse with little squares of unclipped hair where the foot sits.

"Being fine coated, they're a lot more susceptible to rubs," agrees Beth. "One of mine always has to wear a fluffy girth. Another one has to wear the fluffy overreach boots, because the normal ones rub."

When it comes to rugs, Beth is particular about what's inside, too.

"My big thing is I always have the rugs with the nice satin on the inside, and I try to keep that clean. When they get grubby, they rub more."


Fine-coated horses are vulnerable to rubs, including from the rider's heel

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A soft brush is a good bet when getting former racehorses used to daily grooming sessions

A good roll

A key part of a former racehorse's new routine, which is likely to be different and can have a big impact on their skin and coat, is the amount of turnout they have.

"Increased turnout should be introduced thoughtfully and with the individual horse in mind. More time outdoors can mean greater exposure to prolonged wet weather and muddy conditions, so regular skin and coat checks are important," advises Philippa.

"Thoroughbreds can be relatively thin-skinned. Owners should pay particular attention to areas such as the heels and pasterns, as well as checking beneath rugs. They should look out for changes, including soreness, heat, scurf, hair loss, crusting or scabs. Persistent, painful or unexplained changes should always be discussed with a vet.

"Over-rugging should also be avoided as a warm, damp environment beneath a rug isn't good for skin health," she concludes.

It's not just the cold, wet conditions that can cause problems for a Thoroughbred's skin.

Philippa explains that the summer brings its own challenges: "Some can be prone to skin irritation and rashes, particularly in response to heat and sweat, and may also react strongly to insect bites," she cautions.

Beth says to watch out for sunburn, too: "I have one with white legs and a white nose, who's more sensitive to the sun in the summer. To avoid sunburn, he wears a fly mask with a nose cover, and I apply suntan lotion on him, too."



As much field time as possible is brilliant for their wellbeing, as well as coat condition, but do regular skin checks when it's wet and muddy

PHOTO: NIGE ALLIN/SHUTTERSTOCK

A good fit

Beth recommends shopping around for the best-shaped rug for each horse. How they fit is an important consideration, alongside not being too light or too heavy.

"Finding the right brand for your horse is a massive thing. Just because the brand fitted your last cob or pony, doesn't mean it's right for your ex-racer. Nobody can get me out of a pair of Next jeans — and it's the same for a horse and their rugs," she says.

Philippa says to keep a close eye on the fit of rugs over time, too.

"It's also worth remembering that a former racehorse's body shape and musculature can change considerably as their workload and lifestyle change. This can affect the fit of rugs and tack, so these should be checked regularly

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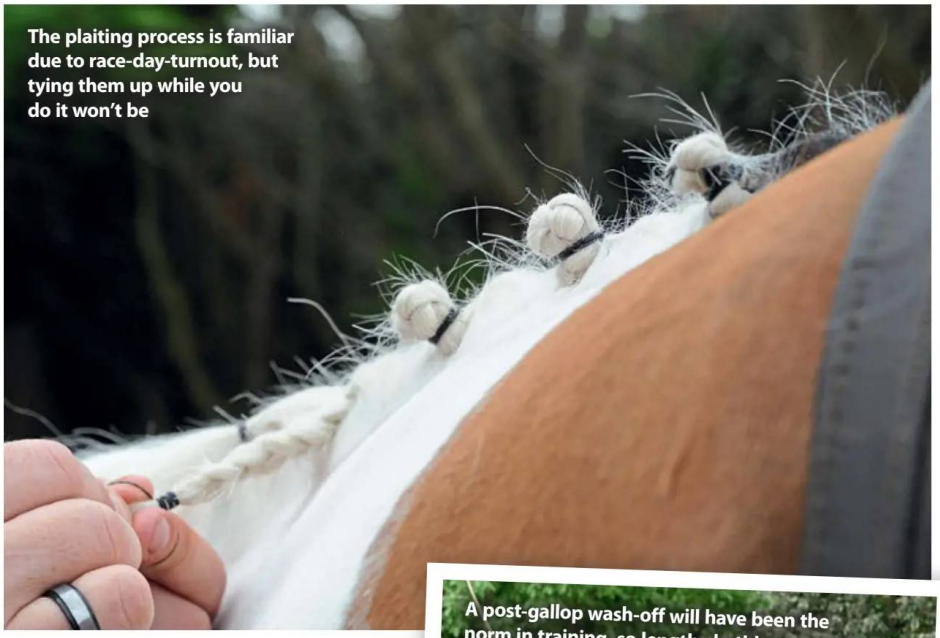
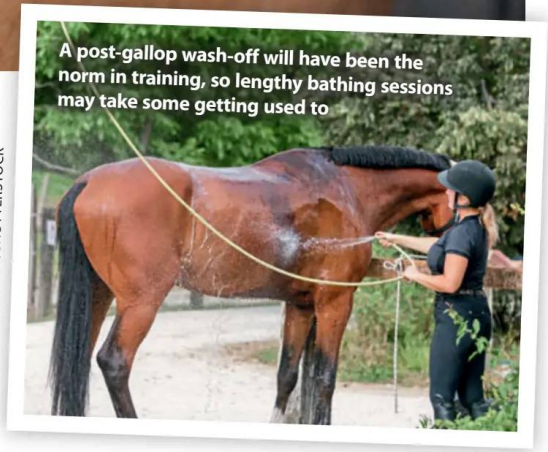


The plaiting process is familiar due to race-day-turnout, but tying them up while you do it won't be



A post-gallop wash-off will have been the norm in training, so lengthy bathing sessions may take some getting used to

PHOTO: 24K-PRODUCTION/SHUTTERSTOCK

rather than assuming that something which fitted well previously will continue to do so.

"Poorly fitting equipment can cause pressure, friction, rubbing and soreness, which may first become apparent through changes to the coat or skin. Regular checks are particularly important during periods when the horse is gaining condition or developing different musculature through retraining."

Individual care

The condition of your former racehorse's skin and coat can be a great way to keep tabs on their overall health and changing shape. As an owner, treating them as an individual is the best way to meet their needs.

"Ultimately, there isn't one management routine that will suit every former racehorse. Whether a horse has come directly from racing or has already spent time with a retrainer, understanding what they are accustomed to, making any further changes gradually and monitoring how the individual horse responds are key to supporting them as they settle into their new home," concludes Philippa.

For Beth, it's about making sure you get the basics right. "Modify your grooming kit and find the right rug that fits the horse, that's my biggest advice. A good rug and a good brush can go a long way."

"I can plait with the lead rope over their neck. They've got lovely thin manes, which are a lot nicer to plait"
— Racing groom Beth Crozier

NOURISH THE COAT

The skin, like every other part of the horse's body, needs the right nutrients to function well.

"The skin is the largest organ in the body. The outer layer is constantly renewed and so takes its fair share of nutrients. Slow-release energy accounts for most of its needs, so protein and oil are the main nutrients," explains Dr Tom Shurlock, technical feed consultant at British Horse Feeds.

"Feeding the ex-racehorse for its current lifestyle will help optimise overall condition, including skin and coat," he continues. "Changing from a high-energy/high-starch diet to a forage-based one will have a number of impacts as the body readjusts to different patterns of nutrient intake and energy output."

Tom advises feeding super fibres — highly digestible fibres such as beet pulp, for example — alongside a high-forage diet, to optimise slow-release energy.

"Improving the profile of slow-release energy and its associated health benefits — including improved hindgut absorption — will improve general health, including skin and coat."



Protein and oil are the main nutrients required for healthy skin and coat hair

