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# EXTRA

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Clipping and Blanketing  
Insights from Top Grooms

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# CLIPPING & BLANKETING

## Insights from Top Grooms

Alan Davies and Carmen Thiemann share their systems for keeping horses comfortable.

By Karen Brittle

**T**he days are getting shorter and your horse's coat is getting longer. You've pulled sheets and blankets out of storage and are ready for the first cold nights. You find yourself studying the weather 10 days out: Is it time to clip yet? If so, what type of clip? And then, which blanket? Of course, you're concerned about your horse's optimal comfort at rest and at work as well as how to maintain his healthy skin and general well-being once he's been clipped. Here, top international horse-care experts Alan Davies, international traveling groom for British Olympians Carl Hester and Charlotte Dujardin, and Carmen Thiemann, who oversees care for all of German Olympian Ingrid Klimke's horses, share their insights on clipping and blanketing.

### Clipping: It Depends on the Individual

Davies has been a professional groom for his entire adult life and has been with Hester, Dujardin and their horses since 2011. He has been recognized by Team Great Britain as Groom of the Year in 2015 and by *Horse & Hound* magazine as 2016 Groom of the Year. When it comes to providing exceptional care and, in particular, to clipping and blanketing, Davies emphasizes the importance of tailoring his approach to each horse as an individual.

According to Davies, "When and how often to clip varies greatly from horse to horse. We have horses in our barn who may not need to be clipped at all if we start blanketing early enough in the autumn, as they grow and maintain a beautiful thin coat beneath the blankets. Valegro, on the other hand, is a hairy horse—last winter I clipped him seven times."



**Clipping and blanketing needs vary greatly from horse to horse. Experts like Alan Davies and Carmen Thiemann advocate knowing your horse and making an effort to understand what his body is telling you.**



Arnd Bronkhorst - Arnd.nl

**Alan Davies (left), the international traveling groom for British Olympians Carl Hester and Charlotte Dujardin, pictured here with Valegro**

Generally speaking, Davies begins to clip horses sometime in September, which is in accordance with England's climate and the intention that the horses will compete internationally throughout the winter season.

In her book *Training Horses the Ingrid Klimke Way*, Klimke writes: "Every barn needs a good soul who is there for the horses, looking after them, keeping them in sight, feeling for them." She is referring to Thiemann, who has overseen the management of Klimke's horses for more than two decades and was distinguished with the FEI's 2013 Best Groom Award.

Klimke and Thiemann are known for their holistic, horse-friendly approach to equine management. For example, all of Klimke's horses, even world-class competitors, are turned out to pasture on a daily basis and all receive regular attention from an acupuncturist as well as their conventional veterinarian. Thiemann's approach to clipping and blanketing reflects this holistic philosophy. "I first clip horses during the fall when they begin to get their long and thick winter coat," she says. "When exactly I do the first clip depends on how quickly the horse begins to sweat while working and also how long the coat is. Only very seldom and reluctantly do I ever clip a horse during the summer—doing so disrupts the horse's natural metabolic processes

and really throws horses out of whack in terms of their natural ability to regulate temperature and hair growth."

For Thiemann, the type of clip depends on the horse's workload, turnout schedule and whether or not the horse will be showing. Thiemann explains, "At our stable, the horses are still turned out daily all winter long. I have to think about this when it comes to clipping and blanketing because they will need more protection and warmth on their backs and in the kidney area in order to be comfortable and maintain wellness when turned out." Therefore, for young horses and horses who do not compete much, Thiemann prefers a blanket-clip pattern, which keeps the horse cool at work but also provides hair coverage along his complete topline for turnout.

For horses who do compete regularly throughout the winter, Thiemann does a full-body clip, leaving only a patch of hair in the shape of a saddle in the saddle area.

Davies says he prefers a full-body clip for horses schooling and competing throughout the winter. Removing all the hair simply makes it easier to maintain cleanliness and keep the horse comfortable before, during and after work. Hester's and Dujardin's horses get turned out daily in most weather, so choosing the right blankets becomes crucial once the horses are clipped. Davies also men-

tions that Hester's stable is designed with a traditional courtyard, so each stall has a window that allows the horses to look out into the area. The stalls also have a window at the back that is opened during the day, which increases ventilation and offers the horses an alternate view. Because of the open design, the horses are exposed to and enjoy a lot of fresh air even when they are inside.

The flip side of this is that horses who have been body-clipped will need to regulate their own temperature against the elements 24 hours a day, so Davies needs to blanket accordingly.

Davies explains the importance of sound grooming protocols before and after clipping both to ensure the horse feels good and to support skin health and coat regrowth. According to Davies, "I want the horse to be as clean as possible before the clip—that just makes it easier to execute. After the horse is clipped, I go over his whole body with a hot cloth, mixing a little antiseptic into the water to reduce the likelihood of skin irritations. I then go over the horse with a very soft brush."

Even when a horse has a full-body clip, Davies is an advocate for daily grooming that includes a rubber curry comb, "flicky" [hard] brush and a soft body brush. He calls himself "old-fashioned" in that way but explains: "I still like to use the curry comb to massage them and rub the skin—I think it helps the coat grow through naturally and helps stop the skin from getting too dead. Regular grooming prevents the coat from growing in dull and it gives the horses a nice distraction as well. I end with a good, old hot cloth run over the whole body."

When it comes to clipping legs, faces and ears, Davies and Thiemann both strive to match common-sense considerations with the aesthetic requirements of the competitive dressage arena. Thiemann says, "I always shave the pasterns



**Carmen Thiemann (pictured) and Ingrid Klimke are known for their holistic, horse-friendly approach to equine management.**

because they stay cleaner that way. Also, horses can easily develop scratches [a fungal infection] under a long coat in the pastern area, especially if they are regularly turned out on wet grass." Thiemann prefers to clip horses' heads and ears, but only externally, so the horse appears tidy and does not sweat as much under the bridle.

Germany has passed legislation that bans the shaving of the inside of horses' ears as well as the long hairs on the muzzle and around the eyes. The basis for the law is that horses need this hair (technically called vibrissae) in order for them to have optimal spatial awareness and discretion about what they ingest and for insect protection. Therefore, competitors at equestrian competitions in Germany can be fined if these hairs are clipped, a policy that Thiemann adheres to and supports because she believes the facial hair does have an important function for horses and leaving it in place promotes overall well-being.

### **Blanketing: Layers Are Key**

According to Davies, properly blanketing horses throughout a long winter season, especially those who may travel to compete in a different climate, is a matter of "constant checking and rechecking." Generally speaking, signs that a horse is overblanketed or getting too warm include the presence of dampness/sweat

under the blanket or the horse's skin feeling very cold under the bottom-layer blanket (as if he may have started sweating underneath and then dried again). In contrast, signs that a horse is underblanketed and getting cold include prolonged shivering, changes in his activity level (i.e., unusual restlessness or lethargy) or, over time, changes in his body condition. If one slides a hand under the bottom-layer blanket, the horse's coat should feel warm to the touch and completely dry. Thiemann adds: "When a horse is too cold, his entire coat will stand up on end. His muscles will appear tense and the whole horse will appear cramped in the way he's standing."

Thiemann says she cannot identify a specific temperature at which blanketing becomes relevant as this varies greatly from horse to horse. She explains, "Some horses run warm and never need as heavy a blanket. Others may grow a coat faster and require a thicker blanket to prevent it from coming in so fast." She says horses in Klimke's barn use all types of blankets: stable blankets of every weight, anti-sweat sheets, rain sheets for turnout. Yes, she's a fan of neck covers for horses who have been freshly clipped, both with their regular blankets and anti-sweat coolers.

Davies generally starts out with horses wearing a cotton sheet, then adds a mid-weight blanket on top and, further into

the winter, a heavy-weight rug. He is a proponent of layering and will add layers as needed between the cotton sheet and the top rug. Some blanket brands come with a layering/liner system, but it is also possible to create layers with other pieces, such as a fleece dress sheet. Davies explains that some horses can tolerate more blanketing than others and that it is important to avoid horses getting too hot under the blankets, which can cause a chill, lead to illness and/or cause skin irritations and rashes. No, he is not "a huge fan" of neck covers because they cause mane rubs. Davies explains, "In the depth of winter, we'll get out the neck covers, but I don't like to keep them on all the time because they tend to rub the mane in places. In dressage, the beautifully plaited mane is such a huge part of turnout, so if we can avoid using the neck covers and still keep the horse comfortable, we do."

Among the horses under Davies' care, "Valegro ends up with a cotton sheet, woolen blanket and top rug. Uthopia is much finer, so he'd get more blankets than Valegro. In contrast, Nip Tuck has been used to living out most of his life. When he was a young horse, he used to live out all the time and, as a result, he's a bit hardier. He's a hot horse and doesn't need that many blankets. You have to know your horse, see them as an individual and know what's best for them."

Thiemann agrees that knowing one's horses well is key to a customized approach to clipping and blanketing. She says, "In Germany, we often speak of listening closely to our horses under saddle. It's a term that implies the rider can hear what the horse is telling her, even though it may be just a wordless whisper. I think the same concept applies to horse care—grooms, riders and owners need to listen closely to understand what the horse needs at any given point." 🐾

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# No Stirrups, No Problem

Try this expert advice to keep you and your horse comfortable in work without stirrups.

By Ann Guptill

**W**ork without stirrups is a great tool for riders in any discipline. It may be underused in dressage but can be incorporated into training programs in small doses that will reap positive rewards. “No Stirrups November” is well known to hunter riders but, I find, less so in the dressage world. With the traditional end of the competition season, before the start of winter showing for those who live or migrate to warmer climates, this challenge can be a good tool for dressage riders, students and instructors.

## What are the benefits of working without stirrups? Why is it so frequently recommended?

Riding without stirrups allows a rider to reach another level of feel, balance and suppleness in the saddle and can be used to effectively solve a variety of rider issues, at any level of training.

**Before crossing the stirrups over, pull the stirrup buckles down below the saddle skirt to get bulk out of the way before pulling them forward and crossing them.**

No stirrup work can help a rider increase awareness of her own biomechanics as well as the horse's. Riding without stirrups will teach the rider to maintain a sense of balance, build core strength and improve her feel of the horse underneath her. This feel is developed by learning to ride in rhythm and with the movement of the horse.

## Do I need to be concerned about making my horse's back sore if I work without stirrups?

As a rider, you must be sure to carry the weight of your body over your legs and not take all of your weight in your seat. Without stirrups to support your weight, you must be sure to stay tall in the saddle and keep your vertical alignment (shoulder/hip/heel). It is also important for a rider to stay symmetrical from left to right, carrying an equal amount of weight on both sides of the body and seat, keeping the shoulders and hips level and not collapsing or leaning in either direction.

## What can I do to prevent my horse from becoming back sore as I work without stirrups?

When starting work without stirrups, it is important, as with any new exercise, that it be done in moderation and introduced in small increments. The best way to condition horses and riders to no-stirrup work is to use intervals of work with and without stirrups. A new exercise program needs to be started slowly for both the rider and the horse.

For example, after a good warm-up of walk, trot and canter to be sure the horse's back and the rider are warmed up, take the stirrups away for a few laps or a few minutes, then return to stirrup work. Gradually increase the duration of the no-stirrup work. It is a good idea to alternate the no-stirrups work with rising trot and stretching the horse over his back. This will allow both the horse and rider to stretch. Remember, it is essential that you carry your body weight over your entire leg and not take all of your weight in your seat alone. To be sure that the rider does not use the reins for balance it is a good idea to have a safety strap attached to the front of the saddle. The rider can use this to center herself and rebalance as needed. She can keep her reins in hand and just use an index or pinkie



Paula de Silva - Arnd.nl

finger on the strap or grasp the strap with her whole hand if needed.

### What are good exercises to do on the longe line without stirrups?

There are a multitude of exercises available for riders to use on the longe. This, of course, has to be done on a safe, experienced longe horse with an instructor who has a wide variety of exercises to use. USDF Certified Instructors must teach seat lessons on the longe in their certification exams so they are a very good resource for this, as is the USDF Longeing Manual. All exercises need to be done with a horse who is accustomed to riders moving around in the saddle with swinging arms and legs. It is also best to do the exercises at first with the rider lightly holding a strap on the front of the saddle, and in a quiet, safe arena. Exercises on the longe help riders develop independent aids and improve suppleness, timing and feel. The rider must maintain a basic balanced position and keep lateral and longitudinal alignment in mind when doing the exercises.

#### Upper Body Exercises:

- **Arm Circles.** Move your arms like you're doing the backstroke, alternating left and right, while keeping your torso centered. If circling your outside arm, be sure to keep the inside shoulder back, facing the direction of the circle, aligned with the horse.
- **T Position.** Hold both of your arms straight out to the side, forming a "T" with your upper body. Be sure to keep your hands as high as your shoulders. Once you are straight and steady, turn your trunk to the inside of the circle, keeping your legs and seat even on each side of the horse and your hands/arms as high as your shoulders. Straighten, then turn to face the outside of the circle. Continue alternating directions, twisting your trunk to face the inside and outside of the circle

without allowing your torso to collapse or fold or your legs to change position.

- **T Position.** Hold both of your arms out to the side, forming a "T" with your upper body, then alternate lowering one arm from shoulder level and raising it back up.
- **Hands to elbows.** Put your hands behind your lower back and touch opposite elbows.
- **Remove one glove and pass it to the opposite hand behind your back**
- **Toe Touches.** Reach down to touch your toe on the same side and then reach across and touch your toe on the opposite side of your horse

#### Lower Body/Leg Exercises:

- **Legs Away.** Lift your legs up and off the saddle out to the side, keep your alignment, holding for a determined number of seconds then relaxing
- **Leg Scissors.** Swing one leg forward while the other is stretched back behind the seat. Keep your torso centered and shoulders level when your legs are swinging.
- **Quad Stretch.** Pull your heel up to your buttocks and grasp the heel/ankle with your hand on the same side. Start on the inside where the instructor can best see your alignment, then do the outside. It is important to stay square on your seat and not collapse toward the leg you are lifting.
- **Ankle Circles.** Twirl your toes clockwise for 5 to 10 circles, then counter clockwise, work-

**Riding without stirrups allows a rider to reach another level of feel, balance and suppleness in the saddle.**

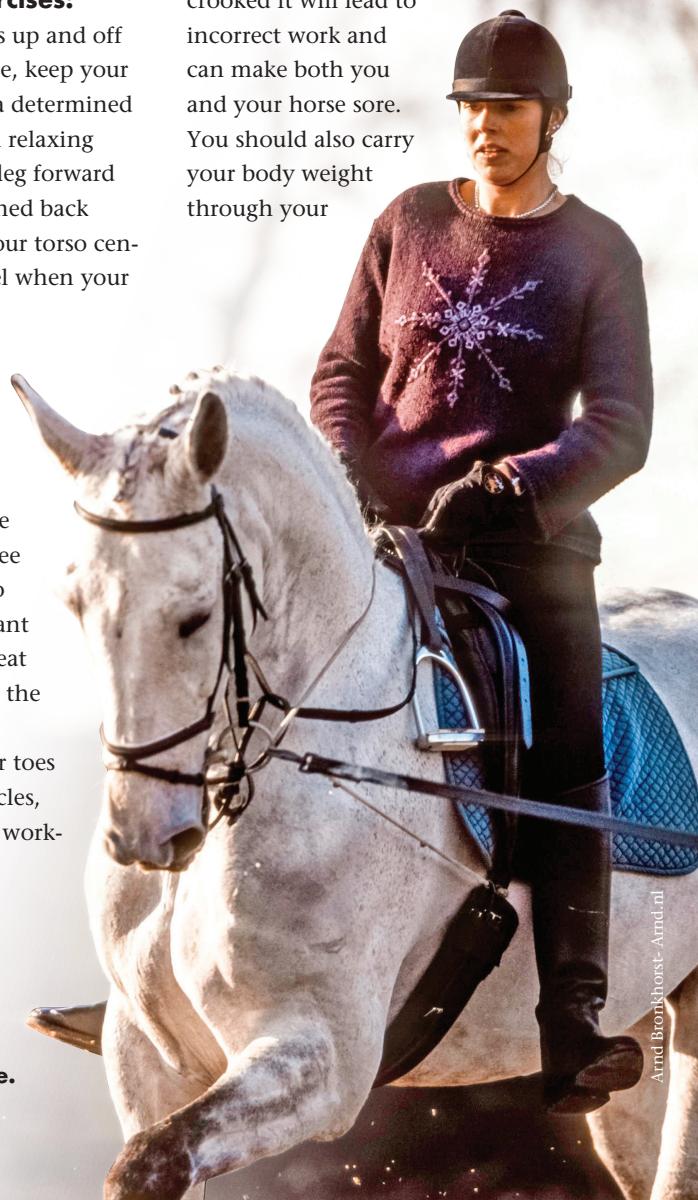
ing both ankles at the same time

### How do I know if I'm working without stirrups correctly?

Your horse will tell you! If the horse remains happy in his work, supple and over his back, you are successful. If you, as a rider, start to become more aware of your seat and its influence, and in a supple way feel stronger and more connected in your seat and core, you are working successfully.

### What should I avoid doing when riding without stirrups?

You should always stay centered in the saddle. If you become crooked it will lead to incorrect work and can make both you and your horse sore. You should also carry your body weight through your



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whole leg and avoid taking the bulk of your weight in your seat or lower back. Here are some other things to avoid:

- leaning to the inside or outside of the horse or saddle. Often on the longe, the centrifugal force of the circle can cause the rider to sit outside the center, collapsing the inside rib cage
- drawing your legs up, which increases the weight in your seat
- pinching with your knees, which blocks the flow of energy through your leg
- leaning back behind the vertical with your shoulders behind your hips and/or your lower legs in front of your seat. The effect of this “chair seat” puts more of your weight in your seat and lower back and less in your legs.

### **Is it better to simply drop my stirrups, cross them over the horse's withers or pull them off the saddle completely?**

The primary concern is safety. The first choice is to cross the stirrups over the horse's withers in front of the saddle. If the horse is not comfortable with the stirrups there or is unsettled, he may not be the horse to do this work with. Before crossing the stirrups over, pull the stirrup buckles down below the saddle skirt to get that bulk of the stirrup leather out of the way before pulling them forward and crossing them. When crossing the irons, be sure they are under the reins and if you are using a safety strap attached to the pommel, be sure the strap is still accessible.

### **Are there any specific safety concerns that I need to keep in mind, other than the obvious concerns of using a safe horse?**

Ride without stirrups in a safe and quiet arena with minimal distractions. Remember that a fatigued rider is more likely to make a mistake, lose her balance or injure herself. Be careful to increase your no-stirrup work incre-



**British eventer William Fox-Pitt schools Tamarillo without stirrups at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.**

mentally. As I mentioned before, it is advisable to have a safety strap on the front of the saddle. This can be used to center yourself, take a hold of if you feel like you are slipping and to be sure you do not balance on the reins or the horse's mouth. The rider has to have a degree of an independent seat to be able to ride effectively without stirrups. If you do not feel centered or balanced enough to ride without stirrups around the arena, ask your instructor for a longe lesson.

### **What should I focus on when riding without stirrups?**

Balance, symmetry in the rider position. Focus on keeping the horse round and over his back so his back muscles stay up and the abdominal muscles stay engaged to lift the back. When returning to work with stirrups, try to keep the slightly deeper, softer seat you obtained from the work without stirrups. Be careful not to brace against the stirrup irons but to emulate the feel you achieved without them. Some benefits of the work without stirrups can be a longer leg, a more open hip angle and a leg that drapes better around the horse and lies comfortably on his side.

### **How can I make riding without stirrups more interesting so I'm not focused on my burning muscles or other discomfort?**

Focus on the positive and have an end goal to your time riding without stirrups!

Work without stirrups doesn't have to be trot or canter work, it can be walk work on a horse who you trust. It is important to be able to bring a feel of mental and physical relaxation into the no-stirrup work. Work without stirrups can be very beneficial for a rider changing from another discipline to dressage. Some of those riders may need to re-adjust their leg position, lengthen and strengthen it to be able to ride with a longer dressage stirrup. Having grown up as an event rider, I am often surprised by riders who have to stop what they are doing if they lose their stirrups. I encourage riders to continue riding if they lose their stirrups, as long as they are safe and can stay centered in the saddle. They need to learn to regain their stirrups without stopping and/or using their hands to fix the position of their foot in the stirrup iron. This independence of the aids is important in all aspects and styles of riding. 🍎

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