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Life on the Track: How One South Wales Yard Keeps Native Ponies Happy, Healthy and Moving

Guest blog by Elizabeth Atwell, Hollytree Track System

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Nestled in a steep, wooded valley in Monmouth, South Wales, *Hollytree Track System* is home to two lucky ponies — *Panda*, a 14.2hh Gypsy Cob, and *Toby*, her 12hh mini cob companion. Together, they enjoy a life of movement, enrichment, and freedom on a

beautifully designed 250-metre surfaced track that winds its way up and down the hillside.



## Building a lifestyle around movement

Elizabeth first built her track around eight years ago for two small ponies who suffered from metabolic issues and couldn't tolerate grass.

"After they passed away from old age, the track stood empty for a while. Eventually, we decided to carry out full renovations and make the changes we'd always envisioned to better suit larger horses," says Elizabeth.

While Panda and Toby don't have metabolic problems, they are both native types prone to weight gain — making the track lifestyle ideal for them.

## What does a horse track look like?

The Hollytree Track isn't a flat or manicured space. It winds through woodland, following the natural contours of the hillside, with sections between two and four metres wide and a few loops to keep the horses moving.

"We actively encourage habitat growth and wildlife within the areas the ponies can't reach," Elizabeth explains. "They have hay at feeding stations around the track, browse the hedgerows, and enjoy enrichment such as herbs and dried flowers in what we call our *'goodie bowls'*. We've even built a staircase into one of the steep banks for extra challenge!"



## Managing weight and condition naturally

Tracks like Hollytree work because they encourage horses to move — between feeding stations, water, loafing spots, and shelters.

"To truly benefit from a track, it's important to understand the whole concept. It's not the same as strip grazing," says Elizabeth. "Forage should be available 24/7. Combined with movement, mental stimulation, and companionship, the result is a happy, healthy, and active horse."

Many horses on tracks learn to self-regulate their intake when provided with consistent access to low-sugar forage such as late-cut meadow hay. This can make a huge difference

to weight management and body condition, while helping to smooth out sugar peaks and reduce stress.

## **Beyond the scales - welfare and behaviour benefits**

For Elizabeth, the benefits extend far beyond body condition.

“The track ethos is about more than creating a circle around a field. It’s about enrichment — encouraging natural behaviours like browsing, exploring, and social interaction. It’s had such a positive effect on our ponies’ mental wellbeing.”



## **Small space? No problem!**

One of the most common misconceptions is that track systems require vast amounts of land.

“Our track is just 250 metres long and sits on less than two acres,” Elizabeth shares. “We also have a pig paddock, vegetable patch, and an apiary — it’s amazing what you can fit in with careful planning.”

Surfacing the track makes it usable year-round, but there are creative ways to adapt if that’s not an option — from grass mats to carpet, rubber, or even AstroTurf. Electric fencing can also create a simple summer track that can

## **Thinking of trying a track system?**

Elizabeth’s advice is simple: *start small*.

“Try a summer setup and see how your horses respond. The main principles are freedom, forage, and friends. Give them 24-hour access to movement, low-sugar forage placed in different areas, and a companion to share their space with. You’ll be amazed at the difference in their health and happiness.”



## **A final word for owners of overweight horses**

“Tracks aren’t just for overweight horses — plenty of thoroughbreds and warmbloods thrive on them. But for those carrying extra weight, encouraging gentle, consistent movement

and providing low-sugar, trickle-fed forage can transform their health. It helps regulate blood sugar, supports circulation, and reduces frustration. You don't need to get it perfect from day one — every small change makes a difference.”

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## **Are balancers expensive?**

At first glance balancers may seem like an expensive option, but the low feeding rate makes them a convenient and cost-effective solution for good doers...A cost-effective way to provide nutrients without excess calories. Many horses maintain weight easily (if not too easily!) on forage alone. Whilst forage only diets may easily meet or exceed energy (calorie) requirements, they are unlikely to provide a balanced diet and may be lacking in key nutrients such as copper, zinc, selenium, vitamin E and lysine (an essential amino acid or 'building block' of protein). Balancers provide a concentrated supply of vitamins, minerals and amino acids but due to the low feeding rate (typically 500g per day for a 500kg horse), contribute negligible amounts of calories, starch and sugar to the total diet. This makes them the ideal way to ensure good doers receive a balanced diet without compromising their waistline or your bank balance. If you are simply looking for nutrients to balance a forage-based diet, consider a balancer without added functional ingredients such as joint and digestive support. At £22.99 for a 15kg bag, SPILLERS™ Daily Balancer will last a 500kg horse 30 days and cost just £0.76 per day to feed. In comparison, the recommended ration of SPILLERS™ Horse and Pony Cubes (3kg per day for a 500kg horse) would be 5 times higher in calories and cost £1.89 per day to feed! Balancers vs. broad spectrum vitamin and mineral supplements. In most cases, balancers come in pellet form and vitamin and mineral supplements in a powder. This means a balancer can normally be fed on its own (although we generally recommend feeding a balancer alongside short chopped fibre to help extend eating time) whereas a powdered supplement needs to be mixed into a small amount of feed. Although the feeding rate for a pelleted balancer is typically higher than a powdered supplement, the recommended amount of any balancer (except stud balancers) contributes a negligible level of calories to the total diet so won't affect your horse's waistline. One benefit of choosing a balancer may be quality protein – the recommended amount of a pelleted balancer often provides higher levels of amino acids than products labelled as 'vitamin and mineral supplements'. Functional ingredients. Many balancers contain added functional ingredients such as glucosamine and MSM for joint support and pre and probiotics for digestive support. Although this will undoubtedly affect the price tag, the recommended amount of balancer is still likely to cost less than the recommended amount of compound feed. When choosing a balancer, consider which functional ingredients may be of most benefit to your horse.

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