

Buzz Cut

A guide to body clipping your horse.

By Lindsey Finn.

True or False? A horse's hair coat grows long in winter because the weather turns cold.

If you answered false, give yourself a pat. Cold weather plays a part in hair growth, but primarily, the decreasing amount of daylight in fall and winter months triggers the equine body to grow a thicker hair coat in preparation for winter. In the fall, the horse's slick summer coat is replaced with a thicker, longer, and sometimes duller, winter coat. Horses living in pastures or not blanketed require this winter coat for good health.

However, this same shaggy hair can be detrimental to a horse kept in training during winter. Sweat-drenched hair takes hours to dry, putting horses at risk of getting chilled and sick. A long hair coat in a humid climate can lead to fungal or bacterial skin infections. Plus, a shaggy horse is difficult to groom thoroughly.

A common solution to this problem is body clipping. Body clipping removes the long winter coat from some, or all, the horse's body.

Types of Clips

Before clipping your horse, choose the type of clip "design" best suited for your environment and training program. Horses in moderate to hard work will benefit from a clip that exposes more of the skin, allowing rapid cooling during exercise. However, these horses must be blanketed during cold weather. Horses in light work will not require as much of the coat to be removed and therefore, blanketing the horse might not be necessary. The full clip, hunter clip, blanket clip and trace clip are several clip styles that are commonly used in the Southeast. Fergus "Chilly" by Jean Abernethy

Full Clip

The most popular clip for horses in work is the full clip, also called the show clip. The full clip involves removing the coat from the entire body and legs. A horse with a thick coat can be clipped entirely the first time and then in subsequent clippings have the legs left natural. When done properly, a full clip will typically look like a normal summer hair coat, just a few weeks after clipping.

Full Clip by Jean Abernethy

Full Clip
Hunter Clip

The most common clip for horses doing hard work in the field is the hunter clip, which leaves long hair on the back where the saddle lies and on the legs. The hair is left on the back for additional padding under the saddle and the hair on the legs offers protection while traveling through brush. This clip is ideal for fox hunters, trail horses or breeds that have natural feathering on the legs. While the traditional hunter clip suits a hunt seat saddle, variations of this clip include the "eventer clip" or the "plantation clip," where a larger area of hair is left on the back to accommodate different style saddles.

Hunter Clip by Jean Abernethy
Hunter Clip
Blanket Clip

The blanket clip leaves long hair on areas of the horse's back, loins, quarters and legs. Hair is removed from the neck, shoulders and belly. This clip offers the horse protection from the cold while exposing enough of the body to allow more rapid cooling during work than with the trace clip or a natural winter coat.

Blanket Clip by Jean Abernethy
Blanket Clip
Trace Clip

The trace clip removes hair from the underside of the neck, between the forelegs, the belly and the upper part of the hind legs. If the horse is in "medium work," more hair from these areas can be taken off. This clip is suitable for horses that are kept out in the pasture or are not in hard work.

If you choose a hunter, blanket or trace clip, use tape or marking chalk to help you set the lines of your desired clip. For the hunter clip, place your saddle on the horse's back and trace the outline of the saddle for a neat clip. It is also helpful to mark the area slightly larger than the desired clip - remember it is easy to take off more hair, but you cannot add hair back!

Trace Clip by Jean Abernethy
Trace Clip
Ready... Set

First, gather your tools. You will need a good set of heavy duty clippers for the body, a set of trimmers for the legs and face, spare blades, a

screwdriver to change blades, an extension cord, clipper oil or a blade coolant spray, and clipper blade cleaning solution or a small brush to clean hair out of the blades.

1. Begin by securing your horse in crossties or have a friend assist you. Turn the clippers on and allow the horse to get comfortable with the sound. Once you know the horse will accept the clippers, begin actual clipping.

2. If you start on the left side of the horse, hold the clippers in your right hand with the flat side of the blades against the horse. Moving against the grain of the hair, make a long broad pass from the shoulder, up the neck, towards the head. Always use long strokes with even pressure, and keep each pass parallel to, and slightly overlapping of, the pass before it. Continue this process over the entire area of the body to be clipped.

3. Be especially careful at the top of the neck, to avoid accidentally clipping mane hair. Remember, it takes an average of two years to fully regrow a mane! Watch the horse's body language when you clip around the stifle area and other ticklish areas. When you are ready to clip around the elbow, have someone assist you by stretching the front leg forward and holding it up. This will make the skin smoother and easier to clip around.

4. Many owners choose not to clip the horse's face. There is usually not much fat and hair to help insulate the face and head. If you must clip the face, you may choose to clip only the cheeks/jowls and underneath the jaw.

Fergus "Taped Up" by Jean Abernethy
Clip Tips

- If it is cold outside when you begin clipping, find the warmest location possible. Use a blanket or cooler to cover the clipped areas of the horse as you go.
- Never use dull clipper blades. A horse clipped with dull blades looks like a cat that lost a fight with a cheetah! Sharp blades, used on a clean horse, can result in a beautiful clip job with virtually no hair lines.
- If you have never clipped the horse before, practice acclimating the horse to the clippers earlier in the week. Consider inserting small pieces of soft cloth gently into the horse's ears. This will make clippers sound quieter, and it will also keep stray hair from flying in to the horse's ears.
- If you do not clip the legs, you may want to trim the fetlocks and pasterns

to keep the legs looking tidy. Use smaller trimmers as they are easier to handle and have a smaller blade width to use around the bones of the lower leg.

- Never clip a dirty or wet horse. If possible, give your horse a bath the day before it is to be clipped, and spray coat polish on the horse's coat when you are finished. If you cannot bathe, groom your horse well and spray with a coat polish. This keeps blades sliding easily through hair. Dirty and or wet hair causes blades to dull and the clippers to quickly overheat.
- As you clip, the housing of the clippers will get warm, causing hazard to your horse and your clipper motor. When this happens, turn off the clippers, clean out the blades with the small brush and spray them with a cooling spray. This is a good time to check the blades, change them if needed, and measure your progress.
- Using a soft body brush, wipe away all loose hair on the horse's body periodically. You may also want to take a couple of minutes to hand walk your horse and stretch out a bit while clippers cool down.
- Give yourself plenty of time. Some professional groomers can completely clip a horse in less than one hour. If you are clipping for the first time, it may be safer and a good learning experience for you and your horse if you hire a professional groomer, especially if you are clipping before an important competition.
- Clip your horse only after the winter coat has fully grown in. This usually occurs in mid-fall. Do not clip in the spring unless it is absolutely necessary, as there is potential for damaging the summer hair coat.
- If you must clip before an upcoming competition, clip your horse two to three weeks before the event. This will give you any extra time for touch-ups and allow the coat to grow slightly and regain its shine. Some coat colors look good even after a fresh clipping, while others, like bay, tend to get a mousy brown-gray color.
- Clip in bright light so that you can see your lines. If you are outside, start clipping in the morning. If you clip in a barn, turn on all lights available. " Wear clothes that can get dirty. A long-sleeved, over-sized button down shirt that is worn backwards and buttoned up to the neck will give you plenty of room to move comfortably but will minimize the amount of hair that will stick to you and get into your clothing.
- If your horse must be clipped and is fidgety and potentially dangerous, ask your veterinarian to administer a sedative. This will help you get a

better clip and minimize the risk of getting hurt.

- Keep an extra set of blades handy and know how to change them. When blades become too dull, your spare blades will allow you to keep clipping without running to the local tack store for new ones. Most tack stores have blade sharpening available, or can refer you to a specialty store that does. This is a more efficient way of keeping blades sharp rather than buying a new set every time you need to clip.