

Form & FUNCTION

How the natural trim positively impacts these important characteristics of your horse's hooves.

BY JAIME JACKSON



This horse is sound and capable of athletic endeavors as a result of consistent implementation of the four pillars of NHC.

With the barefoot hoof care movement in full swing, I have been asked many times how natural hoof care affects the foot's "form and function". It is an excellent question, and in fact addresses one of the fundamental concerns and objectives of natural hoof care (NHC). It's also a timely door opener to a related question that may be confusing to riders – is there a difference between NHC and the natural trim?

NHC and the natural trim

Yes, there is a difference, per se. The terms "natural hoof care" and "natural trim" are often used interchangeably, but while related, they have different meanings. NHC is the holistic or "whole horse" approach to hoof care. NHC advocates like myself point to the "four pillars" of NHC: natural boarding, a reasonably natural diet, natural horsemanship, and the "natural trim" itself. The science of NHC uses the wild, free-roaming horse of the US Great Basin as its model for guidelines and standards in how we define and carry out these four pillars. I will use the natural trim as example of how we do this.

The natural trim refers specifically to trim mechanics – that is, how we physically trim the hoof. It is technically defined as a humane barefoot trim method that mimics the natural hoof wear patterns documented for wild horse feet. As with the other three NHC pillars, we are specifically referencing the feet of US Great Basin wild horses.

Form and function

The question that naturally arises from this distinction

is how does the natural trim affect hoof form, and as a consequence, its function? Of course, each of the four pillars – not just the trim – are going to impact the quality, health and function of the feet. These include where the horse lives, what he eats, how he is made to move by our riding, and the way the hoof is shaped by the trimmer.

NHC trimmers affect hoof form in accordance with what is called the "Principle of Biodynamic Hoof Balance". Biodynamic refers to the hoof's "living relationship" with the environment; in terms of NHC, it is a naturally trimmed hoof characterized by the following:

- Hoof health
- Hoof soundness
- Natural wear patterns
- Natural growth patterns
- Natural shape/size/proportion characteristics

Without getting into the details of this very complex process (which requires considerable training to understand and execute), I have included an illustration (Figure 1, next page) that gives you a general idea of what is happening. Implicit in this discussion is the understanding that the other three pillars of NHC are always at work, in some measure affecting the dynamic of the natural trim.

The NHC cycle

1 The NHC practitioner trims the foot, mimicking the natural wear patterns documented for wild horse feet. This is done regardless of the damage done to the foot

by the pernicious effects of shoeing, unnatural trimming methods and lifestyle complications. Other than booting, this ends the trimmer's role; NHC holistic practices are then implemented.

2 Natural wear patterns precipitate natural growth patterns, a stimulus response elicited from the highly innervated hoof dermis within.

3 In turn, natural growth patterns reinforce the natural wear patterns to create more naturally shaped feet in terms of size, shape and proportion. At this point "active wear points" surface to balance the foot from side to side, and front to back.

4 Not surprisingly, with more naturally shaped feet beneath him, the horse is able to move more naturally within his natural gait complex.

5 As a direct consequence of natural movement, biodynamically borne weight-bearing forces arrive inside the hoof, aiding further in the shaping process ("form").

6 Finally, the descending weight-bearing force drives the "hoof mechanism" – circulation, concussion shock absorbance, fluid hydraulics, growth stimulation and "attack-support-breakover" – which then reinforces the trim and allied NHC holistic practices.

In summary

The relationship between the natural trim and hoof "form and function" is extremely complex, and interdependent with the other three pillars of NHC. When all four pillars are consistently integrated, the result is powerful, sound feet with a healthy horse attached to them – in other words, optimal hoof "form". Further, when this is the case, the entire musculoskelature of the horse is also optimized in terms of form and function. Horses given naturally shaped feet typically experience a corresponding whole body "makeover" of form as muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones realign over the biodynamically balanced feet. 🌱

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Figure 1a - Hind hoof



Figure 1b - Front of front hoof



Figure 1c - Bottom of front hoof