



Turn Your Horse's Paddock into a Personal Paradise

Text and photos by Jen Simons.

Paddock Paradise (PP) is a term coined by Jaime Jackson, barefoot trimmer advocate, for a revolutionary form of pasture management. Simply put, it is a track system with obstacles.

It began as a way for domestic horses to mimic the wild population with their healthy self trimming hooves. The system is supposed to make horses move around more, over different terrains, searching to fill different needs such as water and food or minerals. As they move, they wear their feet down constantly and at the same time, stimulate new hoof growth. The very action of walking barefoot increases blood flow and encourages the growth of new material.

The movement is driven by the search for food and water, and by natural herd dynamics. As one animal moves to find food or water, the others follow. When the first horse finds it, then the followers will drive him off to get it, causing the first to continue the search. Rinse, repeat.

Non-scientific studies looking at the effectiveness of PPs to increase movement have met with mixed results. In my own experience with an easy keeper pony moving from a dry lot situation to my small PP, I did notice (anecdotally)

an increased amount of movement. She lost weight and increased musculature and condition in just a few months. And maintained it while I was sidelined with an injury.

Some of Jaime Jackson's proposals may seem far-fetched; like adding a sound system and speakers which play cougar sounds to get your horse accustomed to predators. But many of the ideas are very sound and they are being put into use around the world, with some very satisfied horse owners.

The idea has evolved since Jackson first proposed it, with whole online communities devoted to the exchange of ideas, experiences and examples of their own PPs. It has become a form of whole horse management; taking into account movement, hoof management, diet and mental stimulation.

It has also been taken up by people with shod horses seeking a way of horsekeeping more natural to the horses and which increases the level of much-needed exercise and mental stimulation.

Many use it as a solution for problem horses; such as easy keepers, insulin resistant horses and horses with chronic laminitis. Others view it as a solution to keeping horses on small acreages or as a form of enrichment.

Some smaller boarding barns (less than say, 20 horses) have adopted it as an effective use of scarce land.



A sample paddock paradise layout. You can make your own to utilize all the parts of your property. If you don't have a loafing shed but do have a barn with a door at each end, run the paradise through the middle of your barn..

Tracks can be a simple loop, a set of several loops or a more complicated set of trails.

Footings

Different footing textures are encouraged. The theory is to get the horses' feet, muscles and ligaments used to anything. Try to include the following:

- A sandy spot for rolling. You will want to put this in a wider area where you do not have to worry about the rolling horse getting stuck under the fence.
- A rocky area (baseball size or larger rocks) that forces them to slow down (such as at a sharp corner), and pick their way over, causing the foot and leg to flex in all directions and increasing pastern strength and encouraging sole growth. This is not appropriate for horses recovering from hoof wall separation (white line disease).
- A crusher run; a narrow path they must pass over, made of crushed limestone. This encourages sole growth and gets them used to harder footings such as what they would see when riding on roads. Great at gates to prevent nasty mud.
- Another footing that the horses really seem to enjoy is pea gravel. Put under and around the waterer, it forces the horse to step on it. Laid from 2 to 4 inches deep these small round rocks shift, massage and polish the horses' feet. Imagine the joy a human experiences walking barefoot in sand! It also allows for excellent drainage under the waterer, which is often a source of leg sucking mud.
- A pool of water is great for promoting proper hoof growth. While mud is not great for feet, and causes problems such as scratches and thrush, daily immersion in water is very good for healthy hoof growth, especially in dryer, sandy areas.

What Does it Look Like

The tracks are a narrow (from 8 to 30 feet wide), fenced path, usually around the perimeter of a field or paddock. The narrower areas press the horses to go more quickly and the wider areas are for loafing and grazing. The centre can be used for short bouts of play; free to buck and fart, while out for short grazing periods, or for converting to a round pen or arena area for work. If it is a very large pasture the centre can be used to make hay for winter months. This reduces the amount of grazing for horses needing a restricted diet without really reducing their area of exercise.

If you make a small track, the horses will quickly reduce the grass to dirt. This is ideal for owners of insulin resistant horses or foundered horses. Some horse owners even go out and eradicate the grass that does pop up.

These smaller tracks are great for use as your sacrifice area. In winter, the horses use it and keep the trails well packed, increasing the area they move around. In spring, they reduce it to mud, but it saves the good grassy areas, without the horses being stuck in a small area for months as you wait for your pastures to dry out.

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Driving Movement

This is done with many factors, using the horses' natural instincts. Narrow the track in shady areas, which causes them to move faster through there. Loafing areas are ideally situated in a sunny spot, with maybe a single, sprawling branched oak for some shelter. (Protect the tree if you want to keep it! Chicken wire works great.) Add sand to that spot and it will be ideal for relaxing and rolling.

Never place the horses' various needs together. Feed away from the shelter. Place the waterer and mineral and salt far apart. This way they have to walk between the locations several times a day.

You can put the hay out in several small piles, quite a distance apart. This makes them move around and search for where you've put it today. This extends time spent eating, and so less time spent in boredom, and is of benefit to digestion and long term health. It also gives you a chance to check fences while you're out, combining chores.

Some use slow feeders scattered around their track. These are many devices that will slow the horse from



Rocks and straw encourage careful walking.

eating its hay, such as small mesh hay nets, hockey nets over round bales, or large wooden boxes with 3" square metal mesh that can hold an entire small square bale.

Enrichment

This is any item on the track that will keep them moving or entertained.

- A few small log jumps on the trail.
- A jumble of large rocks that they have to navigate around, reminding them to pick up their feet.
- A bridge that they have to go over getting them

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Logs encourage horses to be lift their feet.

used to the sound, and this need not even be over a ditch or water. A sturdy pallet with no spaces between boards makes a nice fake bridge.

- Scratching posts. Use a large, solid post, well driven into the ground. Screw on floor scrubbers, heads to push brooms, old curry combs, etc.

- Take advantage of any hills you may have, as many horses like to stand at the top. Hills are good for teaching them to use themselves well, as the climb and descend.

- Horses also like having clear water pools that they can stand in or even roll in on a hot day.

These obstacles can be whatever you want to work on with your horse. If you do a lot of trail riding where you need to cross water or bridges, put a bridge on your track. If your horse spooks at every rock, put rocks on your track. For horses who are not careful of where they put their feet, add rocks, jumps or trot poles so that every time they pass over them, it reminds them to pick up their feet.

Use a slow feeder such as a hay net.



Tips for Building your own Paddock Paradise

- **Download** a satellite or terrain map of your property from Google maps. Print out and trace your property lines on it, then go for a walk.

- **Take notes** of how the areas look in winter, spring and summer. You will want to take this into account when planning fence lines and footing choices.

- **Lay down** some kind of geotextile to prevent the loss of your footing if you are placing sand, rock or gravel over a muddy area. An industrial strength landscape fabric, old carpeting, or even a thick layer of flax straw can be used.

- **Keep the** inner fenceline simpler, even temporary and movable electric fence.

- **Do not** get overwhelmed. Start small, and have a long term goal, with a few manageable additions every year.

- **Observe how** your horses interact, and take this into account when designing your PP. If you have a dominant and aggressive horse, make the tracks wider, with large corners and loafing areas.

- **Have ways** (gates) of making the track smaller to contain them in a sacrifice area in spring or if overweight, and to expand to different areas for more grazing or to do rotational grazing.

- **Save yourself** elbow grease at grooming time. If you want to make a water dugout for soaking or rolling, line the hole with barrier and then a layer of sand or pea gravel. This will reduce the muddiness. 🐾

For more information about the Paddock Paradise concept, go to www.paddockparadise.com or obtain a copy of "Paddock Paradise" by Jaime Jackson, www.jaimejackson.com