

EVIDENCE-BASED EQUINE NUTRITION

Paddock Paradise & Track Systems

A Practical Guide for UK Horse Owners

Cover: AdobeStock / Femke

Sanoanimal

© 2026 sanoanimal.com

Paddock Paradise & Track Systems

A Practical Guide for UK Horse Owners

Imprint

Author: Dr. rer. nat. Christina Fritz praxis@christinafritz.de

Publisher: © 2026 Sanoanimal, a brand of Quadrian Pte. Ltd. 10 Anson Road, #22-02 International Plaza Singapore 079903 www.sanoanimal.com

Printed in Germany

Cover photograph: AdobeStock/Femke; Cover graphic: ChatGPT

Important notice

Like all scientific disciplines, veterinary medicine is subject to continuous development. Research and clinical experience constantly expand our knowledge, particularly with regard to diseases, treatment approaches and therapeutic methods. Where medications, herbs, feed products or therapies are mentioned in this book, the publisher and author have taken great care to ensure that all information reflects the current state of knowledge. However, neither the author nor the publisher can accept responsibility for statements regarding dosage or application. Readers are strongly advised to check the package inserts and manufacturer's instructions carefully and, where appropriate, to consult a specialist, including to clarify any contraindications in individual cases.

Any treatment of horses is carried out expressly at the user's own risk. Where animals intended for food production are concerned, applicable approvals and restrictions on use must be observed. For animals used in sport, current anti-doping regulations must be respected. This book does not replace consultation with a suitably qualified therapist or veterinary surgeon.

Protected trade names (registered trademarks ®) are not always identified as such. The absence of such identification should not be taken to imply that the name in question is freely available for use.

This work, including all its parts, is protected by copyright. Any use beyond the narrow limits of copyright law is prohibited without the consent of the publisher or author and may be subject to legal penalties. This applies in particular to reproduction, translation, microfilming, and storage or processing in electronic systems.

About the author



Dr. rer. nat. Christina Fritz

Christina has spent many years researching the causes and interconnections behind health problems in horses. Her work is grounded in a holistic approach that brings together conventional veterinary science, naturopathic methods, Traditional Chinese Medicine, osteopathic perspectives, and species-appropriate feeding and husbandry — the subject at the heart of this book.

Her approach is built on the conviction that equine health can only be supported sustainably when all influencing factors are considered together. Rather than addressing individual symptoms in isolation, she focuses on the underlying processes in metabolism, the musculoskeletal system, and the way horses are kept and fed day to day.

As co-founder of Sanoanimal, Christina has spent many years developing content, training programmes and practical concepts for horse owners and equine therapists, with the aim of making complex relationships accessible and applicable in everyday horse management. Her goal is to bridge scientifically grounded knowledge and practical experience — showing how horses can be kept healthy not just for a season, but throughout their lives.

The track system and open stable philosophy described in this book represent one of the most important practical expressions of that approach: a management system that works with the horse's nature rather than against it, and that addresses the root causes of the health problems she encounters most frequently in her work with horses across Europe.

Content

Foreword 7

Why this book exists 9

Part One: Understanding the Why 10

The Wild Horse Blueprint 10

The problem with how we keep horses in the UK 11

The grass problem 11

The movement problem 12

Putting it together 12

Part Two: The Track System Explained 14

What is a Paddock Paradise / Track System? 14

Track width and length 15

What goes where 15

Variants and flexibility 15

The Benefits: What Changes for Your Horse 16

Movement 16

Weight and metabolic health 17

Mental wellbeing 18

Practical and economic benefits 18

Part Three: The UK-Specific Challenges — And How to Solve Them 19

The Grass Problem: Ryegrass, Sugar & Laminitis 19

How British pasture became what it is 19

The sugar question 19

Why year-round turnout is not the answer 20

What the track system changes 20

Reseeding and long-term pasture improvement 21

A note on timing 21

Ground Realities: Clay Soil, Hills & the Mud Problem 21

Know your ground 21

The clay problem 22

Preparing the ground: doing it properly 23

Surface options 23

Hills: problem or asset? 24

Peat and other challenging soils 25

Winter management: realistic expectations 25

Fencing on a Budget: Alternatives to Post-and-Rail 26

Why timber post-and-rail is the wrong choice for a track 26

How electric fencing works 26

Components of an electric fence system 27

A practical hybrid approach 27

Training horses to respect electric fencing 28

Day-to-day maintenance 28

Part Four: Building Your Track System 29

Planning Your Track: From Paper to Posts 29

Start with what you have 29

Size and scale 30

Layout options 30

Placing resources 31

Incorporating woodland and natural features 31
Planning permission and legal considerations 32
From plan to ground 33

Surfaces, Shelters & Enrichment 33
Surfaces 33
Shelters 34
Enrichment 36
Feeding stations 36
Water 37

The Transition: Moving Your Horse onto the Track 38
Why transition matters 38
The dietary transition 38
The environmental transition 39
The hoof transition 39
What to expect in the first weeks 40

Part Five: Living With a Track System 41

Day-to-Day Management 41
Mucking out 41
Feeding 41
Seasonal grazing management 42
Monitoring body condition 43
Fence maintenance 43
Adjusting through the seasons 43

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them 44
The track is too narrow 44
The track is too wide or too long for the group 45
Resources are too close together 45
The groundwork was skipped 45
There is not enough hay 45
The transition was too fast 46
The electric fence is not maintained 46
Social stress goes unnoticed 46
Expecting the system to run itself 46

Track Systems and the Ridden Horse 47
A different kind of fitness 47
Musculature and proprioception 47
Hooves 47
Mental state and trainability 48
Practical considerations 49

Part Six: Real Questions from Real Horse Owners 50

UK-Specific FAQs 50

Appendices 53

Appendix A — Testing Hay and Grass for Sugar: The Refractometer Method 53
What you need 53
For hay 53
For fresh grass 53

Appendix B — Hay and Forage Analysis in the UK 55

Appendix C — Approximate Cost Guide: Building a Basic Track 56

Appendix D — Further Reading and Resources 57

Foreword

The first time I visited the UK in April 2022, I thought I had arrived in the wrong country.

It was a bright spring morning, the hedgerows were just coming into leaf, and the countryside looked exactly as you would imagine it — rolling, green and quintessentially British. And everywhere I looked, horses were standing in pastures so lush they resembled bowling greens. Fat, glossy, well-loved horses, grazing on what looked, to my European eyes, like an almost radioactively green carpet of grass. It was beautiful. It was also, I quickly realised, a disaster waiting to happen.

I come from Germany, where the debate around horse keeping has been moving in a clear direction for well over a decade. We argue about movement, about herd dynamics, about the metabolic consequences of modern improved pasture. We build Paddock Trails. We talk about "Open Stable" Systems — a paddock with a shelter, so the horses live outside around the clock — as a basic welfare standard rather than an eccentric fringe position. And we have learned, sometimes the hard way, what happens when a species that evolved to walk thirty kilometres a day on sparse, varied terrain is instead left to being stabled most of the day or stand on a small square of high-sugar ryegrass from January to December.

What I encountered in the UK was a system that, with the best of intentions, was doing exactly that — and doing it at scale.

Horses kept on pasture year-round sounds, on the surface, like a generous and natural approach. Fresh air and grass, freedom, companionship — what more could a horse want? The problem is that the pastures available to most UK horse owners bear almost no resemblance to the environment horses evolved in. Former dairy fields, reseeded with perennial ryegrass bred specifically to produce maximum calories for cattle, offer a diet so energy-dense that even a few hours of grazing can push a metabolically sensitive horse into crisis. Add to that the fact that overgrazed paddocks under constant horse pressure develop into stressed, short-sward monocultures — and stressed grass, as we will discuss in this book, is actually higher in sugar than tall, actively growing grass — and you begin to understand why laminitis, EMS, sweet itch and mud fever and so many "Never Quite Right Horses" are so extraordinarily common in British horses.

What surprised me just as much as the grass, however, was the almost complete absence of a concept I had taken for granted back home: the Paddock Paradise or Paddock Track system.

In Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the Paddock Trail — as we call it — has become a mainstream approach to horse keeping. Livery yards advertise it as a selling point. Horse owners discuss it in the same breath as feeding and hoof care. The basic idea, developed by American farrier Jaime Jackson after years of observing wild mustangs, is elegantly simple: instead of turning horses out into a paddock where they will stand still and eat, you create a track — a looped pathway running around the perimeter of your land — and you distribute resources like hay, water and shelter at different points around it. Horses move between those resources throughout the day, just as they would in the wild when travelling between grazing, water and resting places.

When I began talking to UK horse owners about this concept, I encountered two reactions in roughly equal measure. The first was genuine curiosity — a spark of recognition, a sense that

this might be the answer to problems they had been trying to solve for years. The second was scepticism, and it was usually the same scepticism, expressed in the same words: *"That would just be a mud bath in winter."* Or: *"My land is too hilly."* Or: *"I couldn't afford the fencing."*

These are not unreasonable concerns. They are, in fact, exactly the right concerns — because the UK presents a specific set of challenges that most of the existing literature on Paddock Paradise, written largely for American or continental European conditions, simply does not address. British clay soils behave very differently from the rocky, free-draining desert terrain where Jaime Jackson developed his ideas. British weather is persistent in a way that tests any outdoor system. British fencing traditions lean heavily towards expensive post-and-rail timber that can make the initial cost of a track system feel prohibitive.

This book was written to bridge that gap.

It is a practical guide, written for the backyard horse owner who has a field, a few horses, and a genuine desire to do better by them — but who needs real, grounded advice on how to make a track system work in British conditions. It is also written for livery yard owners who are beginning to realise that the traditional model of individual paddocks and box stables is not serving their horses as well as it could, and who are looking for something better.

I won't pretend that building a track system is free, or effortless. There is an upfront investment — in groundwork, in fencing, in surfacing — that is real and should not be underestimated. But over years of working with horses and their owners, I have seen again and again that the horses who live well cost less in the long run. Fewer vet bills. Fewer farrier emergencies. Fewer behavioral problems rooted in frustration, boredom and metabolic dysfunction. A horse that moves freely, eats in the way its digestive system was designed for, and lives in genuine companionship with other horses is a horse that stays sound, stays balanced and stays willing.

That is what this book is about. Not a perfect system, not a one-size-fits-all solution, but a practical, adaptable framework that can work on a Welsh hillside or a flat Suffolk field, on a shoestring budget or a more generous one, for two retired ponies or a competition yard of twelve.

I hope it gives you the ideas, the confidence, and the momentum to get started.

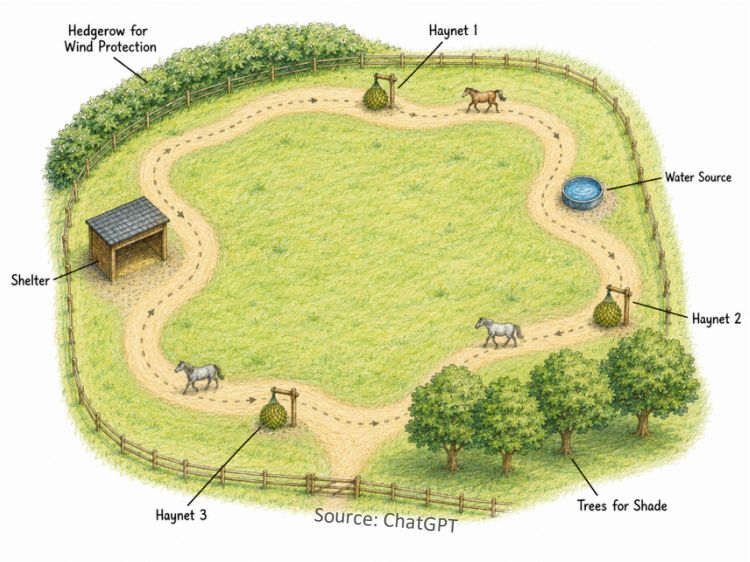
Dr. Christina Fritz
Biologist & Sanoanimal Equine Nutritionist

Why this book exists

Most books about Paddock Paradise or Paddock Track systems were written for dry climates, wide open spaces and post-and-rail budgets. This one was written for the UK.

That means it was written for horse owners dealing with clay soil that turns to porridge in October and stays that way until May. For people keeping horses on former dairy pasture dominated by perennial ryegrass, wondering why their native pony is laminitic again despite "barely any grass." For anyone who has looked at the price of post-and-rail fencing and quietly abandoned the idea before it even started.

The track system concept is straightforward: instead of a static paddock, horses live on a looped pathway around the perimeter of the land, with hay, water and shelter distributed at different points to encourage movement throughout the day. It mimics, in a modest domestic way, the behaviour of wild horses that travel up to thirty kilometres daily between resources. The result is more movement, better hoof health, healthier weight, and horses that are mentally far more content than those standing in a bare paddock with nothing to do.



The concept has been mainstream in Germany, Austria and Switzerland for well over a decade. In the UK, it remains largely unknown — and where it is known, it is often misunderstood, dismissed as something that only works for barefoot horses, not with heavy soil types, or assumed to be impossibly expensive.

This book addresses all of that directly. It explains the underlying principles clearly, so you understand not just what to do but why. It then spends considerable time on the practical realities of building and managing a track system in British conditions — the groundwork, the fencing options, the surface choices, the mud management, the grass and grazing questions that are specific to the UK context. It is aimed primarily at the backyard horse owner, but livery yard owners will find much that is relevant here too.

A note on scope: this is not an academic text, and it does not try to cover every possible scenario. It is a working guide, designed to get you from "this sounds interesting" to "I know how to make this happen on my land." The chapters are deliberately concise. Where you need more detail on a specific topic — hay analysis, metabolic conditions, hoof care — pointers to further resources are provided in the appendices.

Horses kept well are horses that stay well. That is the whole argument, really. Everything else in this book is just the practical detail of how to get there.

Part One: Understanding the Why

The Wild Horse Blueprint

To understand why a track system works, it helps to understand what horses actually are — not the animals we have shaped our management around, but the species that evolved over millions of years before we got involved.

Wild horses are travelling animals. Studies of free-roaming mustang herds in North America show that horses cover between twenty and sixty kilometres per day, not in one sustained effort, but in a continuous, low-intensity drift across the landscape. They move between grazing areas, water sources and resting spots, following established pathways through their home range. They rarely stand still for long. They rarely concentrate in one spot. And they graze little and often — typically sixteen to eighteen hours a day — taking small amounts from a wide variety of plant species as they go.

It was these observations that formed the foundation of Jaime Jackson's work. Jackson was an American farrier who spent years studying mustangs in the Nevada desert during the 1980s, and what struck him most was not their behaviour but their feet. The hooves of wild horses were consistently dense, well-formed and sound — a stark contrast to the chronic hoof problems he was dealing with daily in domestic horses. He began to connect the dots: the movement, the varied terrain, the sparse but diverse diet, and the exceptional hoof health. His conclusions, published in the 2007 book *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding*, gave rise to the track system concept.

The core insight is simple. Domestic horses are the same animal as their wild counterparts. Their digestive system, their musculoskeletal system, their nervous system and their social behaviour all evolved under the same conditions — constant movement, varied footing, continuous low-level forage intake, and life as part of a herd. When we remove those conditions, we do not create a different kind of horse. We create the same horse, living in the wrong environment.

The consequences are well documented. Horses kept in stables for long periods develop stereotypies — cribbing, weaving, box-walking — that are now understood as responses to chronic stress and frustration rather than learned “bad habits”. Restricted movement increases the risk of colic, gastric ulcers and joint problems. Limited social contact affects behaviour and temperament in ways that can make horses harder to handle and train. And hooves that never travel over varied, stimulating terrain simply do not develop the density and resilience that nature intended.

None of this means that every horse needs to roam the Nevada desert. It means that the closer we can bring our horses' daily lives to the conditions they are built for — movement, forage variety, company, continuous access to forage — the healthier and more content they will be. The track system is one practical way of doing that within the constraints of a domestic setting. It will not replicate the wild perfectly. It does not need to. Even a modest improvement in daily movement and environmental variety produces measurable benefits, and those benefits accumulate over a horse's lifetime.

That is the blueprint. Everything that follows in this book is an attempt to apply it sensibly to the realities of keeping horses in Britain.

The problem with how we keep horses in the UK

Britain is a nation of horse lovers. It is also, by accident rather than intention, a nation that has developed some horse-keeping habits that work directly against equine health — and the two things are not unconnected. The more we love our horses, the more pasture time we want to give them, the warmer we want to keep them, and the more carefully we manage their diet in ways that often make things worse rather than better.

The dominant model in UK horse keeping sits somewhere between two extremes. At one end, the competition or sport horse, stabled for the majority of the day, brought out for controlled exercise and carefully rationed feed. At the other, the leisure or companion horse turned out year-round on whatever pasture is available, often with minimal additional management. Both approaches have their problems, but it is the second — by far the more common situation for the average backyard horse owner — that this chapter is primarily concerned with.

The grass problem

Year-round turnout sounds like a generous, natural arrangement. In practice, it depends entirely on what the horse is being turned out onto — and in the UK, the answer is usually pasture that is wholly unsuitable for horses.

The majority of grazing land in Britain was managed for livestock farming, predominantly dairy and beef cattle, for most of the twentieth century. It was reseeded with high-performance grass varieties — above all, perennial ryegrass — bred specifically to produce maximum calories per acre. Ryegrass is exceptionally productive and loves to spread to neighbouring fields. It is also exceptionally high in endophytes that are toxic for horses and can trigger laminitis and abortion in brood mares. But they are also very high in non-structural carbohydrates: the sugars that drive insulin response in horses as well as fructans that lead to dysbiosis of the hindgut.

A horse grazing ryegrass-dominant pasture is not eating grass in any sense that resembles what horses evolved to eat. It is consuming a crop engineered for ruminants with a completely different digestive system, intended to live a very short and extremely productive live for just three to five years. For native breeds, ponies, cobs and any horse with underlying insulin sensitivity, the consequences can be severe: weight gain, Equine Metabolic Syndrome (EMS), and laminitis — the painful and potentially crippling inflammation of the sensitive laminar tissue within the hoof.

Laminitis is not rare in the UK. It is so common that many horse owners have come to regard it as an almost inevitable occupational hazard of keeping certain types of horse. It is not. It is largely an avoidable disease, and its prevalence in Britain is in large part a reflection of how unsuitable most British pasture is for horses.

The problem is compounded by overgrazing. Pastures under constant horse pressure are grazed down to a short, stressed sward. And stressed grass — grass that cannot grow because it is constantly being eaten back — accumulates non-structural carbohydrates rather than using them for growth and will show higher endophyte levels to cope with the stress. The result is that an overgrazed, apparently sparse paddock can be more dangerous for a laminitis-prone horse than a lush, tall meadow. The very field that looks as though there is "barely any grass left" may be the highest-risk grazing on the yard.

Timing adds another layer of complexity. Sugar levels in grass fluctuate significantly throughout the day and across the seasons, peaking on bright, cold days when the grass photosynthesises but cannot grow, and again in autumn when growth slows but photosynthesis continues. Spring is widely understood as a high-risk season; autumn much less so, yet the risk is comparable. A horse with access to pasture year-round is exposed to these risk periods with no management intervention.

The movement problem

Set against the grass question, the issue of movement is perhaps less obviously urgent — but it is just as significant. A horse turned out onto a flat, featureless paddock and left to its own devices does not move anything like as much as one might assume. Without resources distributed across a meaningful distance, without varied terrain to explore, and often without the social dynamics of a larger herd to drive activity, horses in small paddocks spend a great deal of time standing still. Studies comparing horses on conventional turnout with those on track-style systems have found that the latter move three to five times further per day. The difference is not in the horses — it is in the environment.

This matters because movement is not optional for horses. It is fundamental to the function of the hoof, which relies on the pumping action of loading and unloading to circulate blood through its complex internal structure. It is fundamental to gut motility, and therefore to colic risk. It is fundamental to joint health, tendon and ligament conditioning, and the maintenance of a healthy musculoskeletal system as horses age. A horse that stands still for most of the day on soft, wet ground is not resting. It is slowly accumulating a deficit.

Putting it together

The picture that emerges is of a management system that, in trying to be kind, often creates the very problems it is trying to avoid. Too much of the wrong grass, too little movement, too much time on soft ground, and too little environmental variety. The result is a population of horses that are overweight, under-stimulated and frequently unwell — not because their owners do not care, but because the standard approach has never been seriously questioned.

The track system is, at its heart, a response to all of these problems at once. It removes unrestricted access to unsuitable pasture. It creates an environment that encourages movement naturally, without requiring additional ridden work. It provides variety, social interaction and the kind of low-level physical challenge that keeps horses fit and mentally engaged. And it does so in a way that can be adapted to almost any piece of land — including the wet, hilly, clay-heavy land that most UK horse owners are actually working with.

The next chapter explains exactly how.

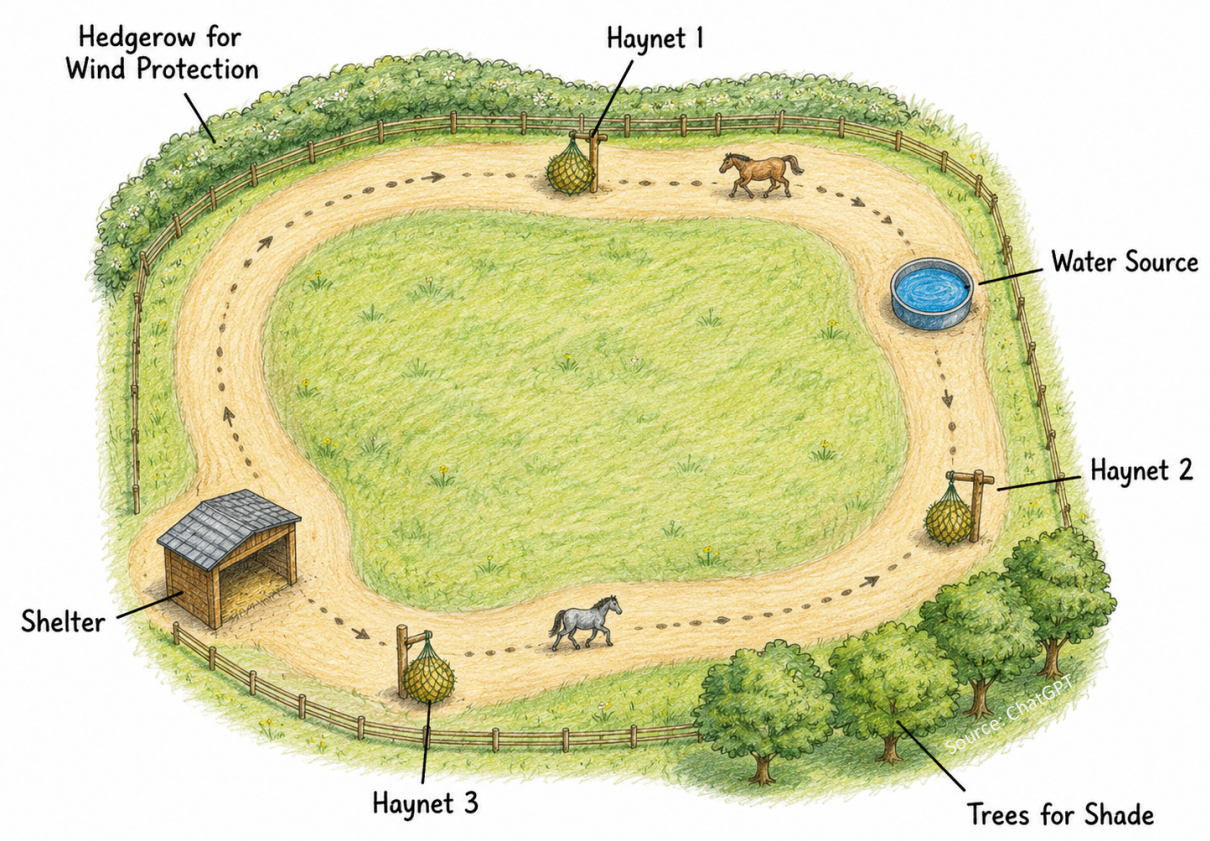

Sanoanimal
Knowledge
to help horses thrive.
Trusted knowledge for a healthier, more natural life with horses.
Read & learn
Practical expert knowledge on horse health.
Nutritionist Training
Study online and become an expert in horse feeding.
Listen to podcasts
Inspiration and knowledge for everyday life with your horse.
More knowledge.
Better horse health.
Explore all content at
www.sanoanimal.com

Part Two: The Track System Explained

What is a Paddock Paradise / Track System?

The principle is simple enough to sketch on the back of an envelope. Take a field. Instead of turning horses into the whole space, fence off a track around the perimeter — typically three to five metres wide — and keep the interior either closed off entirely or reserved for hay production and occasional grazing. Place hay, water and shelter at different points around the track, far enough apart that horses have to walk to move between them. That is the core of it.

What makes it work is the "what's next?" principle. Horses are curious, social animals with an instinct to keep moving and exploring. A track gives them a direction to travel and a reason to travel it. The horse that would otherwise stand at the hay rack all day now has to choose between hay here, water there and shelter somewhere else. That choice — repeated dozens of times daily — adds up to meaningful daily movement without any intervention from the owner.



The key principle of a track system illustrated: hay, water and shelter are placed as far apart as possible, so horses must travel meaningful distances to move between resources throughout the day. The further apart the resources, the more the horses move — not because they are pushed, but because they choose to.

Track width and length

Width matters more than most people initially realise. The minimum workable width is around three metres — enough for two horses to pass each other without conflict. For small, well-matched groups of two or three horses that know each other well, this can work well. For larger groups, yards with changing populations, or any situation where the social dynamics are less settled, five metres is a more comfortable target. A horse that cannot get out of the way of a dominant herd member on a narrow track is a horse under constant low-level stress, which defeats much of the purpose.

Length is a different question, and one that is often overlooked. More land does not automatically mean a better track. A very long track with only two or three horses on it will develop patches of grass along its course or become an overgrazed pasture — and horses will simply graze on the spot rather than keep moving, recreating exactly the overgrazed, stressed-sward problem you were trying to avoid. The track should be sized so that the horse pressure is sufficient to prevent significant grass growth. If your track is developing a green carpet, it is either too wide, too long, or needs more horses on it.

What goes where

The distribution of resources is where much of the design intelligence lies. The key principle is separation: hay and water should never be adjacent, and the shelter or favoured napping spot should be somewhere different again. Ideally, a horse making a full circuit of the track encounters each resource in a different location, with walking required to move between them. Salt and mineral licks, scratching posts, hedgerows, and any enrichment features should similarly be spread around the track rather than clustered in one area.

A resting area — somewhere the herd can gather, socialise and lie down comfortably — is an essential component that is sometimes forgotten. This needs to be wide enough for the whole group and surfaced so it stays reasonably dry. On a wet clay site, this is one of the areas worth investing in properly.

Variants and flexibility

The one non-negotiable principle of a track system is this: the track itself should be grass-free. Horses living on a track are not supposed to be grazing their way around it — they are moving between hay, water and shelter, with their forage intake managed through what you provide rather than what grows underfoot. Everything else is flexible.

How you achieve a grass-free track depends entirely on your land, your budget and your horses. A fully surfaced track — hardcore base, appropriate topping, the whole circuit — is the gold standard, and for a small backyard setup with two or three horses it is an achievable goal over time. But it is not the only way. A natural-soil track with sufficient horse pressure to prevent grass establishing can work well in drier conditions and on free-draining ground. A hybrid approach — surfacing the worst-draining sections and leaving the rest as compacted earth — is the practical reality for many owners, and there is nothing wrong with that.

The interior of the track is equally flexible. Some owners keep it entirely closed and manage it as a hay meadow, harvesting a proportion of their winter forage on site. Others open it for controlled grazing during specific windows — when the grass is genuinely at a safe height

and sugar content, typically late spring into early summer — and close it again in autumn. Others leave part of it as a wildlife habitat, cutting it only once a year in autumn, which benefits insects and biodiversity without putting horses at risk. What works will depend on your land, your horses' metabolic health and how much management time you have.

The layout itself need not follow a single template either. A perimeter loop is the classic design, but a linear track — where horses travel the same path in both directions to reach their resources — works perfectly well on long, narrow plots. L-shapes, figure-of-eights, and tracks that incorporate woodland or hedgerow all have their place. The point is to apply the principle to what you actually have, not to replicate the professional setups of large livery yards with machinery access and twenty horses. A well-thought-out track for two horses on half an acre can serve those horses just as well as a purpose-built commercial system — sometimes better, because the design can be tailored precisely to the animals using it.

Paddock Paradise is best understood as a philosophy rather than a blueprint. The underlying principle — distribute resources to create movement, remove unrestricted access to unsuitable grazing — can be applied in a hundred different configurations depending on the land, the horses and the budget.

Understand the principle: Horses that move. Work with your land. The rest is problem-solving.

The Benefits: What Changes for Your Horse

Ask someone who has moved their horses onto a well-managed track system what they noticed first, and the answer is almost always the same: the horses just look different. More muscle. Better topline. Brighter eyes. A settled, purposeful quality to the way they move around the track that is quite unlike the resigned stillness of a horse standing in a paddock with nothing to do.

These observations are not imaginary, and they are not coincidental.

Movement

Research comparing horses on track-style systems with those on conventional turnout has found that horses on tracks move between three and five times further per day — covering up to fifteen kilometres daily in some studies, compared to the two or three kilometres typical of a standard paddock. This is achieved without any ridden work, without lungeing, and without any effort from the owner beyond the initial design of the system. The environment does the work.

That increase in daily movement has cascading effects throughout the horse's body. The hoof, which depends on the pumping action of repeated loading to circulate blood through its internal structures, becomes denser and better-conditioned. The digital cushion — the shock-absorbing structure at the back of the hoof — develops in response to movement and varied footing in a way that simply does not happen on soft, uniform ground. Horses that have spent years on pasture with soft, flat feet often show remarkable hoof transformation within months of moving onto a track with mixed surfaces.

Gut motility improves with movement, reducing the risk of impaction or gas colic. Joints, tendons and ligaments stay better conditioned. Older horses in particular often show a noticeable improvement in stiffness and overall comfort when daily movement increases, even when the work under saddle stays the same or reduces due to their age.

Weight and metabolic health

For the large proportion of UK horses that are overweight or metabolically compromised, the track system addresses the root cause rather than the symptoms. Removing unrestricted access to ryegrass-dominant pasture and replacing it with constant access to hay — ideally analysed and appropriate to the individual horse's needs — takes control of the diet in a way that a grazing muzzle or strip-grazing system simply cannot match for consistency or horse welfare.

Horses on tracks lose weight steadily and maintain it, without the cycle of restriction and compensatory gorging that often characterises other weight management approaches like feeding hay in meals. Because hay is available ad lib from slow feeders, the horse is never truly hungry — which matters enormously for gastric health, temperament and the avoidance of stress and stereotypies. It is the quality and sugar content of the forage that needs to be managed, not the quantity.



A track system delivers the three essentials every horse needs: forage available around the clock, friends to move and rest with, and the freedom to do both. Get those three things right, and the rest — the sound hooves, the healthy weight, the willing temperament — tends to follow.

Mental wellbeing

This is perhaps the most immediately visible change, and the one that owners often find most striking. A horse with somewhere to go, something to explore and companions to move with is a fundamentally different animal from one standing alone in a bare paddock. Stereotypies associated with boredom and frustration — cribbing, weaving, wood-chewing — frequently reduce or disappear entirely when horses move onto a well-designed track. Anxiety levels drop. Horses become easier to handle, more settled under saddle, and generally more pleasant to be around.

The social dimension is significant here. Horses on a track live as a herd, with the constant low-level interaction, mutual grooming and collective movement that their social nature requires. This is categorically different from horses kept in adjacent paddocks with fence contact, or horses that share a field but have no reason to interact or move together.

Practical and economic benefits

The central field or paddock, no longer under constant horse pressure, can be rested, reseeded with a more horse-appropriate grass mixture, or managed as a hay meadow — potentially producing a proportion of the winter forage on site. This is a meaningful offset against the initial investment in track construction, particularly for owners with more than two or three horses.

Vet bills tend to fall. Farrier work on well-developed, movement-conditioned hooves is more straightforward and horses often can go barefoot. Horses that are fit, well-muscled and mentally content require less remedial intervention of all kinds. The upfront cost of building a track system is real, but so is the long-term saving.

None of these benefits are guaranteed by simply drawing a track on a map and putting up a fence. They depend on good design, appropriate management and the groundwork — sometimes literally — covered in the chapters that follow.



Part Three: The UK-Specific Challenges — And How to Solve Them

The Grass Problem: Ryegrass, Sugar & Laminitis

If there is one chapter in this book that is specific to the UK context, it is this one. The grass problem is not unique to Britain, but it is more acute here than almost anywhere else in the horse-keeping world — and it is so deeply embedded in the landscape that most horse owners have simply never questioned it.

How British pasture became what it is

For most of the twentieth century, British agricultural policy had one overriding priority: productivity. Pasture was managed to produce maximum yields for sheep, dairy and beef cattle, and the tool of choice was perennial ryegrass — a species that, under the right fertiliser regime, produces extraordinary quantities of highly digestible, energy-dense forage. By the time the agricultural intensification of the post-war decades was complete, ryegrass monocultures dominated the British lowland landscape. When those fields changed hands, or when farmers diversified into equestrian use, the grass came with them. Nobody reseeded for horses. Why would they? After all, the fields looked green and productive.

The result is that the majority of horse pastures and hayfields in the UK today are former or current agricultural grassland, dominated by perennial ryegrass and its close relatives. Some have been under horse management for years, overgrazed and horse-sick, with the ryegrass persisting as the most stress-tolerant species in the sward. Others are actively fertilised, producing fresh flushes of lush growth throughout the season. Either way, the grass horses are eating bears almost no resemblance to the sparse, diverse, relatively low-energy vegetation their digestive systems evolved to process.

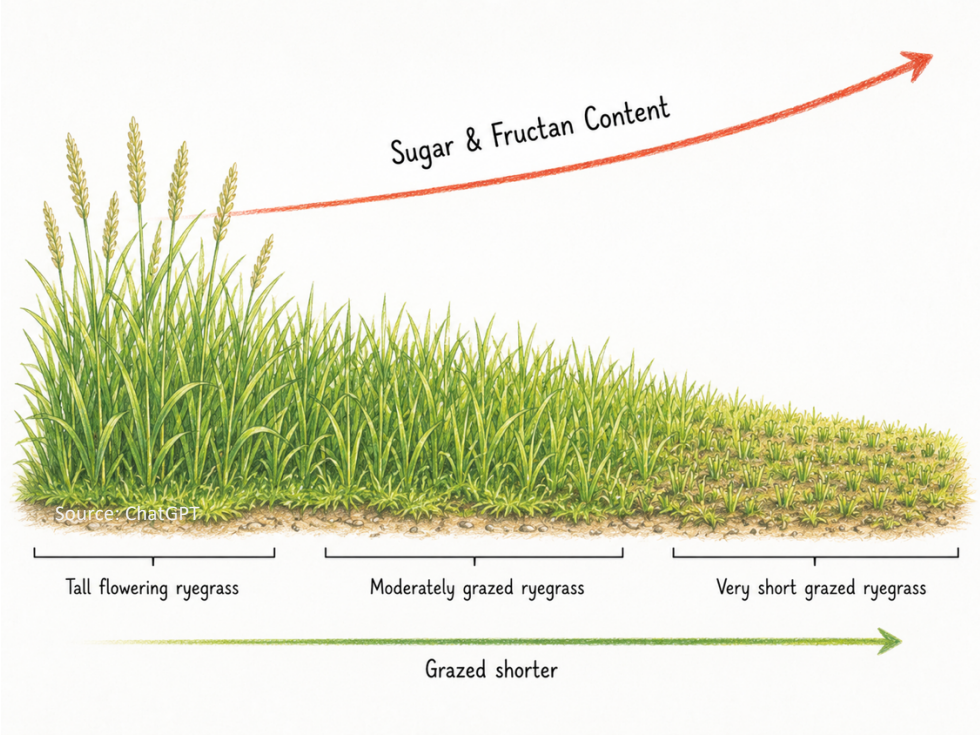
The sugar question

Grasses store energy as non-structural carbohydrates — sugars and fructans. In ryegrass, these levels are consistently higher than in traditional meadow species such as timothy, crested dogstail or the various native fescues. But the absolute sugar content of any grass is not fixed: it fluctuates considerably depending on growing conditions, time of day and season.

Grass produces sugar through photosynthesis and uses it for growth. When growth is restricted — by cold temperatures, drought, overgrazing or any other stress — sugar accumulates in the plant rather than being used. This is the mechanism behind several of the most dangerous grazing situations for horses. A bright, cold morning in early spring: the grass is photosynthesising but the temperature is too low for growth, so sugar accumulates rapidly. An overgrazed paddock in midsummer: the grass is stressed and short, unable to grow properly, with high sugar concentrations in every blade. An autumn flush after a dry summer: rapid growth following stress, with elevated NSC levels throughout.

For a horse with insulin dysregulation — and this includes a very large proportion of native breeds, cobs and good doers, many of whom have never been formally diagnosed — any of these situations can trigger laminitis. The laminar tissue connecting the hoof wall to the pedal

bone is exquisitely sensitive to insulin spikes, and once that tissue is damaged, the damage is cumulative. A horse that has had laminitis once is more vulnerable the next time.



Counter-intuitive but well established: the shorter and more stressed the grass, the higher its sugar and fructan content. A bare, overgrazed paddock offers no protection against laminitis — quite the opposite.

Why year-round turnout is not the answer

The well-intentioned logic of year-round turnout — that horses are naturally grazing animals and should therefore have access to grass at all times — breaks down entirely when the grass in question is ryegrass-dominant improved pasture. There is no safe quantity of that grass for a metabolically sensitive horse in the high-risk windows of early spring, drym hot summer, bright autumn days and hard frosts. Even horses without a formal diagnosis of EMS or PPID can accumulate significant insulin resistance over years of exposure to inappropriate grazing, gradually developing the metabolic profile that makes laminitis increasingly likely.

Year-round turnout on ryegrass pasture does not replicate natural conditions. It replicates a specific, artificial situation that has no equivalent in any environment horses evolved in.

What the track system changes

Moving horses onto a track removes the problem at source. The grazing area is closed off, and horses receive their forage as hay — which, even from ryegrass, has significantly lower NSC levels than fresh grass, because sugars get lost during the wilting and drying process. For horses with known metabolic issues, hay with sugar contents above 6% can be soaked for thirty minutes before feeding to reduce sugar content further, or analysed and selected on the basis of its NSC values.

The pasture inside the track, relieved of constant grazing pressure, begins to recover. Given time and appropriate management — reseeding with more diverse, horse-suitable species, reducing or changing fertiliser inputs — it can shift gradually away from ryegrass dominance towards a more varied sward that is genuinely safer for controlled grazing access in future.

Reseeding and long-term pasture improvement

For owners who want to eventually offer their horses some grazing, either as a seasonal treat or as a managed component of the diet, the track system creates the conditions to improve the pasture first. Species worth introducing include timothy, meadow fescue, crested dogstail, yarrow, plantain and chicory — all lower in NSC than ryegrass, and several of them actively beneficial for horse health. Plantain and chicory in particular have well-documented anti-inflammatory and mineral-rich properties that make them valuable components of a horse-appropriate sward.

Reseeding takes time and is not always straightforward on established ryegrass swards, where the existing species will compete aggressively with new introductions. Harrowing, slitseeding in autumn or spring, and in some cases a more radical renovation of the worst areas are all options worth considering. The key point is that the track system makes this improvement process possible by giving the land a genuine rest from grazing pressure — something that is simply not achievable when horses have unrestricted access.

A note on timing

Even with improved pasture, some seasonal caution will always be warranted in the UK climate. The risk windows — early spring flush, bright cold days at any time of year, autumn growth after summer stress — do not disappear just because the sward has improved. Knowing when to open and close grazing access, and for how long, is a skill that develops with observation and, ideally, with periodic forage analysis. The appendices include guidance on hay analysis laboratories in the UK as well as a sugar quick test for hay and pasture grass.

Ground Realities: Clay Soil, Hills & the Mud Problem

If the grass problem is the reason most UK horse owners need a track system, the ground problem is the reason most of them hesitate to build one. The concern is entirely understandable. British weather is persistent, British soils are heavy, and the prospect of creating a track that becomes an impassable mud bath from October to April is a legitimate one. This chapter is about taking that concern seriously — and solving it practically.

Know your ground

Britain has an unusually varied soil map for a small island. Heavy clay dominates much of the Midlands, the South East and parts of Wales. Peat soils are common across upland areas of Scotland, the North of England and parts of Ireland. Some areas — the chalk downlands of the South, parts of the limestone belt running through the country — have naturally free-draining soils that make outdoor horse keeping considerably more forgiving. Rocky, steep terrain is the reality for many horse owners in Wales, the West Country and the Scottish Highlands.

Understanding what you are working with matters before you spend a penny on surfacing. Clay soil and peat soil require different approaches. Chalk and limestone ground may need very little intervention at all. A simple soil assessment — or just an honest look at how your current paddocks behave through a wet winter — will tell you a great deal about where your money is best spent.

The clay problem

Clay soils are dense, poorly draining and highly susceptible to compaction. Under repeated hoof pressure on wet ground, they compress into an airless, waterlogged layer that sheds water rather than absorbing it and supports almost no grass recovery. Horse owners know this as "poaching" — the churned, rutted surface that forms wherever horses congregate. On a track with no surfacing intervention, clay will poach in the high-traffic areas around gates, hay stations and water troughs within a few weeks of wet weather, and will stay that way until the ground dries out properly in late spring or early summer.

The solution is not to avoid clay ground — most UK horse owners do not have that option — but to manage it with the right groundwork in the right places.



Two fence lines do not make a track system — not in the UK. Without proper ground preparation in the high-traffic sections, the first wet winter will turn the track into a churned mud slide that is neither safe nor usable. Getting the groundwork right before the posts go in is not optional; it is what makes the difference between a track that works year-round and one that gets abandoned in November.

Preparing the ground: doing it properly

For any section of track that will carry regular hoof traffic through the winter, the correct approach is to prepare the subbase before laying any surface material. This means removing the topsoil, laying a geotextile membrane to prevent the surface material sinking into the clay below, and then building up a compacted stone subbase — typically Type 1 MOT crushed stone — before adding the finishing surface. Skipping the membrane and going straight to gravel is a common and expensive mistake: without it, the gravel gradually disappears into the clay and needs replacing within a season or two.

For a small backyard track serving two or three horses, full preparation of the entire circuit is rarely necessary or economical. The priority is to identify and address the worst spots — gates, feeding stations, water troughs, any slope that drains onto the track — and surface those properly. The rest of the track can be managed with lighter interventions like grit mats or left as natural ground, depending on your topography.

Surface options

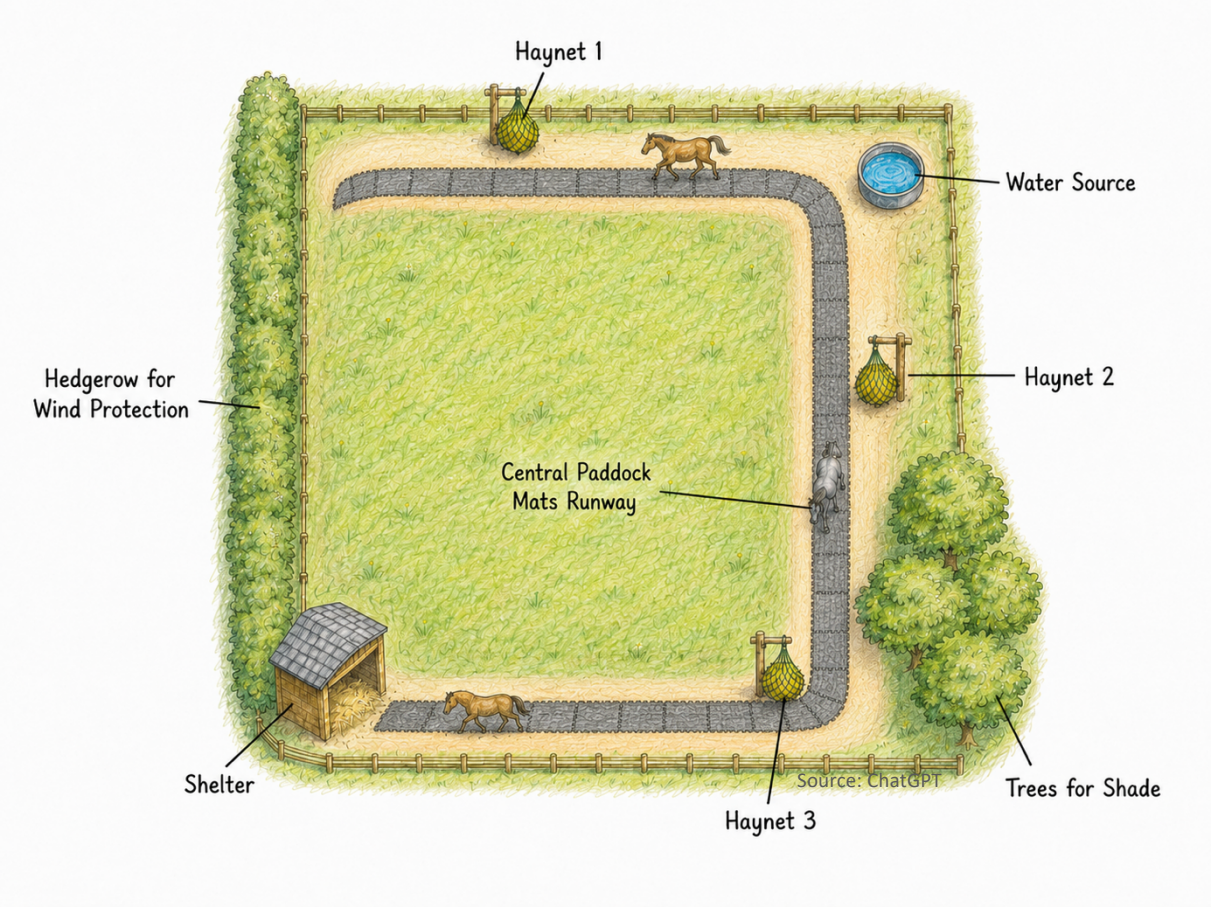
Different sections of a track suit different surfaces, and mixing them is both practical and beneficial — varied footing is better for hooves and more interesting for horses than a single uniform surface throughout.

Hardcore and crushed stone is the workhorse surface for UK conditions: durable, well-draining when properly laid, and excellent for hoof stimulation. It is not comfortable for long periods of standing, so it works best on the moving sections of the track or at gates rather than resting areas.

Woodchip is softer underfoot, good for joints, and provides a degree of insulation against cold and wet. It degrades over time — typically two to three years before it needs topping up or replacing — and works best on sections with reasonable drainage rather than the wettest spots, where it can become waterlogged and anaerobic. Horses prefer well-drained woodchips for lying down and taking a nap, so it is ideal for resting areas.

Paddock mats and rubber matting come into their own in the highest-traffic areas: directly around gates, at hay stations and water troughs, and at the entrance to any shelter. Rubber or plastic interlocking mats laid directly onto prepared ground provide a stable, non-slip surface that is easy to clean and prevents the worst poaching. One cost-effective approach that works particularly well on clay tracks is to lay a central strip of paddock mats running lengthways along the track — not covering the entire width, but creating a firm pathway down the middle.

This serves two purposes simultaneously. It gives you a reliable surface for the muck barrow regardless of how wet the surrounding ground has become, which makes daily mucking out on a long track genuinely practical. And horses, given the choice between stable footing and wet clay, will almost invariably choose the stable surface — meaning the mat strip naturally becomes their preferred travel route, concentrating soil compaction where the ground is protected rather than on the bare clay alongside it. It is considerably cheaper than surfacing the full track width, and on many sites it provides most of the practical benefit of a fully surfaced track at a fraction of the cost.



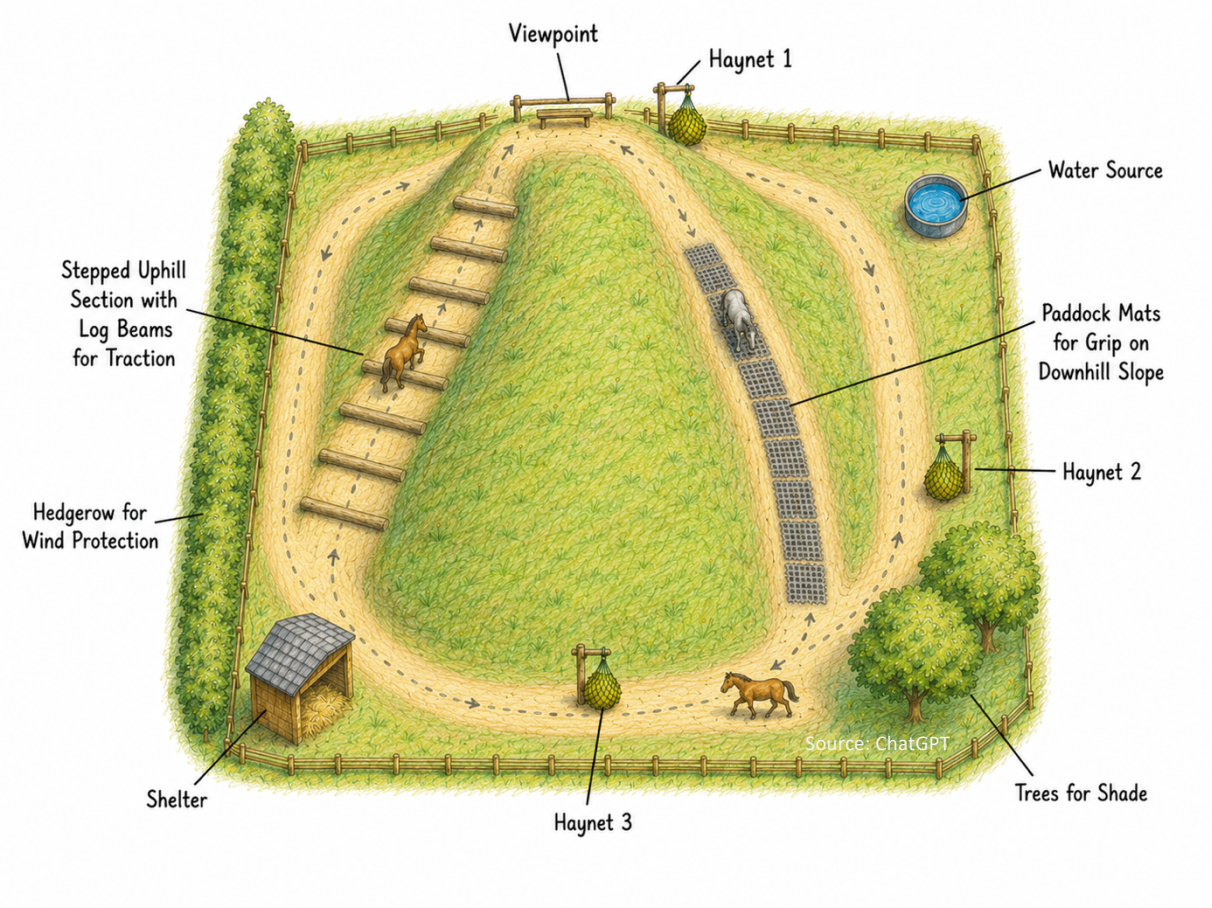
A full hardcore track is not the only option. A central mat strip — interlocking paddock mats laid directly onto levelled ground — gives you a year-round route for the muck barrow and a surface horses will gravitate towards in wet weather without needing to surface the entire width. One of the most cost-effective investments on a clay-soil track.

Geogrid or plastic ground reinforcement panels are worth considering for areas that need to carry occasional vehicle or machinery access, or for softer ground where a more rigid structure is needed under a gravel surface.

Hills: problem or asset?

Hilly ground is, in principle, a significant advantage for a track system. Varied gradients provide muscle-building exercise that flat ground simply cannot replicate, develop proprioception and balance, and create a more interesting environment for horses to navigate. The trouble is that in wet conditions, any slope on a clay or peat soil becomes a slip hazard — and a horse that slips on a slope loses confidence in the track and stops using that section.

The practical solution is to break up slopes with cross-members: lengths of timber or railway sleeper laid across the track at intervals, fixed with ground stakes and backfilled with compacted gravel or sand on the uphill side. This creates a series of level steps that give horses secure footing at each stride, eliminates the sliding surface, and — as a bonus — provides a genuinely useful proprioceptive challenge that builds the hindquarter and core musculature in a way that flatwork rarely does. It is one of the most cost-effective investments on a hilly site.



Hilly ground is not an obstacle — it is free fitness training. A well-prepared slope on the track builds hindquarter and back musculature, develops balance and proprioception, and gives horses a reason to keep moving. Stabilise it properly, and it becomes one of the most valuable sections of the whole circuit.

Steep sections that cannot be adequately stabilised this way should simply be bypassed. Rerouting the track to avoid the worst gradients, or fencing them out and leaving them as rough ground within the track system's interior, is always preferable to leaving a hazard in place.

Peat and other challenging soils

Peat soils present different problems from clay: they are often soft and spongy rather than compacting hard, and they can be surprisingly unstable underfoot even when they appear dry on the surface. On peaty ground, a geotextile membrane is even more important than on clay, and the subbase needs to be substantial enough to distribute hoof load across the soft layer below. In some cases, a reinforcement grid beneath the stone is the most reliable solution. The investment is higher, but the alternative — a track that sinks progressively into the peat — is not a viable long-term option.

Winter management: realistic expectations

Even a well-built track will have challenging periods in a typical British winter. The goal is not a perfect all-weather surface throughout — that level of investment is only realistic for

commercial yards. The goal is a track that is safe, manageable and usable for the majority of the year, with a clear plan for the worst weeks.

That plan usually involves a combination of approaches: a small, properly surfaced paddock adjacent to the track or a wider area around the shelter — that horses can be moved to if conditions on the track become genuinely unsafe and needs to be closed; a willingness to close the muddiest sections temporarily and reroute around them; and regular scraping of accumulated mud from hard surfaces to maintain drainage and grip.

The owners who struggle most with mud on track systems are usually those who expected the system to manage itself through the winter without intervention. Those who approach it as an ongoing, seasonal management task — adjusting, maintaining and adapting as conditions change — find that even a modestly surfaced track on heavy clay ground is workable for (almost) twelve months of the year.

Fencing on a Budget: Alternatives to Post-and-Rail

For many UK horse owners, the first instinct when planning a track system is to reach for post-and-rail timber fencing. It is what yards look like. It is what feels permanent and proper. It is also, at anywhere between £10 and £30 per linear metre installed, the single most effective way to make a track system feel financially out of reach before you have even started.

The good news is that post-and-rail is not the right fencing for a track system anyway — and not just because of the cost.

Why timber post-and-rail is the wrong choice for a track

A track system requires two fence lines running in parallel — an outer boundary and an inner fence creating the track between them. On a one-acre site, that can mean several hundred metres of fencing in total. At post-and-rail prices, that figure becomes prohibitive very quickly. Beyond the cost, timber fencing on the inner line of a track — the fence horses walk alongside every day — takes significant punishment. Horses lean on it, chew it, rub against it and push through it. Maintaining timber fencing under that kind of daily pressure is an ongoing expense that compounds year on year.

For the outer boundary, where security is the primary concern and horse contact is less constant, a more substantial fence may be warranted. But for the inner fence, and often for both, electric fencing is not a compromise — it is genuinely the better option.

How electric fencing works

An electric fence does not physically contain a horse. It trains the horse to respect a boundary through a short, sharp psychological deterrent — one encounter with a live fence is usually sufficient to establish lasting respect. The fence line itself can be a single strand of wide tape or rope, carried on metal T-posts, powered by an energiser. It is the horse's learned response to the fence, not the fence's physical strength, that does the work.

This is why visibility matters so much. A horse that does not see the fence cannot learn to respect it. Wide tape — a minimum of 20mm, ideally 40mm — or rope is far more visible

than thin wire or narrow braid, and should always be the default choice for horse fencing. Electric fence ropes are more expensive than tape, but last much longer, which makes them cheaper in the long run. White or bright colours show up well in low light and poor weather, both of which are facts of life in the UK.

Components of an electric fence system

The energiser is the heart of the system. Mains-powered energisers are the most reliable and cost-effective option where a power supply is accessible, delivering consistent voltage regardless of battery condition or weather. Where mains power is not available, a solar-powered unit with a battery backup is the next best choice — modern solar energisers are reliable enough for year-round UK use, even accounting for the limited winter daylight. Battery-only units are suitable for temporary or seasonal installations but require regular attention to avoid voltage drop.

Posts for the inner fence line need to be robust enough to withstand daily contact from horses moving along the track — which rules out the lightweight plastic push-in posts that work adequately for temporary strip grazing on pasture but simply are not up to the job in a permanent track installation. Plastic posts flex and lean under the weight of the fencing, work their way out of the ground within weeks on any soil that is not bone dry, and will need constant resetting. Save them for dividing a grazing field; do not use them on a track.

The right choice for track fencing is T-posts — the steel star-picket posts widely used in North American horse keeping and increasingly available from UK agricultural and fencing suppliers. T-posts are driven firmly into the ground, stay put regardless of weather, wind or horse pressure, and last for many years with minimal maintenance. They carry insulators for tape or rope cleanly, work equally well on straight runs and corners, and are considerably cheaper than timber while being more durable. For a permanent inner track fence, T-posts with wide tape or rope are the most practical and cost-effective combination available.

Fibreglass posts — the Hotline range being the most widely used in the UK — are a good complement to T-posts on longer straight sections where the fence line needs intermediate support between anchor points. They are flexible rather than rigid, which means they bend rather than break if a horse makes contact, and they carry the electrical charge well. Used alongside T-posts at corners, gates and direction changes, they give you a fence that is both structurally sound and horse-safe throughout.

Tape or rope carries the electrical charge along the fence line. Tape is more visible; rope is more durable in windy conditions and less prone to ripping and tangling. For a permanent or semi-permanent inner track fence, rope is often the more practical long-term choice. Two strands — one at chest height and one at nose height — is the standard configuration for horses, giving a clear visual barrier at eye level and preventing horses from ducking underneath.

A practical hybrid approach

The most cost-effective and durable track fencing for most UK setups combines a solid outer boundary — whether existing hedgerow, stock fencing, or in some cases timber post-and-rail where it already exists — with an electric inner fence creating the track. If the outer boundary is already in place, as it often is on established grazing land, the entire fencing cost of the

track system reduces to the inner fence line alone, which can be installed for a fraction of the cost of any permanent alternative.

For a one-acre site, the materials for a basic inner electric fence — energiser, posts, tape or rope and connectors — can be sourced for between £300 and £600 depending on specification. That is a meaningful upfront cost, but it is not a prohibitive one, and the ongoing maintenance costs are minimal compared to timber.

Training horses to respect electric fencing

Any horse that has not previously encountered electric fencing needs a short introduction before being left on a track with it. The standard approach is to set up the fence in an area where the horse already feels settled, allow it to investigate at its own pace, and let the fence do the training — one contact is almost always enough. Horses that are introduced to electric fencing gradually and positively develop a reliable, lasting respect for it. Horses that are rushed onto a new track before the fence has been properly introduced are the source of most of the electric fence horror stories that put people off the idea.

Day-to-day maintenance

An electric fence is only as effective as its voltage. A fence tester — an inexpensive device that reads the voltage on the line — should be used regularly, particularly after storms, periods of heavy vegetation growth against the fence line, or any visible damage. Grass and weeds growing up into the tape are the most common cause of voltage loss, earthing out the charge gradually until the fence stops working entirely. Keeping the fence line clear — either by strimming underneath regularly or by applying a strip of bark mulch or gravel along the base — is the single most effective maintenance habit for a permanent electric fence installation.

A fence that is not checked is a fence that will eventually fail. That is not an argument against electric fencing — it is an argument for building the check into your daily yard routine, which takes approximately thirty seconds with a tester in hand.



Electric fencing fails when it is installed carelessly, maintained poorly, or asked to contain a hungry horse with grass visible on the other side. Do it right, and electric fencing works reliably — for years.

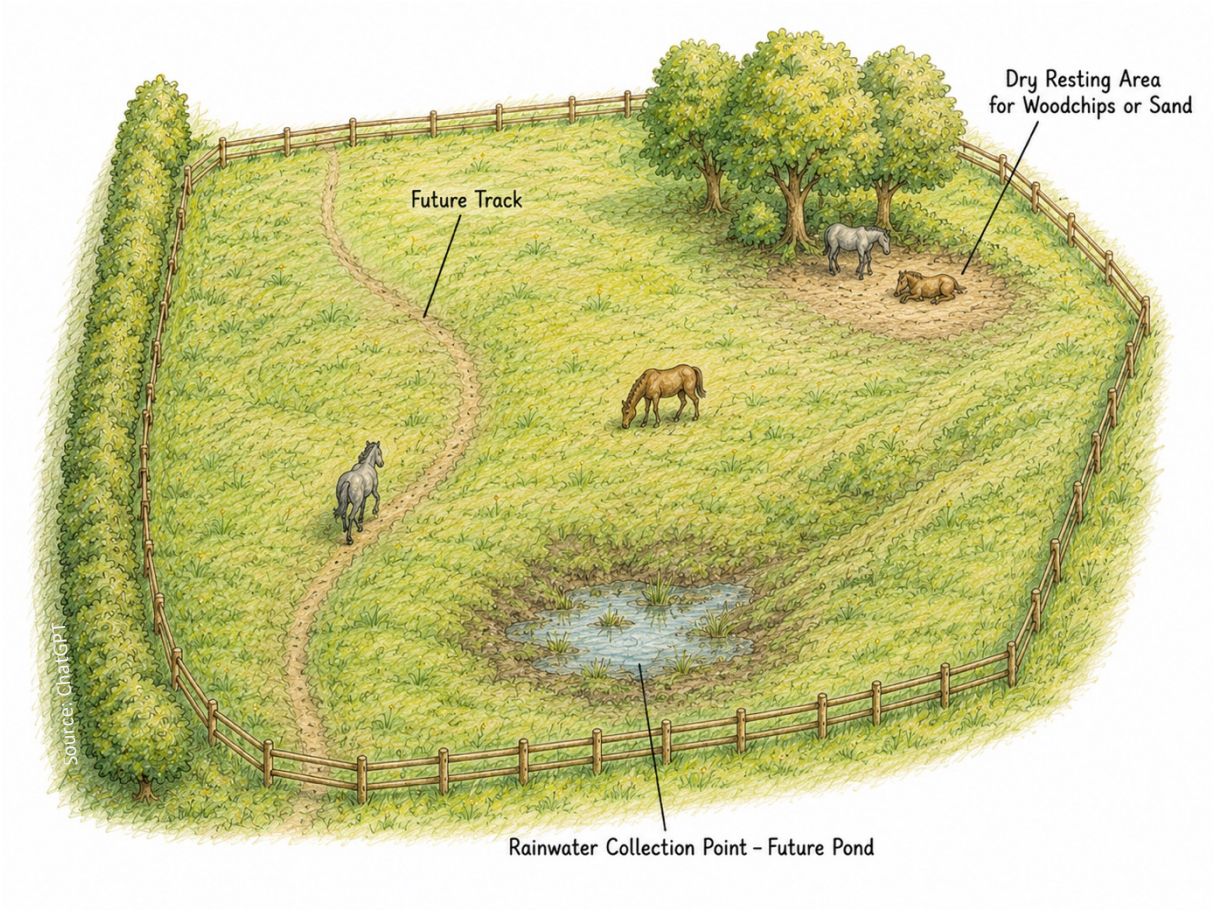
Part Four: Building Your Track System

Planning Your Track: From Paper to Posts

The temptation when planning a track system is to jump straight to the practical — ordering posts, pricing up surfaces, measuring the field. Resist it. An hour spent thinking clearly about the design before anything goes in the ground will save a great deal of time, money and frustration later. Track systems that do not work as well as they should are almost always the result of design decisions that seemed reasonable on paper but created problems in practice.

Start with what you have

Before drawing anything, walk your land thoroughly and honestly. Note where the ground is wettest, where it drains well, where the natural traffic lines already are — horses are good at finding the most comfortable route across a field, and those existing paths often tell you something useful about where a track will work and where it will struggle. Note where the prevailing weather comes from, where there is natural shelter from trees or hedgerow, where the slope runs and in which direction water flows after heavy rain.



The best track designs begin not with a plan but with observation. Where do the horses already travel? Where does water collect? Where do they choose to rest? Existing paths, natural hollows, hedgerows and trees are not obstacles to design around — they are the foundations to design from. Work with the land, and building the track becomes considerably simpler.

Also note what already exists in terms of boundaries. Existing hedgerows, stock fencing or post-and-rail along the outer perimeter means the outer boundary of your track may already be in place, which significantly reduces the fencing work and cost. If the outer boundary is sound and horse-proof, you are only building one fence line — the inner one.

Size and scale

A common question is how much land is needed for a track system. The honest answer is: less than most people assume. A track for two horses can work on as little as half an acre, provided the design is thoughtful and the management is consistent. More land gives more options, but it does not automatically produce a better outcome.

As a rough guide, allow a minimum track length of around 100 metres per horse, though more can be better. If your horses cannot keep the track grass-free, it is too long. For practical purposes: start with a shorter track, watch, learn, and adjust as needed. Width, as discussed in Chapter 3, should be a minimum of three metres for small settled groups and ideally four to five metres for larger or less familiar herds. On a standard one-acre rectangular field, a perimeter track of three metres width leaves a reasonable central area and produces a circuit of roughly 120 to 150 metres — workable for two to three horses.

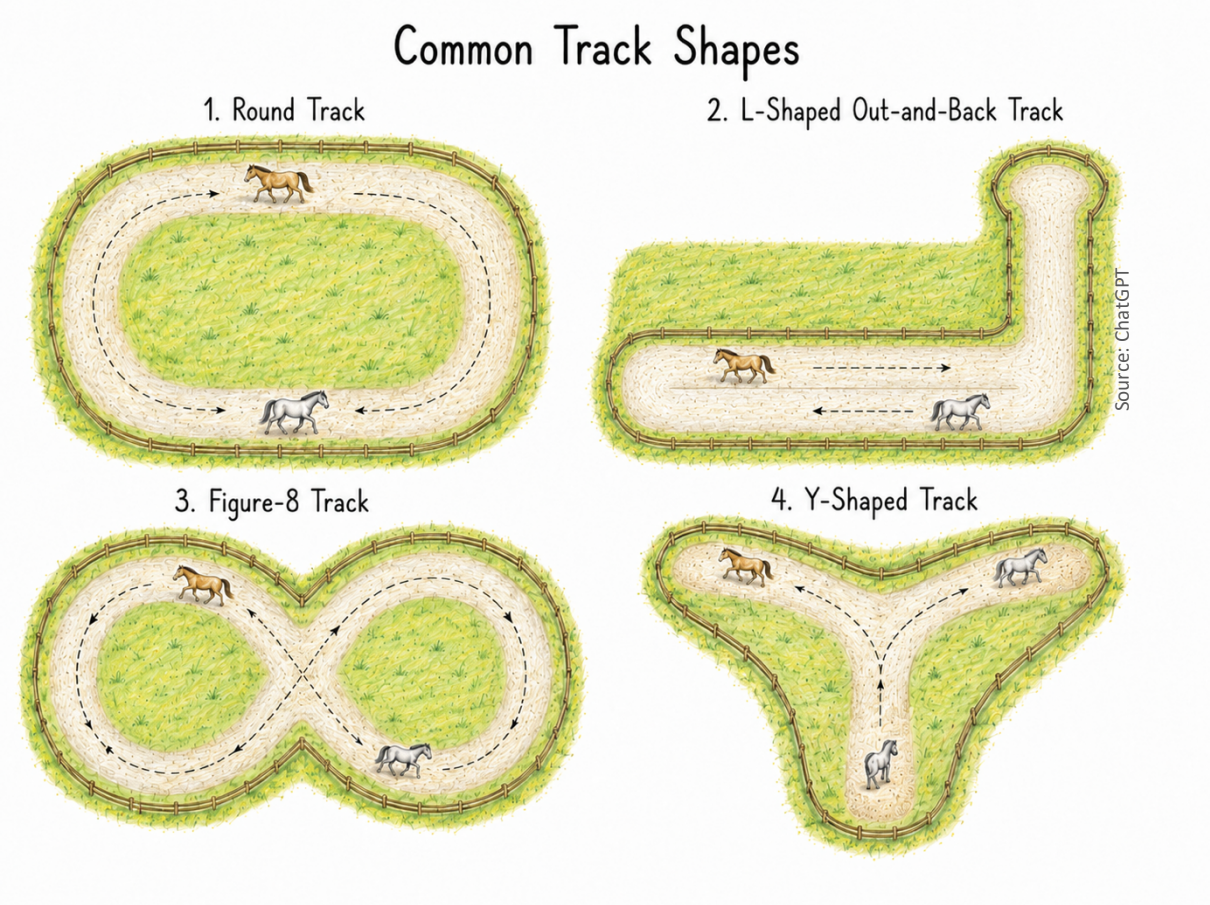
For larger groups, the arithmetic changes accordingly. A livery yard track for eight to ten horses needs both greater length and greater width to allow horses to move freely without conflict, and the surfacing and feeding station requirements scale up with it.

Layout options

The perimeter loop is the most straightforward layout and works well on square or rectangular fields. Horses circuit the outside of the land, resources are distributed around the loop, and the interior is managed separately.

On long, narrow plots — a common situation on former agricultural land — a straight linear track, or one that doubles back on itself in a hairpin, is often more practical than trying to force a loop. Horses travelling the same path in both directions will use it perfectly well, particularly if resources are placed at opposite ends to give them a reason to make the full journey.

Irregular or awkward plots — L-shapes, triangles, fields with woodland or boggy areas — often produce the most interesting track designs, incorporating natural features as enrichment. A section of woodland on the track provides genuine shelter and a different footing and sensory experience. A stream crossing, if safe and shallow, is an excellent hoof-stimulating feature. Work with the shape of the land rather than against it.



Shape is secondary. What moves horses around a track is not the layout — it is the distance between resources. Design for your land first, and fit the track around it.

Placing resources

Once the basic layout is established, the placement of resources is the most important design decision remaining. The principle is maximum separation: hay and water as far apart as the track allows, shelter somewhere different again, and any additional features — mineral lick, scratching post, sand rolling / sleeping area — distributed at intervals between them.

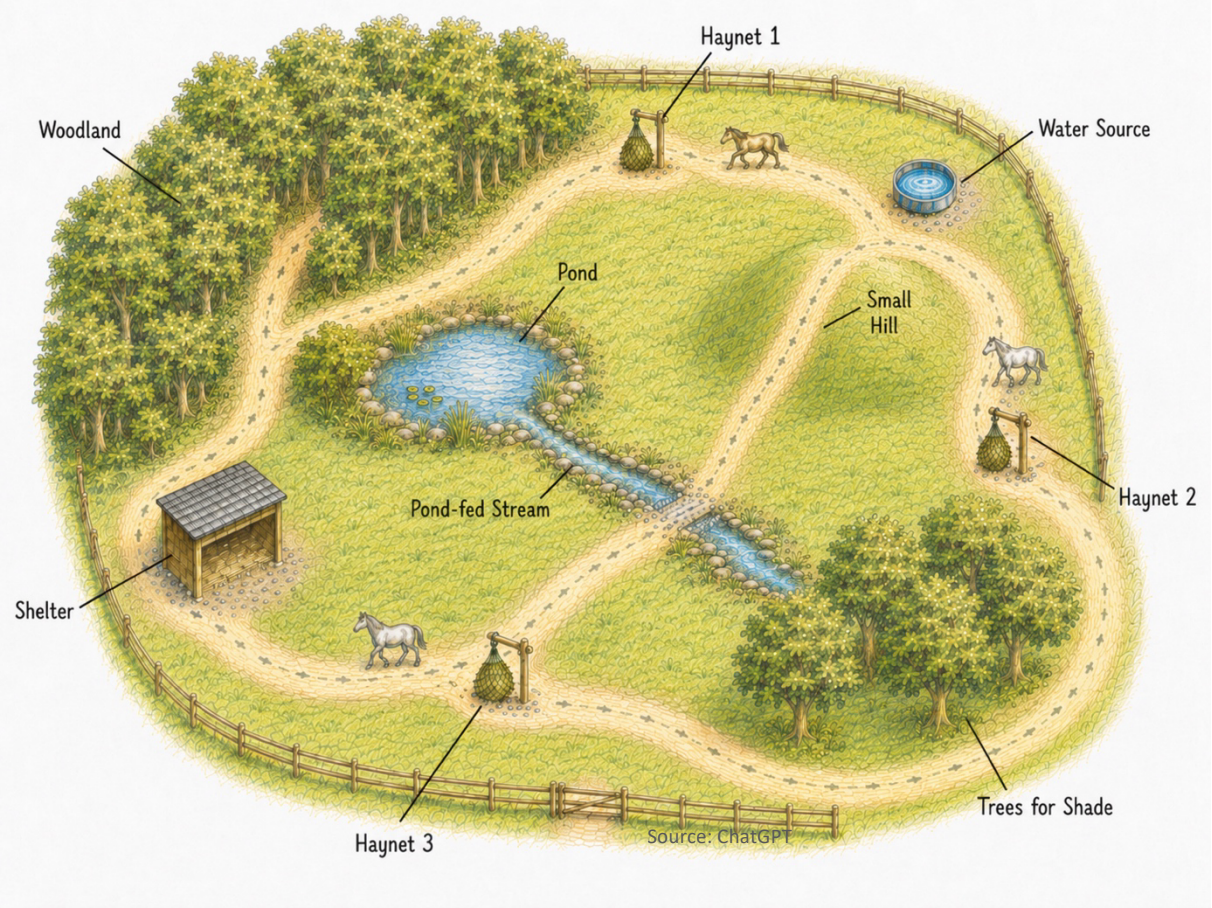
Think about the daily management implications of each placement. Hay stations need to be accessible for refilling — ideally reachable from outside the track with a tractor or at minimum a laden wheelbarrow. Water troughs need a supply line or easy access for filling. The shelter needs to be positioned so that it does not become a bottleneck — horses blocking the entrance to a shelter on a narrow track creates conflict. Orienting the shelter opening away from the prevailing weather and positioning it at a wider section of track both help.

Resting areas — where the herd can lie down and socialise comfortably — should be the most generously surfaced sections of the track, wide enough for the whole group and stable enough to stay reasonably dry. These are the areas worth prioritising in the groundwork budget.

Incorporating woodland and natural features

If your land includes trees, hedgerow or scrub, integrating these into the track rather than fencing them out is almost always worth the extra thought. Trees provide shade in summer

and windbreak in winter, and a section of track under an established canopy stays drier underfoot than open ground — the leaf canopy intercepts a surprising amount of rainfall. The caveat is that trees within horse reach need protection: young trees should be fenced off individually, and even mature trees can be ring-barked by horses given enough time and motivation. A simple protection around vulnerable trunks is usually sufficient.



A flat field with a fence around it is the least interesting version of a track system. Stop seeing the awkward corners, the boggy patch and the overgrown hedgerow as problems to work around. On a track system, they are assets. Shade, shelter, natural browsing, varied footing, wildlife habitat — everything your land already has is something a purpose-built track would try to recreate. Use it.

Planning permission and legal considerations

In the UK, the rules around what requires planning permission on equestrian land are not always straightforward. As a general principle, fencing that is temporary or easily removable — which includes most electric fence installations — does not require planning permission. Permanent structures, hard standings covering significant areas, and any change of use of agricultural land may require consent, and the rules vary between local authorities.

If you are on agricultural land and adding hard surfacing, or if your track system involves any significant earthworks or permanent structures, it is worth a brief conversation with your local planning authority before committing to the build. Most equestrian track installations do not raise any issues, but it is always better to establish this before the posts go in rather than after.

From plan to ground

Once the design is settled on paper, mark it out on the ground with marker posts or spray paint before any fencing goes in. Walk it as a horse would — look for pinch points, awkward corners, sections where the width narrows unexpectedly. Check that every resource is reachable for maintenance. Adjust anything that does not feel right at this stage, because adjusting it after the fence is up costs significantly more in time and materials.

Then start with the groundwork. Surface preparation before fencing, always — it is considerably easier to work on the track without a fence in the way, and the surfacing decisions may influence exactly where the inner fence line runs.

Surfaces, Shelters & Enrichment

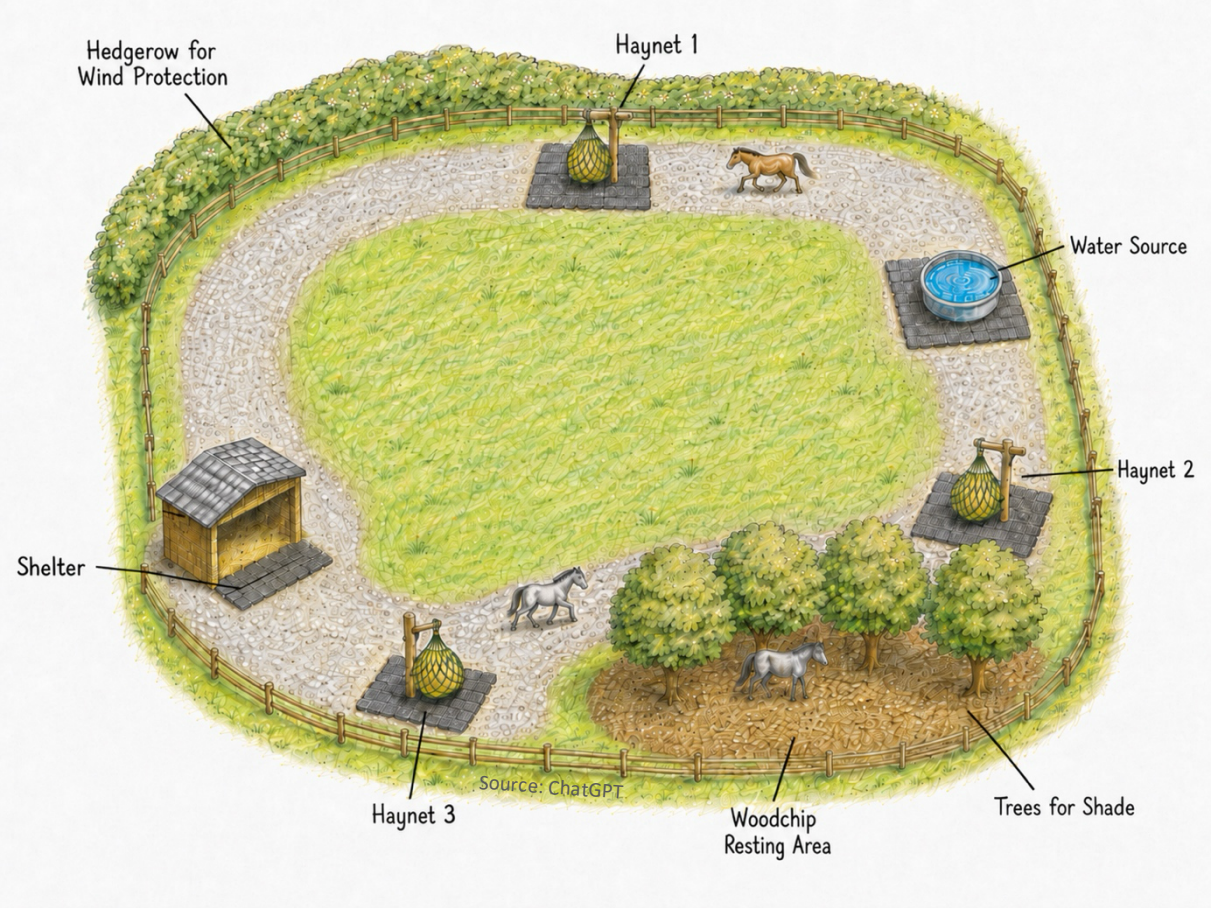
A track system is more than a fence and a pathway. The surfaces horses move on, the shelter they retreat to, and the features they encounter along the way all contribute directly to how much the system delivers in terms of health, fitness and mental wellbeing. Getting these elements right does not require a large budget — but it does require some thought.

Surfaces

The case for varied footing has already been made in Chapter 6, but it is worth stating the underlying principle clearly here: different surfaces do different things for a horse's body, and a track that offers only one type of footing — whether that is grass, gravel or rubber matting — is delivering a fraction of what a mixed surface track can achieve.

Firm, gritty surfaces such as crushed limestone, granite dust or fine hardcore stimulate the sole and frog, encouraging the development of a dense, well-callused hoof. Sand encourages rolling and provides a softer surface that is good for joints and tendons. Woodchip is comfortable underfoot and stays relatively warm and dry, making it a good choice for resting areas and the approaches to shelters. Larger gravel or rounded pebbles provide a more challenging proprioceptive surface that builds balance and awareness. Even a section of exposed bedrock or large flat stones, where the terrain provides it naturally, is a valuable addition.

The sequence and placement of surfaces matters too. A horse that moves from firm crushed stone to a sand rolling area to a woodchip resting zone and back to stone is experiencing meaningful variety within a single circuit of the track. That variety keeps the track interesting and keeps horses moving.



Not all sections of a track need the same surface. Paddock mats for the high-traffic spots around feeders, troughs and shelters. Gravel or crushed stone on the travel sections for drainage and hoof stimulation. Woodchip in the resting areas for comfort and warmth. Match the surface to what happens there, and both the horses and the track will benefit.

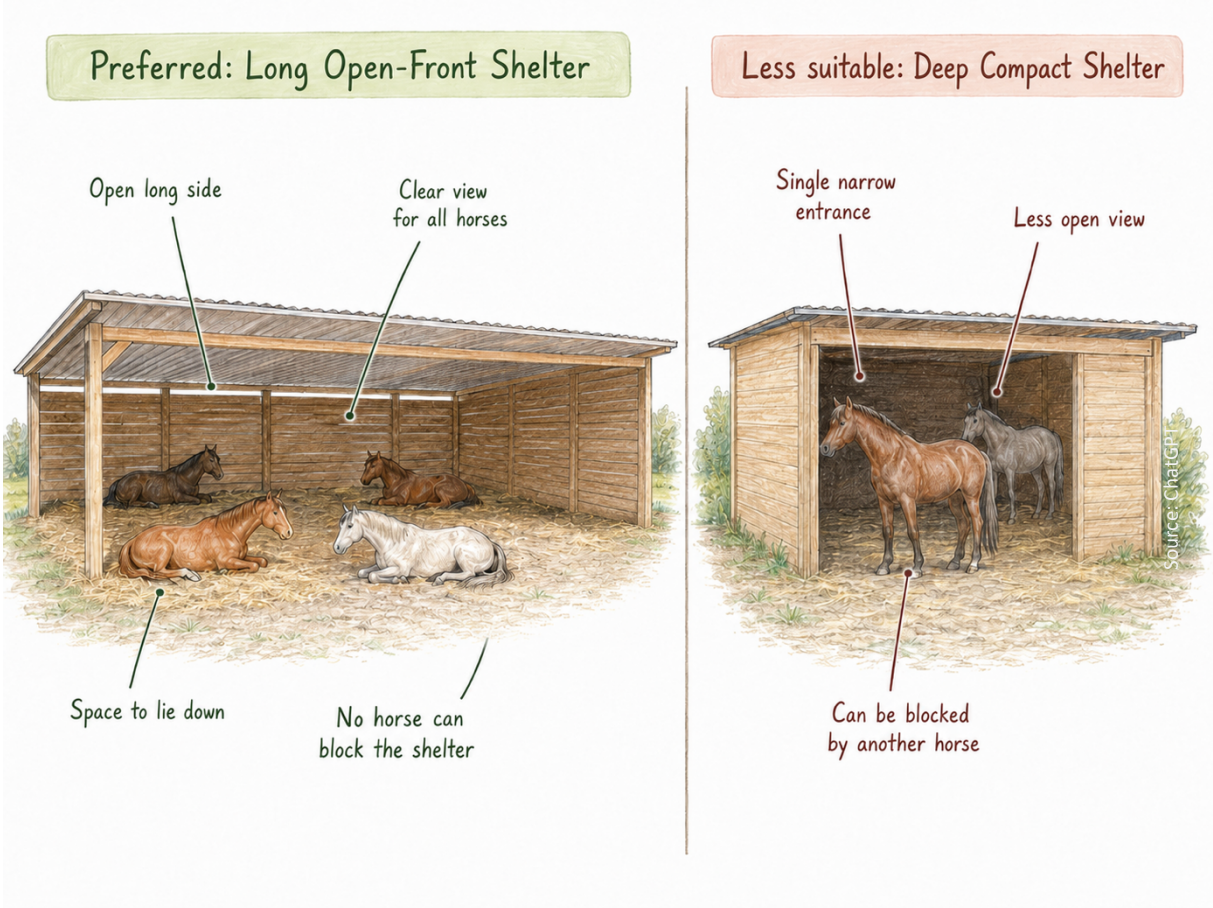
Shelters

Shelter design is one of the areas where well-intentioned choices most often go wrong. The instinct is to build something solid and enclosed — a stable-like structure that feels protective. Horses, however, are not looking for an enclosed space. They are looking for relief from wind, rain and sun, with an easy escape route if social dynamics require it.

The most consistently well-used shelters in track systems are long, relatively shallow structures with a fully open front — essentially a roof on posts, oriented with the opening away from the prevailing weather. A shelter of this type allows multiple horses to stand along its length without any individual being trapped by another, which is the critical welfare consideration in a group housing situation. A horse that can be cornered in a shelter by a dominant herd member will stop using it, and will be exposed to the weather as a result.

An even better solution, where the budget allows, is a double-T or through-shelter design: a long central structure with open sides on both long faces, and short end walls for additional wind protection. Horses can enter and exit from either side, no individual can be trapped, and the shelter provides protection from weather coming from any direction. For yards with larger groups or mixed-status herds, this design removes most of the conflict that standard enclosed shelters generate.

One practical consideration in the UK, as in much of Europe, is that permanent built structures — including timber field shelters on a fixed base — may require planning permission, depending on the size, the nature of the land and the local authority. The rules are not entirely consistent, and it is always worth checking with your local planning authority before committing to a permanent build.



The shelter that looks most protective to a human is often the least used by horses. Enclosed, cave-like structures block the sightlines a prey animal depends on for safety — and a horse that cannot see its surroundings will not lie down, no matter how warm the shelter is. An open-fronted design with good wind protection, a dry insulating floor and clear visibility on all sides will be used far more consistently, in all weathers, by every horse in the herd.

A simpler and often preferable alternative is a tunnel shelter — a galvanised steel hoop frame covered with a heavy-duty weatherproof membrane. These are widely available in the UK in equestrian sizes, are generally considered non-permanent structures and therefore fall outside most planning requirements, and are accepted readily by horses once they become familiar with the material. The key to successful positioning is to orient the tunnel perpendicular to the prevailing wind rather than facing into it, and to leave both ends open.

This means the shelter provides effective wind protection along its length while allowing horses to enter and exit from either end freely — no individual can be blocked in, the through-draught prevents the interior from becoming stuffy, and the structure performs well in the kind of sideways rain that is a fact of British winters. A tunnel shelter positioned and oriented correctly will be used consistently by the whole herd, including the lowest-ranking horses, in a way that a single-entrance enclosed shelter rarely achieves.

Minimum size guidance for shelters in the UK suggests at least 3.7 square metres per horse as a baseline, but more generous dimensions — particularly in length — are always preferable. In large groups or those with frequent changes in herd members, calculate up to 12 square meters per horse. A shelter that is too small will be monopolised by dominant horses and ignored by the rest.

Enrichment



A covered mineral lick placed away from the hay and water stations gives horses another reason to travel the track — and lets them self-select the minerals their body is asking for. Small feature, significant benefit.

Enrichment is the element that most distinguishes a well-designed track from a bare one, and it is the area where creativity pays dividends. The goal is to give horses reasons to pause, investigate and interact at different points around the track — breaking up the circuit into a series of small destinations rather than a featureless loop.

A scratching post — a wooden post with a stiff brush attached, or simply a sturdy post at a comfortable height — will be used constantly and costs almost nothing. A sand rolling area, ideally in a slightly wider section of the track, encourages natural grooming behaviour and provides a soft surface for horses that want to rest. A mineral and salt lick positioned away from the hay and water stations adds another stopping point to the circuit.

Where hedgerow or scrub borders the track, horses will browse it naturally — hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, willow and ash are all safe and beneficial, and horses given access to hedgerow will self-select plant material in ways that appear to have genuine nutritional and medicinal value. If the track borders open hedgerow, this is a feature worth preserving rather than fencing out. Toxic species — yew, ragwort, privet, rhododendron — must of course be removed or securely fenced off before horses have access.

A water feature, where the land and water supply allow, is one of the most enriching additions possible. Even a shallow dip that collects rainwater gives horses somewhere to stand and paddle, which they will do voluntarily and which provides both hoof stimulation and cooling in summer. A more substantial stream crossing on the track, if naturally present, is an asset worth designing around. There is no right and wrong in track design: work with what the land provides naturally.

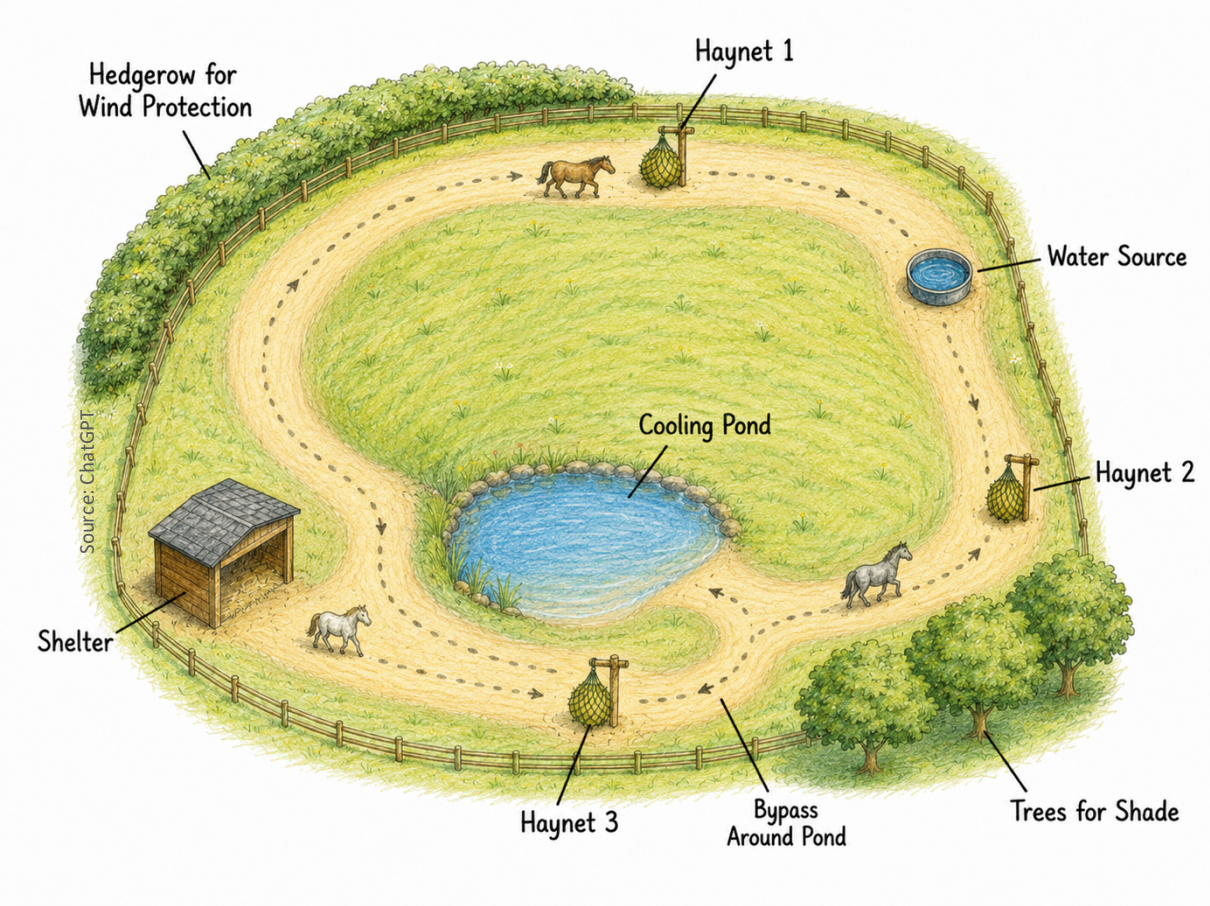
Feeding stations

The placement and design of hay stations has a significant influence on how much movement the track generates. As a basic rule, the number of feeding points should exceed the number of horses — if you have four horses, provide five or six hay stations distributed around the track. This prevents any individual from being excluded and encourages horses to move between stations rather than defending a single source.

For the stations themselves, slow feeders — whether small-holed hay nets, ground-level hay boxes with a net grill, or purpose-built slow feeder frames — are strongly preferable to loose hay on the ground or open racks. They slow intake to something closer to the natural grazing rate, reduce waste significantly, and extend the time horses spend at each station, which has a measurable positive effect on gut health and temperament. Covered feeding stations — a simple roof over the hay net or feeder — keep the hay dry and reduce waste considerably in the British climate, where wet hay is both unpalatable and a potential mould risk.

Water

Two water points on opposite sides of the track is perfect for any group of horses, both to prevent monopolisation and to ensure that movement between hay and water is genuinely required. Automatic drinkers are the most practical solution for a permanent installation, but where these are not possible, large-capacity troughs that do not need daily filling or are attached to a garden hose and a float-operated valve are a reasonable alternative.



Automatic drinkers or troughs provide the reliable water supply every track needs. A clean natural water source — stream or pond — is a bonus worth designing around: horses will drink from it, stand in it and cool off in it on hot days, in a way that a plastic water trough simply cannot offer.

Frost protection in winter is a genuine concern in the UK. Insulated trough covers, trough heaters or the simple expedient of siting troughs where they receive maximum sunlight and are sheltered from the coldest winds all help. A horse that cannot access water reliably in cold

weather is at significant risk of impaction colic — winter water management on a track deserves more attention than it typically receives.

The Transition: Moving Your Horse onto the Track

Building the track is the straightforward part. The transition — moving horses from their existing management onto a system that may be quite different from anything they have experienced — requires more care than most people anticipate, and rushing it is the most common cause of early problems.

Why transition matters

A horse that has lived on pasture year-round, grazing freely and moving at will across an open field, faces two significant adjustments when moving onto a track. The first is dietary: hay instead of grass, or at least hay as the primary forage source, is a meaningful change to the gut microbiome and requires gradual introduction to avoid digestive upset. The second is environmental: a narrower, more structured space with different social dynamics, new surfaces underfoot and resources in fixed locations. Neither of these changes is harmful — both are, as this book has argued, improvements — but they need to be introduced thoughtfully.

For horses coming from a stable or restricted turnout situation, the dietary transition is usually less dramatic, since they are already accustomed to hay as their main forage. The environmental adjustment, however, can be significant for a horse that has spent most of its life in a box — the sudden increase in movement and social interaction can be genuinely tiring, and some horses take several weeks to settle into the rhythm of track life.

The dietary transition

If horses currently have unrestricted access to pasture, begin reducing that access two to three weeks before the track goes live. Introduce hay alongside the existing grazing, allowing horses to become accustomed to it before it becomes their primary forage source. This gives the gut microbiome time to adjust its bacterial populations gradually, reducing the risk of impaction, loose droppings, digestive discomfort or, in worst cases, colic.



The quality of the hay matters enormously, particularly for metabolically sensitive horses. Ideally, have the hay analysed before the transition so you know what you are feeding. For horses with EMS, PPID or a history of laminitis, hay with an NSC value above ten percent should be soaked for thirty minutes before feeding to bring the sugar content down. Soaking is not a perfect solution — it also leaches some minerals — but for high-risk horses it is a meaningful risk reduction measure during the transition period and beyond.

For horses with respiratory sensitivities, steamed hay is preferable to soaked. Steaming kills mould spores and bacteria, and produces hay that is both safer for sensitive airways and more palatable. The investment in a hay steamer pays back quickly in reduced veterinary costs for horses with recurrent respiratory issues — and horses on a track, living outside year-round, rarely need the intervention for respiratory reasons alone. It is worth noting, however, that soaking or steaming hay is not appropriate as the sole management strategy for laminitis-prone horses.

The environmental transition

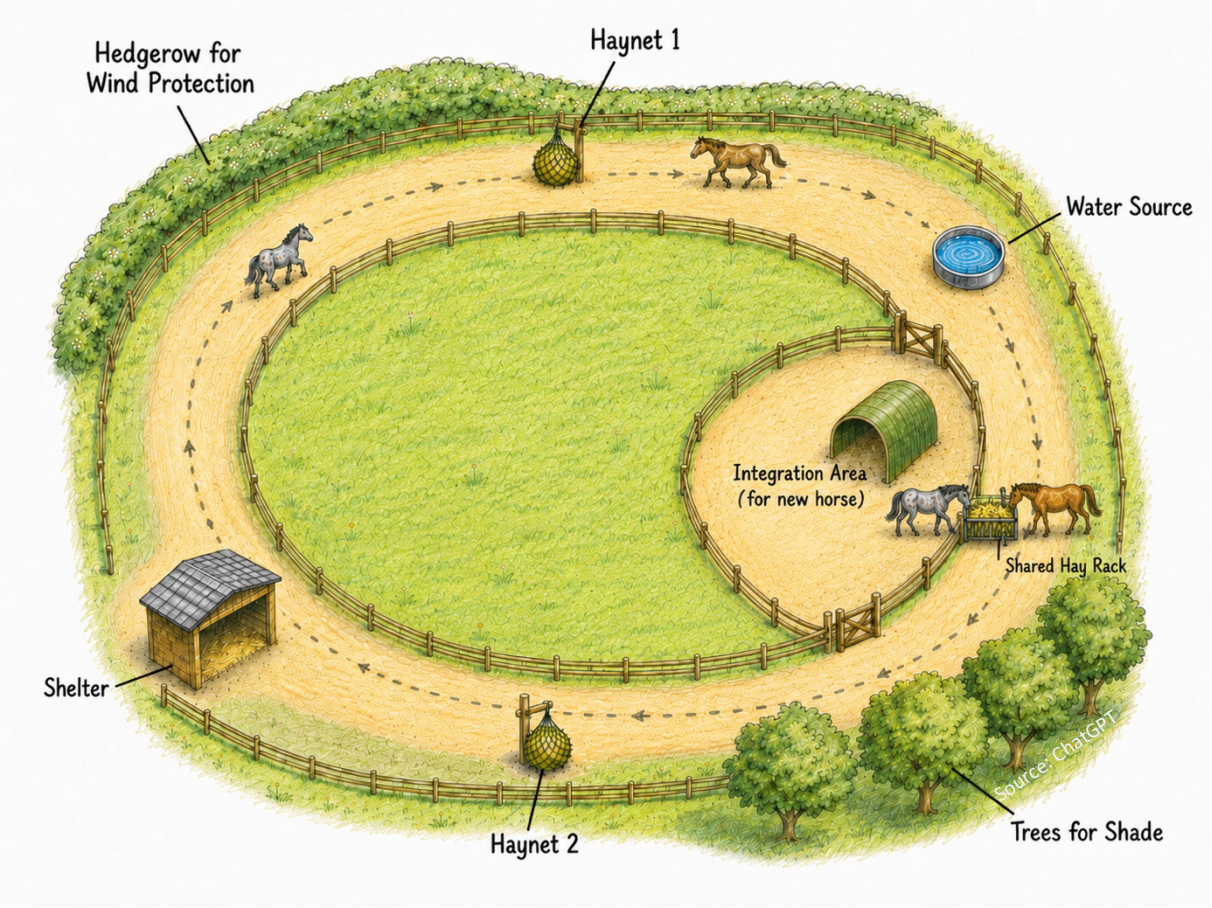
Introduce horses to the track gradually rather than simply opening the gate and leaving them to it. Begin with supervised sessions of a few hours, particularly if any of the horses are new to electric fencing — a horse that has not encountered electric tape before needs the opportunity to investigate and learn to respect it before being left unsupervised on a track where the fence is the primary boundary.

Watch the herd dynamics carefully in the first weeks. A track, particularly a narrow one, changes the social geometry of a group in ways that can surface tensions that were not apparent in an open paddock. A horse that was low-ranking but could keep its distance in a large field may find a narrow track considerably more stressful. Wider sections, multiple escape routes and generous numbers of feeding stations all help, but some groups need more time than others to establish a settled hierarchy in the new environment. If one horse is consistently being harassed or prevented from accessing resources, the track design may need adjustment — wider sections, an additional feeding station, or in some cases a temporary partition while the group settles.

The hoof transition

For horses moving onto a track with varied hard surfaces — particularly those that have spent years on soft pasture — some degree of hoof sensitivity in the early weeks is normal and expected. The sole and frog, accustomed to soft ground, need time to toughen and develop in response to the new footing. This is not a sign that the track is damaging the horse; it is the beginning of the hoof development process that the track system is designed to encourage.

For shod horses, the transition is generally straightforward — the shoes provide protection while the underlying structures begin to strengthen. For barefoot horses, or for owners considering removing shoes as part of the move to a track system, the transition period requires more patience. Hoof boots — worn during the initial weeks on harder surfaces and removed as the hoof toughens — are a practical and humane solution that allows the horse to move freely and comfortably while the adaptation takes place. Expect the full hoof transition to take several months rather than several weeks; the changes happening inside the hoof capsule are structural and cannot be rushed.



A dedicated integration area need not be wasted space. Position a shared hay rack on the boundary fence so new and resident horses can eat side by side — the single most effective way to reduce conflict during introduction — and the same area becomes a sick bay, an extra shelter, or a refuge for lower-ranking horses when the gates are open.

What to expect in the first weeks

Horses newly on a well-designed track typically show a noticeable increase in movement within the first few days — the new environment, the distributed resources and the social dynamics of moving as a herd all encourage activity in ways that a static paddock does not. Some owners are surprised by how quickly their horses settle into a clear daily rhythm: moving, eating, resting, moving again. Others find that their horses spend the first week or two appearing slightly unsettled or restless, particularly if the change from their previous management was substantial.

Weight loss, if the horse was overweight, will begin within the first few weeks and should be monitored using a weight tape or the Sanoanimal App rather than by eye. Horses that have been significantly overweight for a long time can lose condition quickly once unrestricted grazing is removed, and the rate of loss should be kept moderate — rapid weight loss carries its own health risks.

By six to eight weeks, most horses are settled, most hooves start showing early signs of improvement, and most owners are wondering why they did not do this sooner.

Part Five: Living With a Track System

Day-to-Day Management

A track system, once built and settled, is not a hands-off arrangement. It requires consistent daily management — but that management is straightforward, and for most owners it is considerably less time-consuming than the combination of stable work, restricted turnout, collecting droppings from pastures and weight management interventions that a conventional system demands. The key is building good habits from the start.

Mucking out

On a track, horses distribute their droppings across a much larger area than in a stable or small paddock, which means the parasite burden per square metre is lower. That said, regular poo-picking remains important — more so than on a large open pasture, because the track concentrates horses onto a defined area. A daily or every-other-day pick keeps the track hygienic and significantly reduces the worm burden without relying heavily on chemical wormers. A well-maintained track with regular poo-picking and periodic faecal egg counts is a system in which targeted, test-based worming can replace the calendar-based blanket treatment that many owners default to.

There is a practical upside here too: mucking out a track is significantly faster than collecting droppings from an open pasture. Instead of zigzagging across a large field trying to locate every pile, you simply follow the track — a single, defined route that covers the whole area without doubling back.

Feeding

The hay requirement for horses on a track is broadly the same as for stabled horses: between 2 and 3 percent of bodyweight per day in dry matter, adjusted for the individual horse's condition, workload and metabolic status. What changes is how it is delivered. Rather than two, three, or five feeds at fixed times, hay on a track should be available continuously — refilling slow feeders once or twice daily, depending on capacity, is the practical standard for most yards. Doubling up on feeding stations — providing at least one more station than there are horses in the group — removes the need for any horse to wait for access, reduces social tension around food, and ensures that the lowest-ranking individuals eat adequately.

Large-capacity covered slow feeders reduce refilling to once daily as a minimum — and for owners using roofed racks designed for round bales, once a week is realistic, making the system genuinely manageable as a solo operation even on a busy yard.

Hay stations should be checked daily not just for quantity but for quality. Wet hay left in an open feeder will mould quickly, particularly in damp British conditions, and mouldy hay is a significant respiratory risk. Covered feeders reduce this problem substantially; where feeders are uncovered, removing and discarding any wet or mouldy hay at each visit is non-negotiable.



Large roofed hay racks — whether bought off-the-shelf or homemade — take a full round bale covered with a slow-feed net, and transform the most time-consuming part of track management into a twice-weekly task. The roof keeps the hay dry and palatable, the net regulates intake and prevents waste, and the round bale means refilling every three days rather than stuffing individual nets three times a day. Systems like this have been standard practice on track yards across Germany and Austria for years. The UK is catching up slowly — but for anyone serious about running a track system efficiently, this is the single most worthwhile infrastructure investment on the yard.

Seasonal grazing management

If the interior of the track includes grazing that is opened to horses seasonally, the timing of that access requires consistent attention. As a rough guide, wait until the grass is genuinely growing actively — roughly the height of a beer bottle — before opening the gate in spring, which in most parts of the UK means sometime in April, later in colder or upland areas. Close access again in late September or early October, before the autumn flush creates the high-sugar risk period described in Chapter 5.

During the grazing window, introduce access gradually — a few hours per day initially, increasing over two to four weeks — rather than throwing the gate open and allowing unrestricted grazing from the first day. Monitor body condition and hoof health throughout and adjust access time accordingly. For horses that gain weight rapidly or have a metabolic history, the grazing window may need to be short, or skipped entirely in some years.

In summer, when the track itself has little or no grass and the horses are receiving hay as their primary forage, daily hay quantities can be reduced modestly if horses are maintaining good condition. Do not, however, reduce hay to the point where horses are spending periods without access to forage — horses should never run out of feed, since this causes considerable

stress, and horses without adequate forage will also find other things to chew, including your wooden fence.

Fence maintenance

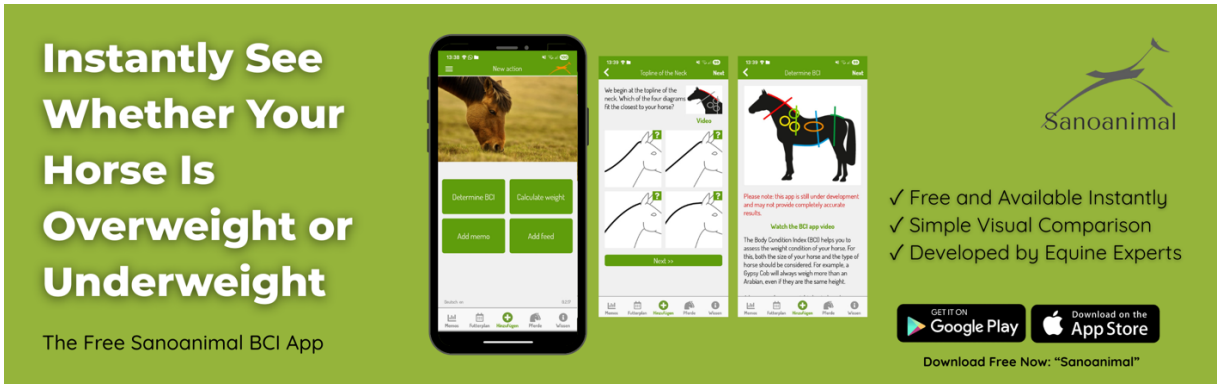
A daily fence check takes thirty seconds with a voltage tester in hand and is the single most important maintenance habit for a track system. Check the voltage, walk the line briefly for obvious damage or vegetation contact, and address any issues before they develop into a full fence failure. A fence that drops below a reliable working voltage will be tested by horses within days — and a horse that has learned it can push through the inner fence has learned something that is very difficult to unteach.

Keep vegetation cleared from the fence line throughout the growing season. A trimmer run along the inside of the inner fence every two to three weeks in summer takes fifteen minutes and prevents the gradual earthing-out that is the most common cause of voltage loss on a permanent installation.

Monitoring body condition

Regular body condition assessment is one of the most important management habits on a track system, particularly in the first year when you are still learning how your horses respond to the new regime. Weigh taping monthly — or more frequently for horses with a metabolic history — gives you objective data to act on rather than relying on visual assessment, which is notoriously unreliable, especially for owners who see their horses every day and adjust gradually to gradual changes.

The Sanoanimal body condition app provides a straightforward framework for assessing condition consistently across time. Record scores alongside any dietary or management changes so that patterns become visible over the seasons.



Adjusting through the seasons

No two seasons on a track look the same. Summer management is primarily about maintaining hay supply, monitoring grazing access and keeping water fresh. Autumn means closing grazing, increasing hay, watching body condition as horses adjust to the dietary change. Winter is about mud management, frost-proofing water supplies and ensuring shelter is adequate and accessible. Spring brings the highest metabolic risk of the year and requires the most careful grazing management.

The owners who find track systems most rewarding are those who approach this seasonal rhythm with curiosity rather than frustration — observing how their horses use the track, adjusting the resource placement, adding enrichment features, and gradually refining the system in response to what they see. A track system is never quite finished. It evolves with the horses, the seasons and the land, and that ongoing engagement is, for most people who try it, one of its most unexpectedly satisfying aspects.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Every track system is a learning process, and most of the mistakes that crop up are predictable ones. The following are the issues that appear most consistently, both in practice and in the conversations of horse owners who have tried the system and found it falling short of expectations.

The track is too narrow



Narrow tracks can work well for small, settled groups — but they still require passing places built into the design: sections where the track widens enough for two horses to pass without conflict, and where no individual can be cornered. A hay rack positioned in the centre of a passing place works particularly well, creating a visual barrier between horses feeding on opposite sides and preventing the dominant horse from reaching across to bite or kick. Lower-ranking horses tend to learn quickly how to navigate the track safely around their more assertive herd mates. The general rule holds: the smaller and more stable the group, the narrower the track can be. The larger the group, or the more frequently its composition changes, the wider it needs to be.

A track that works well for two quiet, well-matched horses in summer can become a source of significant stress when one horse decides to assert dominance and the other has nowhere to go or if a third horse gets introduced. Narrow tracks with tight corners are the most common design error, and the consequences — a low-ranking horse that is constantly chased, cannot access food and water freely, and spends its days in a state of low-level anxiety — are a genuine welfare problem. If horses on your track are showing signs of chronic social tension, widening the track or creating additional passing places is the first thing to address.

The track is too wide or too long for the group

This is, in practice, one of the most common mistakes on newly built tracks in the UK — and one of the most undermining. The instinct to make the track as long as possible is understandable, but a track that is too long or too wide for the number of horses using it will develop grass along its edges and in the sections that horses do not travel through regularly. That grass gets grazed down to a short, stressed sward — exactly the high-sugar, high-risk pasture described in Chapter 5 — and the track ceases to function as a grass-free system. The result looks remarkably like the overgrazed pasture next door, just narrower. The year-round grazing problem has not been solved; it has been recreated in a different shape.

A short track is absolutely fine for two or three horses. Better a compact, consistently grass-free circuit than an ambitious loop that the horses cannot keep on top of. If the system is working well and you have sufficient land, you can always consider extending it later — but start conservative, watch how the horses manage it, and let that inform the decision. The horse pressure needs to be sufficient to prevent meaningful grass establishment, and that calculation always starts with how many horses you actually have.

Resources are too close together

A hay station and a water trough ten metres apart will produce a cluster of horses standing between the two, socialising and barely moving. The whole point of resource distribution is to create distance that horses have to cover — if the distances are too short, the movement incentive disappears. Aim for hay and water on opposite sides of the track, or at least as far apart as the layout allows, and resist the temptation to cluster enrichment features in one convenient area, just because that seems the easy solution for you to maintain them.

The groundwork was skipped

Laying surface material directly onto unprepared clay is one of the most expensive mistakes in track building, because it has to be done again within a season. Gravel sinks, woodchip becomes a waterlogged mat, and rubber mats shift and slide downhill. The geotextile membrane and compacted subbase described in Chapter 6 are not optional extras — they are what make the surface last. Spending the money on groundwork first saves considerably more money in the medium term.

There is not enough hay

An undersupplied track is a stressed track. Horses without reliable, continuous access to forage will spend their time and energy seeking food rather than moving naturally — they will chew fence posts, push through the electric tape to reach the interior grazing, develop gastric ulcers, and display the anxious, unsettled behaviour that is often mistakenly attributed to the

track system itself rather than to the management failure causing it. If horses on your track are losing weight faster than intended, are chewing wood, or are repeatedly testing the inner fence, the first question to ask is whether there is enough hay.

The transition was too fast

Horses moved abruptly from year-round pasture to a hay-only track without a gradual dietary transition will often show digestive upset in the first weeks — loose droppings, reduced appetite, in some cases colic. As described in Chapter 10, the gut microbiome needs time to adjust. A rushed transition that produces health problems in the first weeks is the single most common reason owners abandon the system prematurely, convinced that it does not suit their horses. It suited them fine; the transition just needed more time.

The electric fence is not maintained

A fence that works perfectly in September and is never checked again will, by December, be carrying insufficient voltage to deter a determined horse. Vegetation growth, tree branches that ended up bridging fence and ground, frost damage, a corroded earth stake, a loose connection at the energiser — any of these can reduce the fence to a psychological barrier that a hungry or bored horse will eventually test and find wanting. Once a horse has pushed through an electric fence, reestablishing respect for it is genuinely difficult. Daily voltage checks, as discussed in Chapter 11, are the only reliable prevention.

Social stress goes unnoticed

Track systems change herd dynamics in ways that are not always immediately obvious. A horse that was managing adequately in an open paddock — staying out of trouble by keeping its distance — may find a track significantly more challenging if it cannot escape a dominant individual. Signs to watch for include a horse that is consistently thinner than the others despite apparently having access to food, one that hangs back and waits until dominant horses have moved on before approaching a hay station, or one that is visibly tense and vigilant rather than relaxed and moving freely. These are management problems with management solutions — more feeding stations, wider sections, adjusted group composition — but they have to be noticed first.

Expecting the system to run itself

A track system reduces many of the labour-intensive aspects of conventional horse keeping, but it does not eliminate management. Owners who build a track, turn the horses out and expect everything to take care of itself will encounter problems that attentive management would have caught early. The system rewards observation — of the horses, of the ground conditions, of the fence, of the seasonal changes in grass and weather. Those who engage with it actively find it becomes progressively easier and more refined over time. Those who treat it as a set-and-forget solution will eventually find it setting and forgetting them.

Track Systems and the Ridden Horse

There is a persistent assumption that track systems are primarily for retired horses, metabolic cases and barefoot enthusiasts — that a horse in regular work, competing or being trained seriously, somehow needs a different kind of life. This assumption is worth examining, because the evidence points consistently in the other direction.

A different kind of fitness

A horse that lives on a well-designed track and covers ten to fifteen kilometres per day at low intensity arrives at every training session with a baseline of cardiovascular fitness, muscle tone and joint suppleness that a stabled horse simply does not have. The work required to build and maintain basic condition in a track-kept horse is considerably less than for one that stands in a box for twenty-two hours a day and is asked to perform for one or two. The track does not replace ridden work — but it changes what that work needs to achieve.

Many owners who move their horses onto a track system report that warm-up time reduces noticeably, that horses are more consistently loose and forward from the start of a session, and that the stiffness and tension that characterised the first twenty minutes of work largely disappears. These are not coincidental observations. A horse that has been walking, trotting and negotiating varied terrain since sunrise is physiologically warmer, more supple and more mentally prepared for work than one that has been standing still since the previous evening.

Musculature and proprioception

Varied surfaces and gradients do something that flatwork in an arena cannot: they develop the deep stabilising musculature, the proprioceptive awareness and the postural reflexes that underpin genuine straightness, balance and collection. A horse that has spent months negotiating the camber of a gravel section, the give of woodchip, the grip of rubber matting and the unpredictability of natural ground develops a body awareness and an athleticism that shows clearly under saddle.

This is particularly evident in horses returning from injury or long periods of restricted work. The gradual, self-regulated loading that a track provides — the horse choosing its own pace and footing at every step — is an ideal rehabilitation environment that builds strength and confidence without the risk of overloading associated with structured exercise programmes.

Hooves

For shod horses, the benefits of varied terrain and increased movement accumulate within the hoof capsule regardless of the shoes — the digital cushion develops, the internal structures strengthen, and the overall quality of the hoof improves over time. Many owners find that their farrier's job becomes more straightforward as the hoof quality improves: less remedial work, better hoof wall to nail into, more consistent growth.

For barefoot horses, or owners considering the transition, a track system is the single most supportive environment for developing the hoof quality that barefoot performance requires. It does not happen overnight — as Chapter 10 discusses, the transition takes months rather than weeks — but the end result, a dense, well-developed hoof that can work comfortably on

varied terrain without protection, is achievable for the majority of horses given time and appropriate management.

Mental state and trainability

Perhaps the most significant benefit for the ridden horse is one that is harder to measure but immediately apparent to most owners: a horse that lives well is easier to train. A horse with adequate movement, social contact, continuous forage access and environmental variety is not carrying the background load of frustration, boredom and low-level stress that characterises many stabled horses. It arrives at work in a fundamentally different mental state — more curious, more willing, more able to focus and less reactive to the ordinary demands of training.

The behavioural problems that trainers and riders most commonly encounter — tension, spookiness, resistance, difficulty concentrating — are not always training problems. They are sometimes, perhaps often, management problems. Addressing the management does not replace good training, but it removes a layer of difficulty that should not have been there in the first place.



No domestic horse will ever experience the freedom, the landscape and forage diversity or the rich social life of a wild herd. We cannot give them that, and we should be honest about it. But we can close the gap — more than most of them currently experience. They spend their whole lives in our service. The least we can do is spend a little time, thought and effort making theirs worth living.

Practical considerations

A few adjustments to routine are worth making for horses in regular work on a track system. Rugging decisions need to reflect the fact that track-kept horses are more active and generate more body heat than stabled horses — over-rugging is a common mistake in the first winter, and horses that are too warm will sweat unnecessarily and may lose condition. As a general principle, rug lighter than you think you need to, and let the horse's movement do the thermoregulatory work it is designed to do.

Feeding for performance needs to account for the additional calories burned in daily track movement. A warmblood-type horse covering twelve kilometres a day on the track and doing four hours of ridden work per week has a meaningfully higher energy requirement than the pony or cob kept as leisure horse for an hour of hacking per week, and hay alone may not meet it. Balancing the diet with appropriate additional forage-based energy like sainfoin, and for horses in harder work a suitable hard feed, remains as important on a track as in any other management system — the track changes the baseline, not the principles.



Part Six: Real Questions from Real Horse Owners

UK-Specific FAQs

The questions in this chapter come up repeatedly in conversations with UK horse owners who are curious about track systems but not yet convinced. Some are practical concerns, some are welfare questions, and some reflect assumptions that are worth examining directly. They are answered here as honestly as possible.

"It'll just be a mud bath from October to April."

This is the most common objection, and it deserves a direct answer: an unprepared track on clay soil in a British winter will indeed be a mud bath. That is not an argument against track systems — it is an argument for doing the groundwork properly before you build one. A track with a geotextile membrane, a compacted stone subbase in the high-traffic areas, and a central mat strip for the muck barrow will be manageable through a normal British winter. It will not be pristine. No outdoor horse-keeping system is pristine in February. The question is not whether there will be mud, but whether the mud is manageable and whether the horses are safe, dry enough and able to move freely. A well-built track answers yes to all three, plus improved animal welfare.

"My land is too hilly."

Hilly land is actually better for a track system than flat land, not worse. Varied gradients provide muscle-building exercise, develop balance and proprioception, and create a more stimulating environment than a flat featureless circuit. The practical challenge — slopes becoming slippery in wet weather — is solved with cross-members laid across the track at intervals, as described in Chapter 6. Steep sections that cannot be adequately stabilised can simply be bypassed. Very few pieces of land in the UK are so steep that a workable track cannot be designed around the topography.

"Electric fence isn't safe."

Modern electric fencing, correctly installed and maintained, is one of the safest horse fencing options available. Unlike timber post-and-rail, which can splinter and impale, or stock fencing, which can trap a leg, electric tape gives way on impact and delivers a short psychological deterrent rather than a physical barrier. The safety record of well-maintained electric horse fencing is excellent and it has become the standard fencing for horse tracks and pastures in other countries. The risk comes from poorly maintained fencing — inadequate voltage, damaged tape, insufficient visibility — all of which are management failures rather than inherent problems with the system.

"My horse won't respect electric fence."

Horses that do not respect electric fencing have almost always either never been properly introduced to it, or have encountered a fence with insufficient voltage and learned that it can be ignored. But there is a third factor that is at least as important as either of those: a hungry horse with lush grass visible on the other side of the fence will test that boundary regardless of how well it was introduced. This is one of the strongest arguments for providing ad lib hay on the track — a horse with continuous access to forage has far less motivation to push through

the fence in the first place. Remove the hunger, and you remove the primary reason most horses bother.

For horses that have already learned to disregard the fence, retraining starts with checking the voltage. A fence that delivers a genuinely strong charge — the kind used for cattle and bulls rather than the modest pulse many horse owners consider sufficient — commands respect very quickly, even from horses that have previously walked through it without hesitation. Crank the energiser up, check the voltage with a tester, eliminate any earthing faults, and in most cases the horse reconsiders its position within a day or two. Combined with reliable hay provision and a proper introduction process — allowing the horse to investigate the fence calmly before relying on it as the sole boundary — a well-maintained, adequately powered electric fence is respected by the vast majority of horses reliably and long-term.

"My livery yard won't allow it."

This is a genuinely difficult situation, and there is no simple answer. The most productive approach is usually to reframe the conversation away from the ideological and towards the practical: a track system reduces grazing pressure on the yard's pasture, keeps metabolically vulnerable horses off unsuitable grass, and produces horses that are easier to manage and less likely to need veterinary intervention. Livery yard owners are running a business, and a proposal that protects their land and reduces horse health incidents is a more compelling argument than one framed around natural horse keeping philosophy.

The economics are worth mentioning too: mucking out a defined track is faster than managing open pastures, bedding costs are reduced if the horses live outside around the clock, large roofed hay racks reduce refilling to once a week, and healthier horses mean fewer emergency vet calls — which benefits the yard owner as much as the horse owner. If the yard is genuinely unwilling to consider any modification to its setup, it may simply not be the right yard for a horse that would benefit significantly from a different management approach.

"It looks awful. Won't I have planning issues?"

A well-maintained track system does not look awful — it looks like a purposeful, managed equestrian facility. The aesthetic concern usually reflects an imagined worst-case scenario of churned mud and sagging tape, which is the result of poor management rather than the system itself. On the planning question, most electric fence track installations do not require planning permission, as discussed in Chapter 8. Permanent hard standings and built structures may require consent depending on size and location — always worth checking with the local authority before committing.

"Isn't it cruel to take away grass?"

This question contains an assumption worth unpacking: that grass is a natural right for domestic horses, and removing it is a deprivation. In reality, the ryegrass-dominant improved pasture that most UK horses have access to is not a natural food source — it is an agricultural crop that horses are metabolically ill-equipped to handle in the quantities typically available. Replacing it with appropriate hay, available continuously from slow feeders, is not a deprivation. It is a closer approximation of what horses actually evolved to eat: diverse, relatively low-energy forage, available in small amounts throughout the day. The horse that loses access to unlimited ryegrass and gains continuous access to good hay has not lost something valuable. It has gained something better.

"Feral horses are on pasture year-round too. Why is that different?"

Because the pasture is completely different. Wild and feral horses — mustangs, brumbies, sorraia ponies — graze on sparse, botanically diverse, often semi-arid ground that bears no resemblance to fertilised, ryegrass-dominant improved pasture. They also cover vast distances daily, which means their energy intake from grazing is offset by the energy expenditure of constant movement. A domestic horse on a small paddock of improved ryegrass pasture is in an entirely different metabolic situation: high-energy input, minimal energy output. The comparison between feral horses on open steppe and domestic horses on a small paddock of improved pasture does not hold up on examination.

"My horse has EMS or laminitis. Can he still go on a track?"

Not only can he — a track system is arguably the most appropriate management environment for a metabolically compromised horse. Removing access to unsuitable pasture, providing analysed low-NSC hay from slow feeders, and increasing daily movement through track design addresses the three most important management factors in EMS and laminitis simultaneously. The transition requires care — hay should be analysed and, if necessary, soaked; any grazing access should be introduced very cautiously and only once the horse is stable — but the long-term management of a laminitic horse on a well-run track is considerably more straightforward than the constant balancing act of managing pasture access in a conventional system.

"I only have one horse."

Then the first priority is finding that horse a companion — because a horse needs a horse. Horses are social animals for whom isolation is a genuine welfare issue, and no track system, however well designed, compensates for the absence of equine company. A companion horse is not an optional extra for a single horse; it is a basic welfare requirement. Once companionship is addressed, a track system for a small group of two works perfectly well, and many of the most thoughtfully designed backyard tracks in the UK are built for exactly that number.

Appendices

Appendix A — Testing Hay and Grass for Sugar: The Refractometer Method

Sending hay samples to a laboratory for analysis is the gold standard for knowing exactly what you are feeding — but it takes one to two weeks, costs money, and by the time the results arrive, the sugar content of the pasture may have shifted considerably or your hay dealer has already sold the batch. For day-to-day decisions, a faster and surprisingly reliable alternative exists.

Equine nutritionist Elke Malenke developed a practical method for estimating the sugar content of hay and fresh grass using an inexpensive wine refractometer — a small hand-held optical instrument that measures the concentration of dissolved solids in a liquid sample. The method will not replace laboratory analysis for horses with serious metabolic conditions, but it gives any horse owner a working estimate quickly and cheaply, and is particularly useful when deciding whether to buy a batch of hay or when assessing whether pasture is safe to open after a period of cold or dry weather.

What you need

A wine refractometer with a 0–32% Brix scale, available online for around £15–20. A digital kitchen scale accurate to 1g. A 3-litre freezer bag. A garlic press (the simple IKEA model works best). A small plate or bowl. A transfer pipette (usually included with the refractometer). Tap water.

For hay

Take samples from several different parts of the bale and mix them together. Weigh out 50–100g of the mixed sample into the freezer bag. Add exactly the same weight of tap water — so 50g of hay gets 50g of water — and wet the hay as evenly as possible. Seal the bag, press out the air, and leave it weighted down for one hour, turning and kneading it once after thirty minutes. After an hour, place a small amount of the wetted hay into a garlic press and squeeze several drops onto the plate. Mix the drops with the pipette and transfer two or three drops onto the refractometer prism. Close the lid and read the Brix value on the scale. Repeat several times and average the readings.

The result is a reasonable approximation of the sugar content in dry matter — typically within one to two percentage points of a laboratory value. For horses without metabolic issues, aim for hay below 10% sugar. For good doers and horses with insulin dysregulation, EMS, PPID or a laminitis history, the target is below 6%.

For fresh grass

Cut a sample of fresh grass and squeeze it directly into the garlic press over the refractometer. Read the Brix value as above. Because fresh grass has a much higher moisture content than hay, the raw reading needs to be multiplied to convert it to a dry matter equivalent: multiply by 5 for very lush, juicy grass, or by 4 for drier grass. A fresh grass reading of 8% Brix

therefore corresponds to approximately 40% sugar in dry matter — very high, and a clear signal to keep horses off that pasture until conditions change.

This grass test is particularly useful in spring and autumn, when sugar levels can spike rapidly with changes in temperature and light. A refractometer kept in the yard and used routinely takes less than five minutes to give you a reading that could make the difference between a safe grazing decision and a laminitis episode.

The full method, including a worked calculation example, is published on sanoanimal.com: *Quick and easy method for determining the sugar content in hay*, by Elke Malenke https://sanoanimal.com/horse/horse-feeding/roughage/hay/sugar-test-a/

Appendix B — Hay and Forage Analysis in the UK

For horses with metabolic conditions, or when establishing a new hay supply, laboratory analysis remains the most reliable tool. The following laboratories offer forage analysis services in the UK and are familiar with equine nutritional requirements:

Equi-Analytical / Dairy One — widely used for equine hay analysis, provides NSC values alongside full mineral profiles. Samples can be submitted via their UK partners.

Sciantec Analytical — UK-based agricultural laboratory offering hay analysis with equine-specific reporting options.

Some feed companies offer subsidised or free forage analysis as part of a broader nutrition advisory service. This can appear cost-effective, but it is worth bearing in mind that the analysis is not truly free — the company recoups the cost through product recommendations, and the advice that accompanies the results will almost inevitably point towards their own supplement range. The analysis data itself is useful; the feeding recommendations usually are not.

When submitting samples, request as a minimum: dry matter, crude protein, crude ash, crude fibre, water-soluble carbohydrates (WSC), sugar, fructan, and starch, if possible. Your will find Sanoanimal nutritionists who can help you interpret the results on our website: https://sanoanimal.com/horse/therapists-a/

Appendix C — Approximate Cost Guide: Building a Basic Track

The following figures are indicative for a small backyard track for two to three horses on approximately one acre of land with moderately challenging clay soil. Costs will vary considerably depending on region, ground conditions, existing boundaries and the specification chosen.

Item	Specification	Cost Range
Inner electric fence line	T-posts, fibreglass line posts, 40mm tape, energiser, connectors	£400–£700
Geotextile membrane	High-traffic sections (gates, feeding stations, water trough areas), approx. 50 linear metres	£150–£250
Type 1 MOT crushed stone subbase	Delivered and spread, approx. 30 tonnes	£400–£600
Surface topping	Crushed limestone or granite dust over subbase	£200–£400
Central paddock mat strip	Interlocking rubber or plastic mats, approx. 60m × 1m width	£600–£1,200
Tunnel shelter	Galvanised steel hoop frame, weatherproof cover, 2–3 horses	£800–£1,500
Slow feeders	2–3 large covered hay racks or round bale feeders	£300–£600
Water trough	With supply connection	£150–£300
Total	**Modest but functional track, owner-supplied labour**	**£3,000–£5,500**

This figure assumes that an outer boundary already exists, that the owner carries out much of the labour, and that the build is phased over one to two seasons rather than completed all at once. A fully surfaced, professionally installed track with purpose-built shelters and automatic drinkers will cost considerably more — but the basic system described above is workable, horse-appropriate and achievable for most backyard horse owners with a modest budget and a willingness to invest the time.

Appendix D — Further Reading and Resources

Jaime Jackson — *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding* (2007). The original text that established the track system concept. Written for North American conditions, but the underlying principles remain the foundation of everything in this book.

Sanoanimal.com — English-language equine health and nutrition resource covering hay analysis, metabolic conditions, pasture management, feeding and horse husbandry in depth. The most comprehensive freely available resource for the nutritional background to track system management.

Horse & Hound forum (horseandhound.co.uk/forums) — the UK's most active equestrian discussion community. Search "track system" or "paddock paradise" for extensive threads from UK owners sharing practical experience, including many dealing specifically with clay soils, wet weather and livery yard setups.

British Horse Society (bhs.org.uk) — guidance on pasture management, mud management and horse welfare standards under UK law, including the Animal Welfare Act 2006 requirements relevant to outdoor horse keeping.

NEWC — National Equine Welfare Council (newc.co.uk) — publishes the *Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Horses, Ponies, Donkeys and their Hybrids*, which provides the welfare framework within which any management system, including a track system, should operate.

OKAPI

100% species-appropriate · no nonsense

Essential minerals, the *natural* way.

Inspired by nature.

Backed by science.

Proven in practice.

Supporting horse health for the *long run.*



Discover OKAPI Mineral Licks
for your paddock track at
okapi-shop.com