

Shoeless? Naturally!

Barefoot trend stimulates the debate on showing performance horses sans the iron footwear.

Article by Annie Lambert



LARRY SMITH

Everyone remembers those first days of summer and a ritual of warm weather – bare feet. But, toughening up tender soles that have spent winter months protected by footwear can be painful.

Horses go through the same transition when their shoes are pulled for any reason. Their feet will usually toughen up in time as well. And, there is a growing school of riders who believe your horse might benefit from being left unshod, but “naturally” trimmed, year around.

As more horsemen experiment with the natural trim on their performance horses, there is also evidence that chronic soundness problems have been alleviated. This holistic approach to equine hoof care advocates that shoeing actually weakens the structure of the foot.

While the “barefoot revolution” certainly has its share of naysayers, there are a fair number of horse owners and trainers who have transitioned at least some of their horses from shoes to bare feet with no regrets.

Trimming is also less expensive than shoeing, say the believers. And they cite that it has always been a problem to keep horses well-shod using strange farriers when they are traveling. Even getting a pulled shoe tacked on can be an aggravating experience when traveling far from their home base, not to mention the damage a ripped off shoe can cause.

But don't think the transition from shoes to trims will be painless. It will take commitment, horsemanship and a dose of common sense. Advocates feel it is worth all that and more. It is not the easy way out, they suggest, just an alternate choice that has worked well for many horses.

Saved by the rasp

Ojai, Calif., non-pro, Carol Roberts, a longtime reined cow horse competitor, was at the end of her rope a couple of years ago. Her cow horse futurity prospect, Ill Be A Super Star, was very sore. Her veterinarian and farrier were plumb out of ideas.

“I'm going to the best vet there is, there is fluid in the bursa, but there was not a particular problem that we could pinpoint to fix,” Roberts lamented. “My shoer was elevating her, she's getting worse ... we tried pads, wedge pads, just anything and she is getting worse.”



JAMIE JACKSON



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The brackets on the edge of these mustang hooves point out the rounded angle along the rim of the foot known as the Mustang Roll.

Roberts gave her 3-year-old some time off as the National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity came and went. She started riding the mare again, and with the help of some anti-inflammatory medications, showed at the Non-Pro Triple Crown a month or so later. Lameness once again forced a lay off. Carol tried a couple of other comebacks, but the mare was chronically lame.

“Nothing was working at that point,” Roberts said. “She was so lame she couldn't walk from her water to her feeder. And that is when I just couldn't watch it any longer.”

Under the initial guidance of natural trimmer Sossity Gargiulo, Roberts pulled the mare's shoes and headed down recovery road with her horse. She was well aware it was a long road, if going barefoot would work at all.

“Eventually she started getting sounder and sounder,” Roberts related of the mare. “I was amazed, totally blown away. I learned to do the

(Above) This cutting horse is expected to move hard and fast in the pen. Question is: Can the horse get his job done best with or without shoes, and what's most beneficial in the long run?



JAMIE JACKSON

This hoof exemplifies the natural concavity of the sole often found on the feet of mustangs living in the wild.

trimming myself. I just have the shoer put on the hind sliders.”

Roberts now does all her own trimming and keeps all her show horses trimmed in front and shod behind. She showed the mare she had nearly given up on to earnings of over \$20,000 last year – barefoot all the way. Her 2010 futurity prospect, Oaks Dual Rey, is also getting along just fine without shoes in front. The gelding was the National Stock Horse Association Futurity Intermediate Non-pro Reserve Champion in August.

“I don't let my horses go very many weeks between trims because it makes more work for me,” Roberts said. “With the mare so crippled, I figured that she needed consistency and I stayed on top of her foot. But it worked for her and still works for her.”

“Here I am doing this trimming,” Carol added with a laugh, “when I used to just stand there and hold the lead rope.”



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Before and after photos demonstrate dramatic improvements to equine hooves after employing the natural trim.

Natural Trim

(Below) The natural trim shortens the toe, allowing the heel to grow and substantially strengthens and thickens the wall and sole of the foot.



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Sossity trims

Although Roberts researched the natural trim online and studied the training materials of natural trimmers like Pete Ramey and Jamie Jackson, it was Gargiulo, in nearby Ventura, who gave her the hands on lessons.

"She is an incredible trimmer," Roberts said of Gargiulo. "She is extremely knowledgeable, reads x-rays and has educated herself regarding the natural trim in so many ways."

Gargiulo won't take much credit for Robert's newfound trimming expertise. According to the lady trimmer, "Carol has a good eye and does an amazing job." Sossity occasionally drops by to look at 'Star,' just to make sure all is well.

"Star is a really small horse with small feet, just naturally," Gargiulo explained. "Add to that having been in shoes at a young age and her feet were tiny, contracted and had the shrunken look."

Gargiulo is also involved with hoof care in the California barns of cutting professional Scott Weis, in Ojai, and reining and cow horse non-pro enthusiast Shannon McCarty from Goleta. Weis started using Gargiulo the first of the year hoping to alleviate a foot problem he was having with one of his talented 3-year-olds.

"I had a horse that was really, really dropped in one heel," confirmed Weis. "He wouldn't grow any heel and even with pads and everything else we couldn't keep him sound. I thought I was going to have to give up on him."

But Weis had heard about Sossity from Roberts and decided to give his futurity prospect another shot, this time barefooted. The trimmer came every couple of weeks to "round up" the feet, beveling the ridge of the foot with the Mustang Roll, a part of the natural trim that prevents chipping of the hoof.

"I'm pretty sold on it," Weis said of the natural trim. "The horse that had no heel now has a lot of heel and he's breaking over that toe good. One thing about it, they are obviously getting circulation in the foot. And the feet have toughened up. Even the little pale-footed ones have gotten pretty tough footed."

"I'm not putting shoers out of business, just saying it is useful for how it is intended, to keep that foot growing at a better rate than it would with a shoe on. I had a horse with no heel and two months later his feet looked like they did when he was a yearling. And he is sound, that is the main thing."

Weis has since transitioned all his 3-year-olds to the barefoot mode. And because the cutting discipline does not require reining style stops, they are unshod behind as well.

Unnerved

McCarty has Gargiulo trim her horses every six weeks, but personally keeps the feet rasped and rounded up every other week. When a friend related the un-soundness nightmare she was going through with her performance horse, McCarty offered to help if the owner would give the natural trim a six-month try.

"They had come to the last result of nerving my friend's mare," McCarty explained. "Trying to avoid that, we pulled the shoes. I backed the trailer as close to the stall as I could get because she was that lame. We TheraScoped her, put protective boots on her and hand walked as long as she would tolerate for a month."

McCarty's project didn't need the boots after the

first month when she began jogging the mare. In spite of the horse being “slightly off” the jogging was important to stimulate circulation in the feet. The foot was changing rapidly, so she was rasping consistently to avoid any major changes in the hoof structure.

“We started Aqua-Treding and riding her daily,” McCarty pointed out. “At about three months, starting at the toe, the whole inside of her foot peeled out, just like an orange peel, and there was a new, good floor underneath. The frog had sloughed out twice before that.”

Although the mare was a little sore for a few days, by month four she was perfectly sound. At five and a half months the owner successfully showed her at the Watsonville Quarter Horse show. The mare remains barefoot and sound.

McCarty swears by the barefoot trend. She has also noticed an abrupt end to all the usual soundness issues endured by young show horses.

“Every year with futurity horses you always fight soundness issues like suspensories,” McCarty offered. “Since I’ve had them barefoot, nothing. I showed [Putting On The Bling] at Snaffle Bit last year with no shoes in front. I swear by it.”

Shannon and her husband, John McCarty, both made the non-pro finals in Reno last fall, however, John’s horse, Roosters Zack, was shown shod.

“John’s horse came back from Reno last year sore footed,” Shannon said. “He had a little bit of navicular change, but mainly he was just sore footed. We jerked his shoes and his feet were great afterwards.”

“And, people say you can’t go down the fence barefoot, that’s wrong. I haven’t had a horse have any problems [with traction].”

McCarty practices what she preaches. Her 2010 cow horse futurity mount, Gangsta Gal, recently won the NSHA Intermediate Non-pro Championship in route to the Reno Snaffle Bit.

Objective analysis

Dr. Britt Conklin, co-owner of Reata Equine Hospital in Weatherford, Texas, has dedicated a large portion of his practice to equine podiatry. Conklin is also a member of the American Farriers Association and is a Texas Professional Farrier Association Certified Farrier. With his expertise on the hoof of the horse, Conklin looks at natural trimming with a balanced eye.

Conklin believes some horses can and some horses should not go barefoot. He is a strong believer in the idea of natural selection and survival of the fittest when species are subjected to living in the wild. During the past 100 years or longer of domesticated breeding, however, Conklin believes “we have taken the selection out of survival of the fittest.”

“The horse that would normally die as a result of poor foot genetics has continued to breed without the threat of a predator,” Conklin pointed out. “Because of this we have inadvertently allowed some weak traits that would be ‘selected out’ to flourish along side the positive traits we have bred for such as cow sense, speed or endurance.”

A generalized statement on the practicality of natural trimming cannot be made for all horses and equine feet as a whole. Equine athletes, Conklin says, are individuals and require individual decisions toward hoof care based on their environment, acclimation to that environment, structural soundness, gait and movement patterns, conformation and intended use. Any or all of those factors “may be used to rule-in or rule-out farriery.”



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Roberts keeps her current futurity horse trimmed, sound and winning.



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Naturally trimmed show horses form tough, meaty soles that protect them from bruising and winning.



ANNIE LAMBERT

KAT ROGERS

Feel the Dirt

Even rodeo professionals are finding success with their horses performing shoeless. The advantage might be how the horses handle the less than perfectly prepared ground at some rodeo venues.

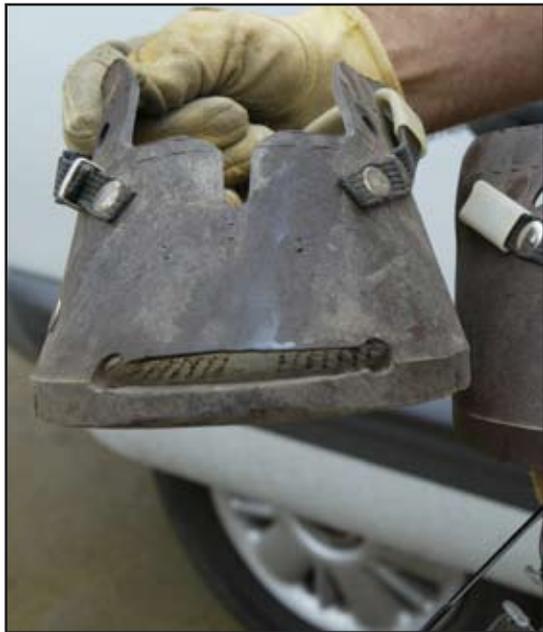
Jordon Peterson was the only barrel racer at the 2009 Wrangler’s National Finals Rodeo riding a barefoot horse. The 21-year-old from Lott, Texas, won round six and finished 12th overall. More than a few competitors and spectators noted that her gelding, Jester, handled the ground better than the other 14 horses. In fact, Peterson’s gelding covered all types of ground all year without missing a barefoot stride.

“I haven’t had one single problem with him in any kind of ground,” confirms Peterson. “I have not felt him slip one time. I’ve never felt like I was having problems because I didn’t have shoes on; I actually had an advantage.”

“I watched Jordon’s horse run a lot this past year,” adds Canadian barrel racer Deb Renger. “In Ellensburg [Washington] it had rained for several days and in the short round her horse had zero problems and ran a 17.04. And, just watching her horse at the NFR, she didn’t seem to have any trouble with that ground either.”

—AL

Shannon McCarty and a shoeless Gangsta Gal show at the NSHA Futurity, where they won the Intermediate Non-Pro division. (Inset) McCarty’s mare, Gangsta Gal, directly after winning the NSHA Futurity Intermediate Championship, barefoot.



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Jaime Jackson, one of America's first "natural hoof care practitioners," uses these Swiss-made boots because they can be modified for individual foot problems.

Iron free

Most equines are going to be tender-footed, to some degree, when making the transition from wearing iron to working shoeless under a variety of conditions. There are no shortcuts when it comes to transitioning from shoes to a natural trim. Some folks think it is easier to start with a horse that had been barefoot rather than one used to wearing shoes long-term. Most agree the process varies on an individual basis.

"If a consideration to go barefoot is made," Conklin reminded, "it needs to be understood that an adequate acclimation period is needed in an environment that is comparable to the one [the horse] will perform in. Just as your feet require time to acclimate to going barefoot, so will your horses. Supplemental boots may be good in the early convalescence or when the environmental conditions are bad – as on rocky ground – but in reality their overuse will only delay the acclimation period. I honestly feel at least eight to 12 months is a reasonable time for an acclimation period."

No ordinary trim

The natural trim should not be compared to an ordinary pasture trim you might give your broodmare every six to eight weeks. The trim might not be for every performing horse, but you'd be hard pressed to convince the advocates. Most would at least argue that more horses are eligible candidates for the natural trim than those who may not suit.

That doesn't surprise Jaime Jackson, a farrier since the early 1970s and author of *The Natural Horse: Lessons from the Wild*. Jackson spent five years during the 1980s studying wild horses, becoming one of America's first "natural hoof care practitioners." The Lodi, Calif., based trimmer – a founder of the Association for the Advancement of Natural Horse Care Practices – developed an integral portion of the natural trim dubbed the Mustang Roll.

"The Mustang Roll is just one part of the process, not the trim," Jackson explains. "It is one thing we do to the hoof to simulate the natural wear pattern of the wild horse hoof. It is a popular barefoot term."

In his 1999 edition of *Horse Owner's Guide to Natural Hoof Care*, Jackson defines the Mustang Roll: "At the hoof wall's ground bearing surface, the



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The Mustang Roll can be maintained between trims with occasional rasping.

outer wall will turn in a distinct, smooth radius of approximately one-half inch; this is the 'mustang roll' and it is an important signature of both natural wear and natural trimming."

Jackson has taught many people the natural trim through his clinics, books and tapes. There are other professionals – including Pete Ramey of Georgia and Yvonne and James Welz in Arizona – educating the public, and a fair number of horse people are learning how to trim and maintain their horses' feet on a personal level.

When properly trimmed, subscribers to the practice claim horses grow tough thick soles and walls. Jackson calls those healthy feet "meaty."

"Meaty is not a scientific term, but it is descriptive," the trimmer said with a laugh. "You want a sturdy hoof with a thick sole. Anything other than that they're not going to be comfortable on."

The debate

Numerous horsemen will cite that showing horses, sans the iron, in a variety of disciplines is not a new idea. Indeed, going barefoot has been tried in the past and some have employed the practice for years. It is, however, a newer idea to many.

After trying the barefoot route, California trainers Ken Wold, Wilton, and Ted Robinson, Oak View – both in the NRCHA Hall of Fame – have returned to keeping horses shod. Wold tried pulling shoes on a trainee with whom he was having soundness troubles. He went back to shoes when his veterinarian found a medical solution. Robinson has never been too keen on going barefoot.

"I think horses need to be shod for the best performance," Robinson, NRCHA Million Dollar Rider, stated. "They've been building shoes since the 1800s, there is a reason, right? And those horses were tougher then; there are so many bad-footed horses anymore."

"I tried the barefoot deal on my 2-year-olds. Those colts were kind of wringing their tails and they wouldn't go, although they never appeared lame. We shod them and they took off. It was a real test for me."

NRCHA Hall of Fame members Doug Williamson, Bakersfield, Calif., and Bobby Ingersoll,

Internet Connections

Information on the natural trim is readily available online.

Jaime Jackson
www.jaimejackson.com

Association for the Advancement
of Natural Horse Care Practices
www.aanhcp.net

The Horses Hoof / James & Yvonne Welz
www.thehorseshoof.com

Ivy & Pete Ramey
www.hoofrehab.com

Debra R. Taylor DVM, MS, DACVIM
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of Veterinary Medicine
www.hoofrehab.com/auburnvetschool.htm

Reno, Nev., don't have a problem leaving horses barefoot, although they usually ride into the show pen on iron.

"I don't shoe my own horses much before Reno [for the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity]," Williamson said. "I seriously think the negative is showing in the fence work. I think we need a tiny bit of traction, training plates or anything."

"The trouble with shoeing is getting the right angle on the foot. Wild horses joust around in the rocks and don't grow a lot of toe. The hoof, from the hairline to the ground, needs to be the same angle as the pastern. If you leave the toe too long, the heel won't grow because all the weight is on the heel instead of the middle of the foot."

Ingersoll showed his Mustang, Kiger Cougar, at the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity ... shod.

"I got him when he was just coming 2," the three time Futurity Champion said. "He was limited in what he could do, but he tried his heart out. In Australia, where they do the camp drafting, all those horses are barefoot. They show on grass sometimes and don't shoe any of them."

Roberts is of the belief that her barefoot horses benefit by being turned out in larger areas, seldom confined to a stall. Feet on horses in the wild look incredible, said Carol, but "they are moving about 20 miles a day."

"I would love to see more barefoot horses, but I can understand why it doesn't work for some people," she conceded. "There is so much to it. It isn't like you slap on a new set of shoes every six weeks, you have to stay on top of it."

"I don't shoe horses, but I'm not a barefoot fanatic," Sossity clarified of her trade. "I'm looking out for the horse and what will give him the healthiest hoof possible. I use boots, pads, casts and anything I can, but I'm not against shoeing. Natural trimming is a nice rehabilitation or maintenance option for horses."

"God did know what he was doing when he gave horses a hoof," Roberts said. "We always think we can make it better and sometimes we're better leaving it alone."

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