



By mid-2008, all 38 horses of the Houston Police Department's Mounted Patrol Unit were working successfully barefoot, or in hoof boots.

# WALKING THE **beat**

Follow the journey of one mounted unit as they took their patrol horses from shod to barefoot.

BY JILL WILLIS

**D**id you know that every single horse in the second largest police mounted patrol unit in the US is ridden barefoot, or in hoof boots instead of shoes? It's truly admirable how this group of police officers – one lieutenant, four sergeants and 24 officers – began taking these courageous (barefoot) steps even though all traditional forces were pushing against them.

## A need for change

Many of those traditions are the very reason a great majority of people do not know how to keep a horse healthy. You can find a lot more information on treating disorders or their symptoms than on preventing problems

in the first place. So it was one-part logic and one-part hunch on the part of Houston Police Sergeant Gregory Sokoloski that led him to consider a completely different approach to caring for the Houston Police Department's Mounted Patrol horses. This began back in 2003 after completing a thorough review of the medical histories, vet and farrier records – and the accompanying bills – of all retired four-legged employees since the Unit first started with 14 horses back in 1983.

Sergeant Sokoloski says he was initially trying to understand why so many of the horses had health and lameness issues instead of being sound and healthy, when



they were presumably receiving all the proper care. "What was really starting to get to me were the bad answers I was getting," he says. "But the more questions I asked, the more isolated I became."

At the time, Sergeant Sokoloski was being encouraged by a friend (an endurance rider who had watched her own horse successfully move from lameness to soundness after she removed his shoes) to consider barefoot alternatives. Although he was not inclined to believe that police horses could go barefoot, he was aware that changes were needed. "The city was spending a lot of money and just getting poor results and ongoing problems with our horses."

### Testing a theory

In December 2003, Sergeant Sokoloski and his supervisor, Lt. Randall Wallace, agreed to attend a barefoot trimming seminar and demonstration where an equine cadaver leg was also dissected. "I was stunned and fascinated by the importance of the hoof mechanism and the idea that so many of the injuries and behavioral problems could be attributed to the metal shoes," recalls Sergeant Sokoloski.

After a bit more exploration and investigation, the sergeant asked for and received permission from the lieutenant to remove the shoes from his new personal mount, Shadow, a four-year-old Warmblood. They took the plunge just one week before the 2004 Super Bowl in Houston. It was not only Shadow's first time being ridden without shoes; it was also his first time out in an official working capacity as a police horse.

### Bucking the trend

"The vet and farrier both contended that going to work without his shoes was dangerous and bad for the horse," says Sergeant Sokoloski. "But we worked five 14-hour days in a row and it was amazing how much better movement Shadow had and how much more confident he was going in all gaits over the different road surfaces downtown.

"His traction was excellent, he was confident with every step he took and there was no wear of his hooves after riding," adds the sergeant. It had rained throughout the week and the wet, trash-filled streets were a slippery obstacle course, but Shadow moved through them flawlessly, frequently at a run. The only issue afterwards was a little soreness that was quickly remedied by a pair

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### Caution: Please do your homework before you begin studying!

There is a growing demand for competent Natural Hoof Care (NHC) professionals! If you are interested in a career providing quality NHC services, you should do your homework before making a final decision about where to go for training!

As NHC becomes increasingly popular, many "barefoot" instructors are promoting themselves, or their schools, as teaching a *variation* of natural hoof care when, in reality, they do not even know what a natural trim is or what is involved in the method.

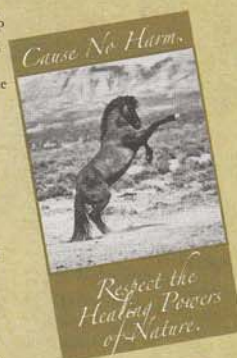
It is for this reason that NHC pioneer Jaime Jackson returned to teaching in 2009 and formed the Institute for the Study of Natural Horse Care Practices. The ISNHCP provides quality, competent, hands-on, non-invasive, authentic natural hoof care instruction and training based upon Jackson's world renowned research on the hooves of the sound, healthy wild horses in the U.S. Great Basin.

The ISNHCP will hold its next NHC "training camp" in Lompoc, California in July 2011. NHC is a whole-horse approach to having sound, healthy, happy horses.

For information on our comprehensive and in-depth NHC training program, please go to the NHC Training page at [www.ISNHCP.net](http://www.ISNHCP.net). To learn more about NHC in general, please go to: [www.AANHCP.net](http://www.AANHCP.net).

"Mr. Jackson, you gave us the proof there is nothing more beautiful than a natural hoof. You opened our minds on this amazing course to learn the spirit of *The Natural Horse*."

(Excerpt from a poem presented to Jaime Jackson from ISNHCP students on the last day of their December 2010 training camp.)





of “Old Mac” hoof boots. “This further convinced me that barefoot was the way to go, even if there was the occasional need for hoof boots.”

## Success stories

Lt. Wallace was also fully convinced. “Before this, I was like most people and believed that horses were supposed to wear shoes – simply because everyone was doing it and I didn’t know any better,” he explains. “When I was introduced to barefoot, I felt my eyes were opened to the truth and it became crystal clear to me that shoes were not only unnecessary, but also detrimental to the horse. I saw that [horses had been given] all the protection they needed in the hoof, but humans had screwed that up by nailing metal shoes to [their hooves].”

The two officers immediately decided the next horse to have his shoes removed would be Barney. He had been diagnosed with navicular syndrome, was chronically lame, and had been abscessing for several years. He was considered one of the best in the unit for dealing with large crowd-control situations but only worked on special occasions – no more than once a month (at the most) and then only if he was medicated with Bute. In less than two months after having his shoes pulled and being naturally trimmed, Barney astonished everyone on the force with his “sudden” soundness. He happily returned to working full time, and continues to work five days a week.

## Learning curve

“At the beginning of our barefoot journey some horses

took longer to transition than others and the process had a few ups and downs,” recalls Sergeant Sokoloski. “Some of the horses went through a lengthy and painful transition process; however, this gave us the opportunity to continue learning and get better with each horse. In the beginning I was the only officer trimming the horses and was generally given the ‘last chance’ on frequently lame ones. Luckily, those in charge at the HPD recognized the benefits of our barefoot program and supported us by providing the necessary resources for our program to be a continued success.”

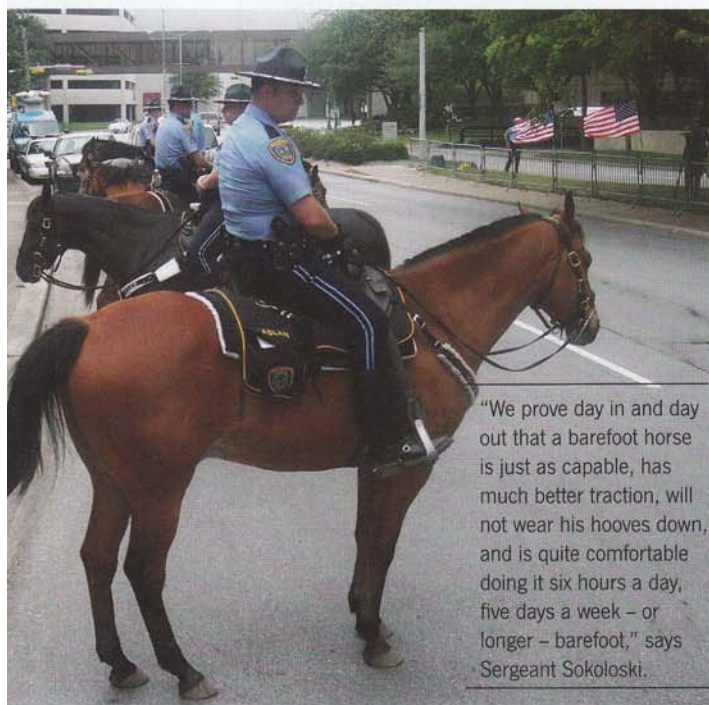
Two more police officers were encouraged to learn how to help trim the barefoot police horses. As many others have discovered, they soon learned there are differences in various methods of barefoot trimming. In 2005, the police officers attended another hoof care clinic that promoted a barefoot trimming method developed by former farrier turned natural hoof care advocate, Jaime Jackson, who uses the hooves of wild, free-roaming mustangs as the ideal model.

Given the demands on working police horses and the varied terrains they travel on, the officers agreed it was logical to use this method so their horses would have the same strong, tidy, rock-hard hooves of wild mustangs.

By late 2007, Officers Danny Pryor and Scott Berry had enrolled in Jackson’s AANHCP Natural Hoof Care Training & Certification program and, along with Sergeant Sokoloski, successfully transitioned 21 horses to barefoot. By the middle of 2008, the entire herd of 38 horses was working either barefoot or in hoof boots.

## Visible benefits

Once the police officers began using the “wild horse model” as their method of trimming, they began making changes to naturalize other parts of the horses’ lifestyle. While watching the health of their horses consistently improving, they also saw their veterinary and farrier expenses steadily decreasing. “We used to have problems with the horses tripping, stumbling and abscessing all the time,” says Sergeant Sokoloski. “The medical logs were filled with comments about these issues along with notes about tendon and back problems and poor hoof quality with the shoes. What is amazing is that all these conditions have stopped. It is incredible to see the medical logs with months and months of various medical conditions – and then no more entries after ‘barefooting’.”



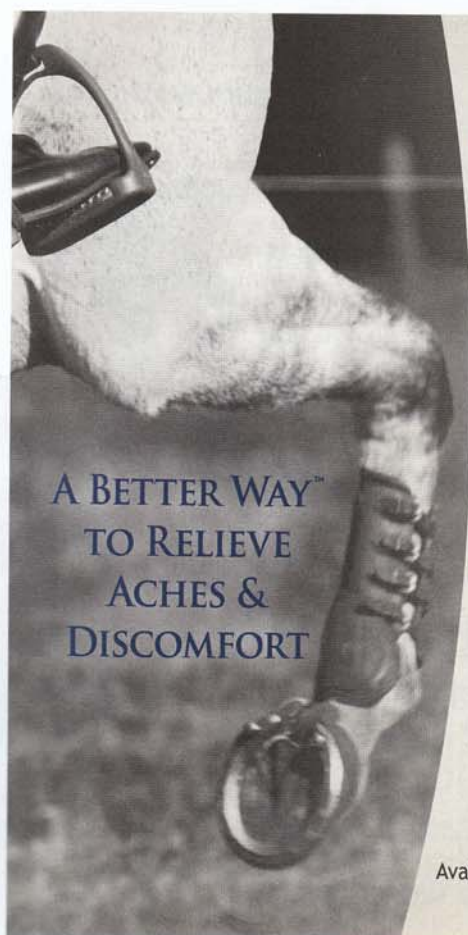
“We prove day in and day out that a barefoot horse is just as capable, has much better traction, will not wear his hooves down, and is quite comfortable doing it six hours a day, five days a week – or longer – barefoot,” says Sergeant Sokoloski.



Prior to beginning this journey, none of the police officers was inclined to think horses could function without shoes. "Although I had racing Quarterhorses of my own at the time, I was originally ignorant and thought that horses had to wear shoes," said Sergeant Leslie Wills who, along with Sergeant Sokoloski, trains both the horses as well as the police officers when they are first learning how to ride. "Greg gave me one of his books on barefoot horses and it all made perfect sense to me. I immediately went into the Mounted Patrol Unit after reading that book and had Greg pull the shoes off my assigned horse, Suzy Q. I have never looked back since! I believe we are making great strides in the barefoot movement. The horses at the Houston Police Mounted Patrol have never been happier or healthier since going barefoot."

"The ability the horse has to heal and reshape his hooves into their [natural] form is amazing," says Sergeant Sokoloski. "During the process of healing, enormous changes are occurring, not only outside, but also inside. The most important part of this process is to allow the horse to heal by keeping the hoof form correct and providing turnout so that the horse can move as much as possible. We prove day in and day out that a barefoot

In addition to all 38 horses being barefoot, most are also ridden bitless – usually in rope halters.

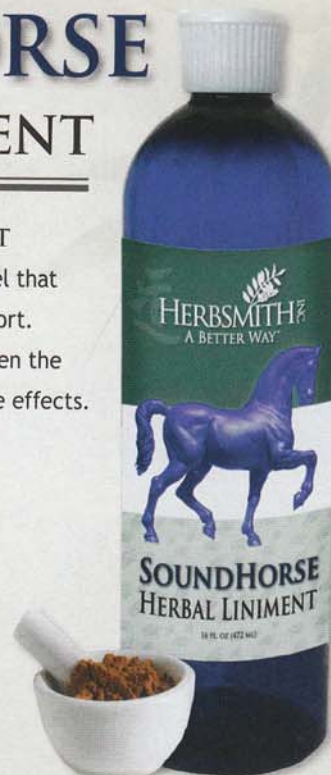


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horse is just as capable, has much better traction, will not wear his hooves down, and is quite comfortable doing it six hours a day, five days a week – or longer – barefoot.”

## Living the barefoot life

“The greatest testament of departmental backing we have received with our barefoot program was the planning and construction of our new state-of-the-art facility, which was specifically designed with the barefoot horse in mind,” says Sergeant Sokoloski.

In fact, a substantial portion of the savings in vet and farrier bills helped fund the new 15-acre facility to house the Mounted Patrol and Canine Units. Completed in early 2009, the new facility is five times larger than the previous one and designed to help naturalize the horse's lifestyle. Of course, some traditional elements have remained in place. Although each horse does get stalled part of the time, every stall has an attached 50-foot run with crushed granite footing and is equipped with a “slow feeder” to give the horses free choice access to grass hay. The slow feeders encourage the horses to work harder at getting to their hay; this provides them with more mental stimulation and emulates the natural nibbling aspect of eating smaller amounts over a longer period. During their “off days”, the horses are turned out together on dirt pastures with minimal green grass but 24/7 access to grass hays. 

*Most equipment and tack for the HMP horses is purchased through donations by private individuals and companies. For more information or to make a donation, email Sergeants Sokoloski or Wills at [Gregory.Sokoloski@cityofhouston.net](mailto:Gregory.Sokoloski@cityofhouston.net) or [Leslie.Wills@cityofhouston.net](mailto:Leslie.Wills@cityofhouston.net).*

JILL WILLIS IS A NATURAL HOOF CARE/HORSE CARE ADVOCATE AND BOARD MEMBER OF THE AANHCP (ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF NATURAL HORSE CARE PRACTICES) AND A PARTNER OF JAIME JACKSON'S AT THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF NATURAL HORSE CARE PRACTICES. HER OLDEST HORSE, ZA APOLLO+ (NOW 24 YEARS) SPENT MOST OF HIS FIRST 19 YEARS SHOD ON ALL FOUR FEET AS A RESULT OF HER IGNORANCE, AND GETS ALL THE CREDIT FOR HER SHIFTING TO A DIFFERENT AND BETTER PARADIGM.

It's especially impressive that a unit patrolling a city as large as Houston has gone barefoot with their horses, but other police departments in the country have also removed the shoes from their police horses – including those in Austin, Texas, Tampa in Florida, Las Vegas, and Madison, Wisconsin.

