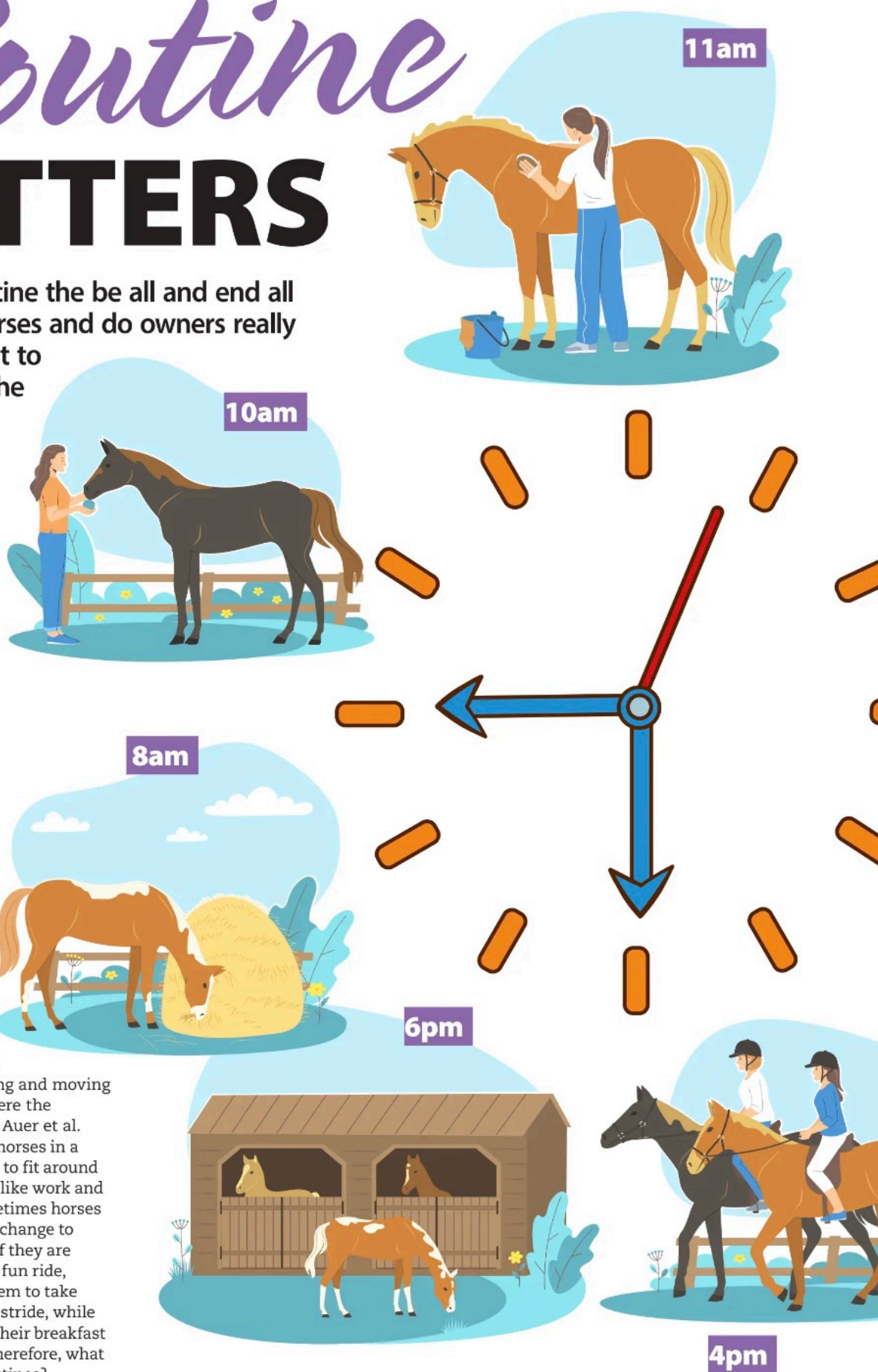


Routine MATTERS

Is following a routine the be all and end all when keeping horses and do owners really need to bust a gut to ride and feed at the same time every day? **Catherine Welton** finds out from a variety of experts

L EFT TO THEIR own devices, horses have a repetitive routine and spend the same amount of time eating, resting, sleeping and moving around every day. These were the findings of a 2021 study by Auer et al. Owners often keep their horses in a routine without realising it, to fit around their own commitments — like work and school runs. However, sometimes horses are required to cope with a change to their routine; for example, if they are heading to a competition, a fun ride, or to camp. Some horses seem to take this kind of change in their stride, while others have a meltdown if their breakfast is even five minutes late. Therefore, what are the pros and cons of routines?

ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK/JULIE HARDING



Most yards keep to a routine, which can include stable chores in the morning while the horses are turned out

MEET THE EXPERTS

DR DEBBIE MARSDEN

BSc, PhD is an equine behaviourist who advises vets, lawyers and horse owners on all aspects of horse behaviour, management and training. She is also a qualified riding instructor.

CLARE MACLEOD MSc

RNutr, is an independent registered equine nutritionist and author. Visit equinenutritionist.com

DR LINDA GREENING

is head of inclusivity in Hartpury College's Equine Department, where she also lectures in equine behaviour and conducts research into equine sleep.

DANNY ANHOLT is a Fellow of the British Horse Society and a Centre10 Gold Standard Accredited Coach who specialises in bespoke mentoring programmes for coaches and riders.

What does the equine behaviourist think?

According to Dr Debbie Marsden, a routine helps a horse to relax as it gives him confidence in his environment.

"A horse can predict what's going to happen, anticipate it, and get his body ready for it, whether that's feed time, turnout, rest, or exercise," she explains.

Understanding this, says Debbie, can be useful in all sorts of ways: "For example, coming in from the field. If horses are always brought in in a certain order, they will learn to organise themselves to facilitate that, which can avoid bullying and accidents around gateways. Another example is picking out a horse's feet. If the owner does them in the same order, the horse will learn to lift them before he is even asked to do so."

However, there can be a downside to this anticipatory behaviour.

"Going early in a dressage test, or cantering when approaching the canter place on a hack are examples of this," adds Debbie. "That's why the rider should sometimes walk the 'good' canter sections of a ride and only practise parts of a test at a time."

Another downside with a routine is that inevitably things happen to upset it, which can be stressful for the horse. Debbie, therefore, advises incorporating regular, small, planned changes, such as doing things slightly differently at weekends. This way a horse gets used to a little variation.

For horses taken to camps or competitions, Debbie suggests going on "practice" outings to establish an "away" routine.

"Familiar people and the usual handling, grooming, tacking up and warming up practices all really help."

When it comes to taking on a new horse, Debbie cautions against giving the equine time off to "settle in".

"Be mindful of letting the horse rest after a long journey and act within the limits of quarantine procedures, but horses should be handled and exercised as they are used to from the next day to keep things the same," she says. "Ask the seller about the horse's daily routine. Even tiny details about his grooming habits and tacking up can help the new owner keep some elements of the old lifestyle consistent. Every familiar habit, however small, can be comforting."



Horses love to have familiar people around them

1pm

2pm

What does the equine nutritionist believe?

Clare MacLeod says that two aspects come to mind when considering a feeding routine.

"Firstly, we need to think how a horse's gut works. Horses rely on microbes in the digestive tract to help them digest their food. And they need the food they eat to be consistent, day to day, to keep those gut microbes healthy."

This is why it's important not to change a horse's bucket feed suddenly, but Clare points out that the same principle applies to forage and grazing too.

"It's actually quite bad for a horse's gut to be turned out on grass one day and not the next," she says.

For any owner who can't guarantee daily field turnout, she suggests hand grazing or giving the horse some dampened chopped grass on days when he can't graze to keep his diet as consistent as possible. The same applies if the horse is taken to camp or competitions. In these situations, Clare advises taking the horse's own forage from home as his gut will be used to it.

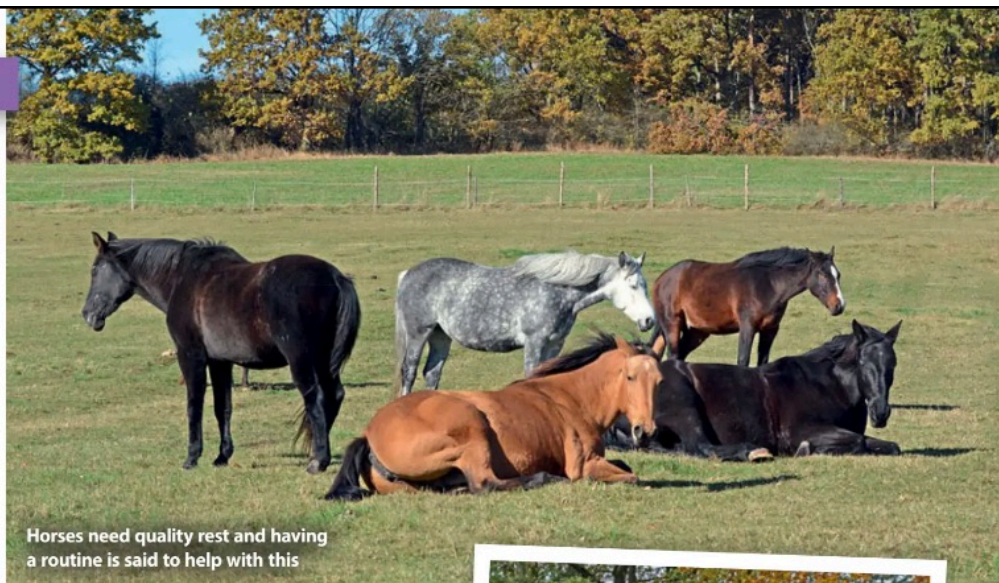
The second aspect is behaviour.

"Horses are very good at anticipating routines. So, the best thing is either a good feeding routine that the owner sticks to, or no feeding routine at all. If your horse is at grass 24/7, it doesn't matter what time you turn up to feed him, and by not having a routine you will stop him from developing any anticipatory stress if you're late one day. Of course, if your horse is stabled sometimes you need to turn up at regular times. In fact, in this situation, it's best to stick to the same feed times every day, even at the weekends, when we love a lie-in, because the horse will be anticipating his bucket feed and could get stressed or be anxious if it's late."

Clare also believes that owners should consider the fact that horses are herd animals when it comes to a feeding routine.



When devising a feeding regime, think how the horse's gut works



Horses need quality rest and having a routine is said to help with this

"A horse's eating patterns are driven by what other herd members are doing. A horse with a poor appetite will eat more if eating in company. Studies have shown that horses get stressed if they have run out of hay and others are being fed. Therefore, if you're on a livery yard, try to synchronise feeding times with other owners, or, if you can't be there when someone else is feeding, ask them to give your horse a slice of hay or a carrot. It doesn't have to be a full bucket feed but just enough to make the horse think that he's a part of herd eating behaviour."

What does the equine sleep expert believe?

Dr Linda Greening has been researching equine sleep at Hartpury University for several years and believes that having a routine can be a factor in helping horses to get enough quality rest.

Her research has informed some changes on the yard at Hartpury.

"We have quite a few loan horses, and it can be a fairly intense environment for them, with others coming in and going out, mucking out taking place and so on. Therefore, the yard team instigated a couple of 'quiet times' on the yard at the same time every day. We think that once the horses have learnt that routine, they should start to anticipate it and use it to rest, and we are currently undertaking a study to test this theory."

Another issue to consider, especially in the winter months, is when stable lights go on and off. Horses are subject to biological rhythms, just like humans, and so they are affected by light and dark. In one of Linda's recent studies (Greening et al, 2021), she found that leaving stable lights on overnight affected the amount of sleep the horses had.

"In a more recent study investigating the effects of light, we discovered that using red lights at night didn't disturb the horses' circadian rhythms in the same way as white lights," she says. "Therefore, if you need to do a late night check on your horse it's worth thinking about using the red setting on your head torch as it's less likely to disrupt him."



A warm-up routine is vital and ensures that horses stay sounder for longer

What does the coach believe?

For coach Danny Anholt having a routine when warming up a horse is particularly important.

"Some years ago, Dr Hilary Clayton studied the effects of a structured warm-up routine, particularly in respect of the walk. Horses who were steadily and systematically warmed up before work stayed sounder for longer," Danny notes.

He has also found that practising a specific floor plan in the warm-up can become a welcome comfort blanket.

"Taking your horse to a competition takes him out of his comfort zone. Surrounded by unknown horses and people might be a challenging prospect for a natural herd animal, particularly an inexperienced horse. Our experience tells us that the moment we slot into the familiar warm-up routine, both horse and rider find solace in it."

Danny adds that there are benefits to a routine that involves hacking too.

"One significant behaviour observed in feral horses that seems to be clear evidence of their attachment to habits is the tendency to follow familiar paths and tracks. I don't see any harm in replicating this natural process by hacking familiar routes," says Danny. "Occasionally, an insecure horse may begin to nap towards home or spook in a place where he has been scared on a previous occasion, but that's where patient, systematic retraining is needed. Changing hacking routes isn't going to solve the problem."

Of course, a rider can't stick to the same exercise and training routines with their horse forever. And different horses need different routines.

"One of the joys of training horses is learning their individual likes and dislikes. Some horses thrive on simple routines, while some love to be challenged. Ridden routines will evolve as the horse matures, becomes stronger and gains confidence," says Danny.

This is where it helps to have a good trainer who can give the rider that

"eyes on the ground" perspective. Danny, meanwhile, is often asked if horses get bored with a routine.

"It's the riders who get bored," he notes. "Remember that nature designed the horse to eat grass for almost the entire day, so the work that we impose on him must be pretty entertaining."

DANNY ANHOLT'S TRIED AND TESTED WARM-UP ROUTINE

How to ride it

- 1 Walk on a long rein (not loose) for 5-10 minutes minimum. The horse must be in a low, round frame.
- 2 Leg yield in walk three or four times each way, with a stretch between each one.
- 3 Trot with frequent changes of rein (each long diagonal). Walk for three or four strides while changing the bend (at X).
- 4 Progress to a three-loop serpentine with walk steps over the centre line.
- 5 Walk and stretch briefly.
- 6 Perform a four-loop serpentine. The 'S' shape of the loop is important to enhance lateral suppleness in the change of bend.
- 7 Walk and stretch.
- 8 Canter large in a light seat with neck flexions to the inside and outside.
- 9 Walk and stretch to change the rein.
- 10 Lengthen and shorten the canter.

11 Perform a small circle at A and C to collect, then lengthen on the long side. Push the boundaries a bit, but with the lightest possible aids, especially the hands. Develop a strong upper body position to enable collection.

12 Walk and stretch when changing the rein.

13 Counter canter can be introduced at this stage when the canter is supple.

Remember...

- It's important to stretch in walk (briefly) between each exercise and when changing the rein.
- Don't expect significant results until the routine has been established for some time (weeks or even months).
- The movements aren't being judged, so leg yields and counter canter are employed as exercises and will develop over time.

The occasional curveball

There are proven benefits — both physical and mental — to keeping a horse in a routine, and while some anticipatory behaviour can be problematic, particularly around feeding time, for the most part it works to an equestrian's advantage. However, even when an owner tries their best to give their horse a routine, life inevitably sometimes gets in the way, but building in small, regular variations will help a horse to cope better when life throws a curveball.

HAVING A ROUTINE IS GOOD FOR PEOPLE TOO

Research has shown that a daily routine reduces stress and makes humans more productive. Doing things in the same order means that the human brain can go into 'autopilot', causing it to use less mental energy. This reduces decision fatigue and leaves a person with more 'head space' for other things.

Routines have also been shown to help people feel more in control, thus boosting self-esteem. Therefore, mucking out the stable in the same way every day or making up feeds in the same order could actually have a positive effect on mental wellbeing.

CASE STUDY



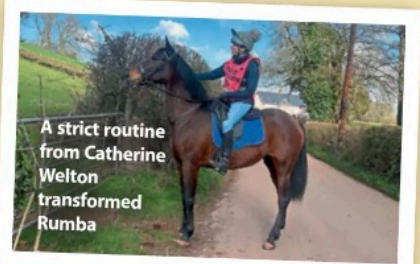
Rumba once ran along the fence line when turned out — but this no longer happens

'Within a week or so Rumba's box-walking had stopped'

Rumba, a seven-year-old PRE mare, was very anxious after her arrival from Spain. She had been bought to produce and sell on, but after a few weeks she was still too unsettled to move on. She box walked in her stable and if she was turned out she would run along the fence line, writes Catherine Welton.

I offered to look after Rumba while her owner worked out what to do with her. I integrated her into my own horse's routine, with regular feeding times and turnout, ensuring that she always went out and came in at the same time as my gelding, Moriarty. Within a week or so Rumba's box-walking had stopped, and she could be turned out for hours at a time without showing any signs of stress.

I am lucky to have a brilliant vet, Ashley Stewart of Evolution Equine in Somerset, who is always on hand with advice alongside practical vet duties.



A strict routine from Catherine Welton transformed Rumba

Ashley told me: "When a horse has experienced a big upheaval like Rumba had, creating a routine that they can rely on is really helpful. With a routine, the horse has confidence that her needs will be met. She knows when she will be fed, when she will be turned out and that she will have company. That takes away a lot of the stress."

As for what happened to Rumba — well, you can probably guess. I ended up buying her myself! 🐾