

T H E



Naturally

S H A P E D H O O F

By Jaime Jackson

MY FIRST EXCURSIONS into wild horse country during the early 1980's stemmed from my curiosity about the hooves of wild horses roaming freely in America's Great Basin outback.

As a serious-minded horse enthusiast, I had been aware of the numerous and often discrepant ideas the domestic horse world harbors concerning "proper" care and the shaping of hooves. I wanted to know if nature—through the living model of the wild, free-roaming horse—had a grand plan for the hooves of *Equus Caballus*.

If so, I wanted to know if it

**There's plenty
farriers can learn
about basic hoof
shapes, size, angle,
texture and color
from the hooves
of naturally
wild horses.**

would have application and value in the world of the domestic horse. As a professional farrier, I felt especially qualified to investigate and report my findings to other horse

enthusiasts and professionals (1).

My ensuing studies of the wild horse and its naturally shaped hooves proved to be one of the most enlightening experiences I have ever had as a farrier or horseman.

Nature indeed has a grand plan for the horse; one, in fact, that goes far beyond the hooves, touching every aspect of the animal's life.

In this article, I would like to focus on the meaning of the "naturally shaped hoof"—what it is, what it looks like, where it comes from and what precisely it holds in the way of potential value and application for horse enthusiasts and their mounts everywhere.

As I have learned in recent years

from first-hand experience, knowing only what such a hoof looks like and how, technically speaking, the domestic horse may be endowed with it, is not enough to help our mounts move more naturally. This is because a naturally shaped hoof cannot make a horse (and its rider) move more naturally.

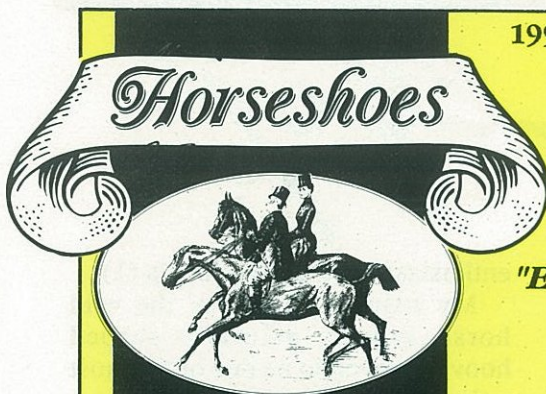
In the wild, natural movement arises from highly motivated behaviors. Forged by such movement, the hoof merely facilitates the natural locomotive process.

I see no reason why this relationship of hoof-to-locomotion should be any less axiomatic among domestic horses. Thus, if we are to enjoy the equestrian benefits made possible by giving our mounts more naturally shaped hooves, we must be equally diligent in our efforts to gain a clear and comprehensive understanding of the holistic forces

Author Jaime Jackson is a professional farrier from Tilly, Ark., and author of the newly-published book, "The Natural Horse."



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that produce them in the wild. Only then can we adapt this knowledge to our equestrian methods.

Naturally Shaped Hoofs?

I remember my first moments in the remote high desert mountains of Nevada where I witnessed my first naturally shaped hooves. After viewing hundreds, I knew I had made a great personal discovery.

I had been blessed with witnessing the first body of healthy, sound, athletic and naturally moving horses with the most perfect, relatively uniformly shaped hooves I had ever seen. There was no arguing with what nature had put before me. Then and there, I knew I had much to learn about "what is correct" for Equus Caballus back in civilization.

But what I didn't realize immediately is that the hooves of these wild horses presented far more information than what meets the naked eye. By gathering statistical data and performing a detailed analysis, they yielded specific answers to questions concerning toe angle, toe length, relative hoof size and color. This is information I have since found to be indispensable in

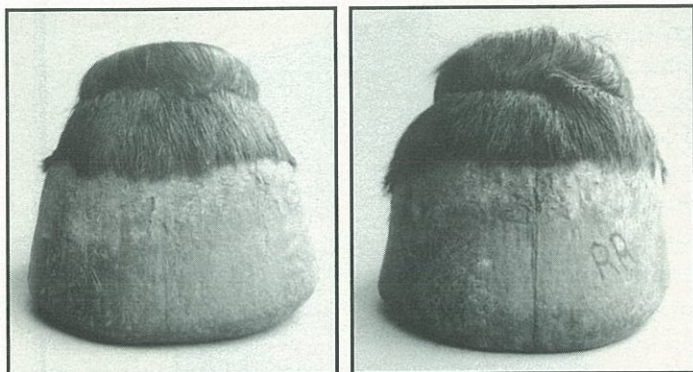


FIGURE 1. Note these anterior views of the left front hoof and right hind hoof.

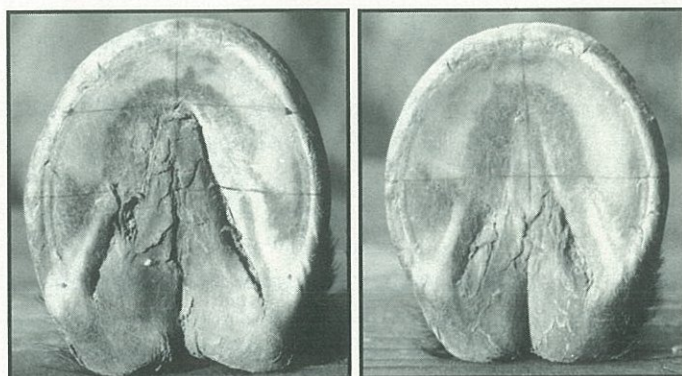


FIGURE 2. Check out these volar views of front left hoof and hind right hoof.

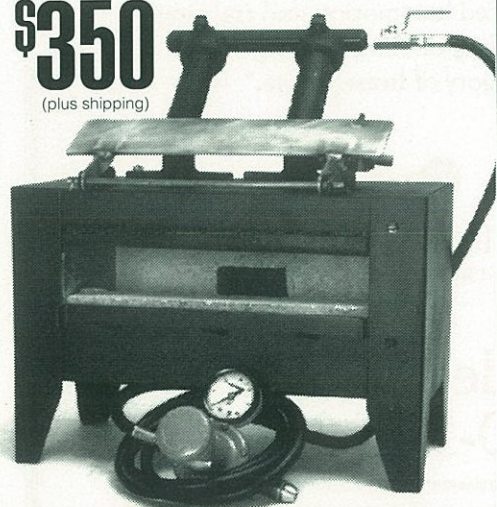
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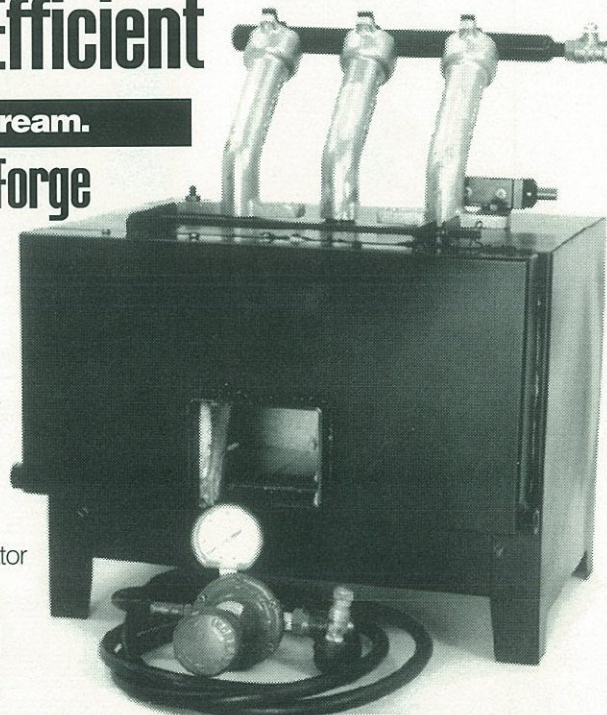


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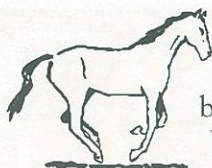
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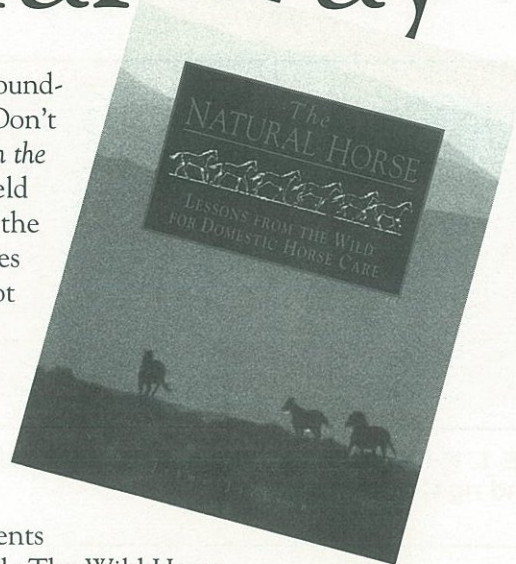
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Shoe Your Horse The Natural Way



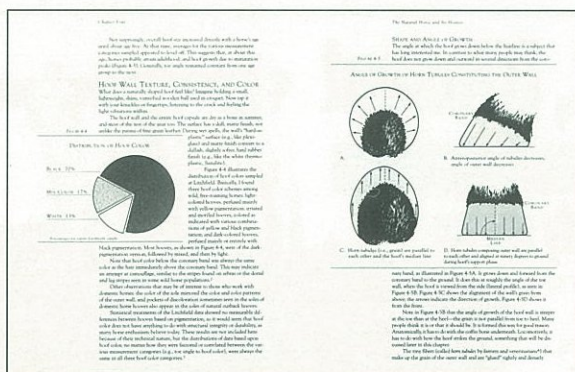
Years in the making, Jaime Jackson's groundbreaking new book is finally available. Don't be without *The Natural Horse: Lessons from the Wild for Domestic Horse Care*. Based on field research of wild, free-roaming horses and the

author's experiences as a farrier, this book demonstrates how our actions toward the care of our horses have not been in their best interest. In addition to the author's extensive discussion of natural gaits and locomotive behavior, the book includes valuable information on front and hind hoof sizes and symmetry, toe angles, and frog passivity as well as a six-step method for trimming a naturally shaped hoof.

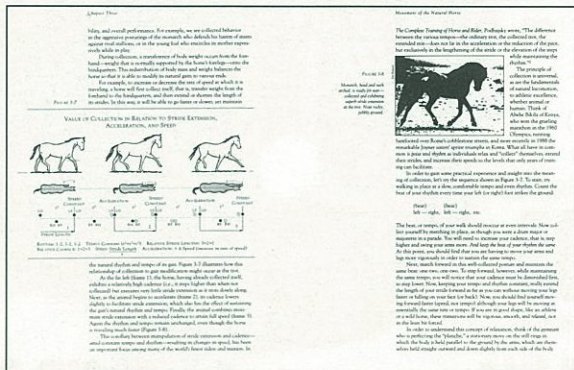


Contents include *The Wild Horse and Its History*, *Social Organization of the Natural Horse*, *Movement of the Natural Horse*, *The Natural Horse and Its Hooves*, *General Care of the Horse*, *Hoof Care the Natural Way*, *A Natural Way to Ride*, plus notes, bibliography, and index.

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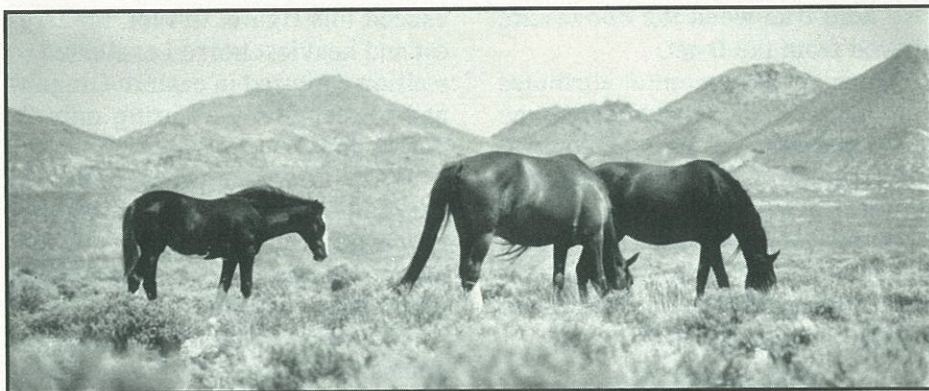
By spending time among these wild horses, I was able to see and learn how their hooves were forged in an environment so rugged as to tax the imagination of most horse enthusiasts. Fortunately, I was able to make arrangements with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—the official U. S. Government agency charged with the care and protection of these horses—to study their hooves at extremely close range.

Because the animals themselves nearly always accepted my presence once we got to know each other, my role as student/observer was both feasible and enjoyable. It was inevitable that I began to unlock some of nature's deeper secrets about these animals' lives.

With BLM cooperation, I was able to measure and photograph these horses' hooves up close just after the horses were captured and removed from the range—something not possible to safely do in the outback. I will now define briefly the basic hoof shapes I observed and evaluated, including a few interesting facts concerning hoof size, angle, texture and color.

Hoof Shape

The naturally shaped hoof is characterized by two distinctly ar-



NOT MUCH DIFFERENCE. With very little variation, most of the adult wild horses had toe lengths measuring about 3-inches. Few exceeded this.

chetypal forms (fundamental shapes after which all hooves are patterned in the horse's natural world): front and hind. (Figure 1 shows basic naturally shaped front and hind hooves viewed from the front; Figure 2 shows them from below).

The specimens you see were removed from a wild horse that unfortunately died from stress within several days of captivity. Even so, they present a clear image of the archetypal shapes and natural condition common to all hooves of horses I encountered in the outback. The left and right versions of these shapes are mirror images of each other and symmetrical in both size and shape (although not necessarily in relation to color). On the average, these basic shapes vary little among wild horses in the outback.

As can be seen, the walls of the hooves are smooth and virtually free of cracks. The toes are not "rolled," but the entire bearing surface of the outer wall is well-rounded around its entire circumference. The sole and frog are well-defined, clean and free of loose horn. This is also true of the white line, which circumscribes both. The soles of naturally shaped hooves are slightly concaved (dished) just enough to afford the interadjacent frog relative passivity should the hoof be placed upon a flat supporting surface.

Next, notice the circumferential shape or outline of the front versus the hind hoof when both are viewed from below. The front hoof is wider and rounder. Conversely, the hind hoof is narrower, but only forward of the heels. These shape variations

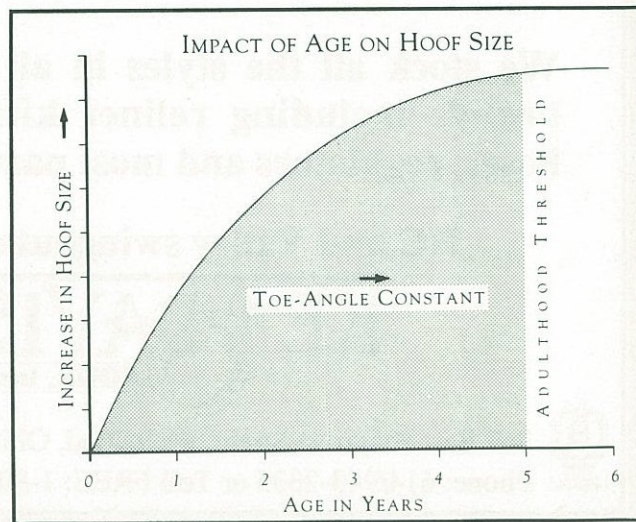
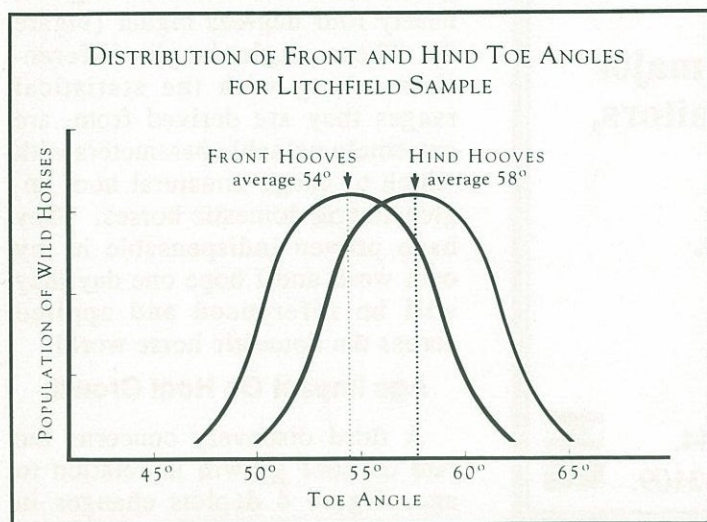


FIGURE 3 AND FIGURE 4. Both charts courtesy of Northland Publishing Co., publishers of "The Natural Horse."

age. By 5 years of age, hoof size tapers off. This means we can expect relatively rapid changes in hoof growth to occur among domestic horses until that age— basically until maturity.

This is important information for farriers who shoe customer's horses before the animals reach maturity. Mechanically obstructive shoeing of young horses could have immediate and long range insidious effects upon the animals as they mature.

Hoof Color

While my investigations of natural hoof shape encompassed many measurement categories (toe length and heel length) and numerous comparative studies (such as weight on toe angle), I would like to address one more item before closing this discussion: hoof color.

I identified three basic color or pigmentation patterns among wild horses. These were black, white (or yellow) and mixed black/white (mottled or striated variations).

Significantly, I found all categories of hoof investigation, including size, shape and structural integrity, were virtually identical in all color categories.

This should come as welcome news to owners of paint horses, albinos and other breeds endowed with white pigmented hooves. Nature speaks clearly: light-colored hooves are just as strong and durable in the rugged outback as darker colored hooves! (4).

Article Notes

1. This I did in 1989 at the American Farrier's Assn. annual convention in Lexington, Ky. These findings were spawned by my book, *The Natural Horse*, published by Northland Press (Flagstaff, Arizona).

2. For a discussion of breakover theory,

see Leslie Emery et. al, "Physiology of Movement of the Front Leg," *Horseshoeing Theory and Hoof Care* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1977) 39- 63.

3. *The Natural Horse* explains in detail how this critical support is achieved through what is called interdigitation of the sensitive lamina (of the coffin bone) and insensitive lamina (of the outer wall). Healthy, well-balanced hooves, forged by the natural locomotive process, promote this critical linkage of digital bone to outer wall. Foundered hooves and badly flared hooves are familiar examples to most horse enthusiasts of the necrotic disintegration of this interdigitation phenomenon.

4. In view of numerous references to inferior white hooves that run rampant in the horse world today, some readers may remain troubled in spite of my findings because of numerous references to inferior white hooves that run rampant in the horse world today. Much of this concern is fueled by unsubstantiated opinion—decimals spawned by rumor and myth derived from fraudulent historical references concerning American Indians, frontiersmen and others using their horses barefooted 100 years ago. *The Natural Horse* brings many of these references to light in order to winnow outback fact from old west fiction.

Watch The December issue for: "Nature At Work: Forging The Naturally Shaped Hoof."

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