



GOLDEN OLDIES

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Not too long ago, a horse that was in the mid to late teens was considered “old” with its useful years behind them. The American Quarter Horse Association, the largest global equine breed registry, considers horses seniors at 16 years old. Looking at the ages of medal-winning Olympic equine athletes this year in individual freestyle dressage, eventing, and jumping, the average age is 14 years old with the oldest 17 years. The oldest equine Olympic athlete competing in this summer’s games is 21 years of age, so if these horses are “old”, how can they be successful in some of the highest levels of equine athletics?

Research has not given a set age on when a horse is considered geriatric; rather, owner perception and the presence of clinical conditions associated with aging are key. Most owners consider their horse “old” at approximately 22 years and, when making a purchasing decision, consider horses aged greater than 16.5 years old a negative attribute. Clinical

conditions such as decreased immunocompetence, glaucoma, arthritis, dental abnormalities, impaction colic, and pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID) are all associated with equine ageing. Old horses would often be characterized by being of poor body condition because before deworming, or anthelmintic, management was commonplace, it was thought that chronic parasitic scarring in the digestive tract may have caused malabsorption problems, resulting in thinner older horses. Rotational deworming is not currently recommended by the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP), so speak with a veterinarian on when to deworm, what parasites to target, and how to help prevent anthelmintic resistance.

A deeper understanding of equine dental care has also impacted senior horse health, with the AAEP recommending a dental exam annually for most horses, and potentially more frequently for those over 20 years. Although equine teeth continuously


erupt from the gumline, as horses age, their teeth “expire.” When this occurs varies depending on an individual horse’s lifetime dental care, diet, and genetics. An expired tooth may fall out or is easily pulled by a veterinarian and will not reform. If a senior horse is having trouble maintaining body condition, drops feed, or leaves chewed wads of forage on the ground (called quidding), a dental exam should be performed. Maintaining dental comfort and teeth grinding surface can help maximize a horse’s ability to chew.

In terms of nutrition, some seniors are easy keepers while others require additional calories, so familiarity with the equine body condition scoring (BCS) system is important. If a horse has dental issues or problems gaining weight, consider a “complete” feed. Many feeds advertised for seniors are complete feeds, but not all. Complete feeds have a higher fibrous component, allowing the feed to replace a horse’s daily forage requirement if the horse has trouble consuming enough long-stem forage to meet their needs. Many are processed through extrusion, which “predigests” certain nutrients to make them easier for the horse to utilize. Complete feeds have guidelines for feeding a horse with or without access to forage. Some examples of complete feeds for senior horses include Nutrena SafeChoice Senior, Purina Equine Senior, and Seminole Wellness Senior Mix. Divide the daily required amount of feed into at least two, and ideally three or more, feedings. This will help spread out what horse eats throughout the day and reduce


idle time. Idle time can also be reduced by introducing chaff, hay cubes, or hay pellets into a senior horse’s diet. Depending on an individual horse’s dental needs and feeding behavior, soaking or adding water to the feed or forage can further prolong eating time.

Although horses retain their athletic capabilities as they age better than humans do, owners often reduce the workload of their equine athletes as they age. Some horses can remain competitive at higher levels when conditioned properly, but others may need to “step down” in level or work intensity. It all depends on the individual horse, so be mindful if the horse in question seems to tire quicker, act stiff, become lame, or does not seem to enjoy their work. Horses used to a heavy riding schedule and frequent human interaction may become depressed when work suddenly ceases, so consider having a routine of groundwork, trail riding, or low intensity work to keep them stimulated.

Fortunately, horses are living longer and more productive lives due to improvements in equine nutrition, management, and veterinary care. With no set age being considered “old,” owners should remember that by being proactive about management and regular care, and mindful of special considerations for dentistry and nutrition, senior horses can still have value as riding, and potentially, competition horses.



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