Feeding the competition horse correctly can prove to be quite a challenge. For these individuals not only is it important they receive the right amount of essential vitamins and minerals, but they also need their diet to provide the correct amount of energy. Too much and the horse may become too sharp, meaning a loss in concentration not to mention control; too little and there's the risk of them running out of stamina and that all important sparkle.

Forage First

Even for horses competing regularly, forage should still form the basis of their diet. However, unfortunately what goes into a horse's net is frequently not thought important as it's considered purely bulk. Whatever level you're competing at, forage can have a huge impact on general wellbeing and performance so it is important not to overlook this part of the diet. Firstly (and perhaps most obvious) is the requirement for clean, dust and mould-free hay/haylage. Dusty, mouldy forage is highly likely to cause respiratory problems which will affect overall health and undoubtedly impact on the performance of any horse. Transporting horses often means prolonged periods of time in the confined space of a lorry/trailer, so a clean, dust free forage is essential. Additionally, travelling can be a stressful experience for any horse, so providing a highly palatable forage source is more likely to tempt a stressed/excited individual to pick at his net en-route to a competition. Keeping this trickle of fibre moving through his digestive system will help to buffer the natural stomach acidity and reduce the chance of your horse or pony being prone to gastric ulcers which we know to be particularly prevalent in competition horses. Lastly, don't forget that forage sources such as bagged forages can have a valuable impact on the calories in your horse's diet; for example, one with higher calories is ideal for horses who are competing regularly and require a little help maintaining their weight or stamina during prolonged exercise. Lower calorie options meanwhile are invaluable horses and ponies prone to laminitis or those resting or in light work.

Having found appropriate forage for your competition horse, there are a multitude of concentrate feeds to pick from! A good starting point is to be honest about your horse's workload. The nutritional needs of a child's show pony are likely to be very different to those of an endurance horse, whose nutritional needs will be very different to those of a show jumper. All these horses can be considered competition horses in their own right, but whilst the show jumper may want a quick hit of fast release energy, an endurance rider will be looking for slow release energy to fuel the horse over a long period of time. Higher calorie fibre choices may suit the endurance horse as these supply calories through controlled energy whilst a small pony prone to laminitis will require low sugar and starch levels. Remember that whilst there is a large choice of competition feeds available, many will be high in cereals (and therefore starch) which can cause unwanted, excitable behaviour! Whatever product you decide to feed, if it contains vitamins and minerals, you must be comfortable feeding them at the manufacturer's recommended amount. This is the amount the manufacturer has calculated is appropriate for your horse's weight in order to provide him not only with calories, but also those essential vitamins and minerals he is unlikely to be getting from his grazing and forage. Many a lazy horse only seems lazy when in reality he isn't fit enough for the work being asked of him, and is lacking in the essential vitamins and minerals he needs due to restricted intake of his bucket feed.

Protein…Friend or Foe?

Many riders are still very cautious about the level of protein contained in their horse's feed. Historically, protein was blamed for causing the excitability/heating effects which we now know are actually caused by the inclusion of too many calories, particularly from high levels of starch and sugar in the diet (cereals being the main offender). In fact the horse doesn't really utilise protein as an energy source. Its main role is one of growth, renewal and repair within the body. Whilst horses are highly unlikely to be deficient in protein, it is an essential component in the diet as it consists of chains of amino acids, some of which provide the building blocks to help us improve the horse's topline/ muscle development when the horse is worked correctly. Remember also, quality not quantity, is key when thinking about protein. Good quality protein (ie. high in essential amino acids) is found in feedstuffs such as alfalfa, soya and linseed.

BETA NOPS

If the horse is competing at a level where testing for prohibited substances is likely, it is important to ensure all feeds/supplements carry the BETA NOPS(Naturally Occurring Prohibited Substances) logo. This indicates that the manufacturers have had to comply with extremely stringent guidelines to try to ensure that there has been no contamination from naturally occurring prohibited substances. For professional riders, a positive blood test can have devastating effects on their career, so this is an extremely important consideration. Many chaffs, mixes and cubes and also some forages will have NOPS approval.
Top Tips for Feeding the Competition Horse:

- Choose clean, dust free forage to maintain respiratory health. This is especially important when travelling.
- Provide a palatable forage which even a stressed or excited horse may be tempted to nibble on.
- Don’t underestimate the value of good quality forage to provide calories (energy) in the diet of very sharp horses.
- Don’t make sudden changes to the diet on the day of the competition.
- During the summer months or when the horse is sweating a lot, ensure salt or electrolytes are added to the diet.
- If the horse is a fussy drinker, make sure water is taken from home, try flavouring water, or offer small very slushy feeds.
- Ensure vitamin and mineral as well as calorie requirements are met to allow the horse to perform at its optimum.