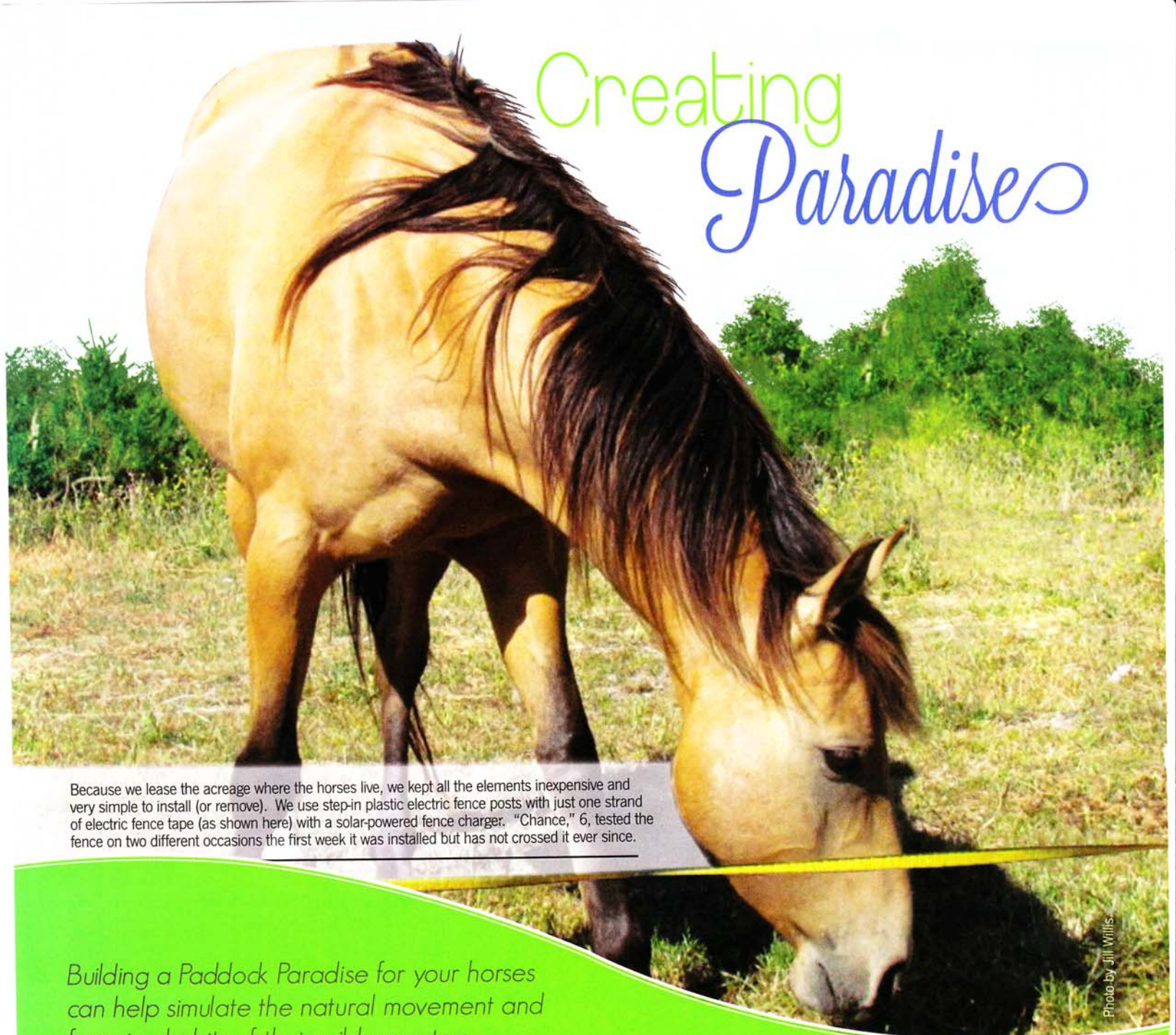


Creating Paradise



Because we lease the acreage where the horses live, we kept all the elements inexpensive and very simple to install (or remove). We use step-in plastic electric fence posts with just one strand of electric fence tape (as shown here) with a solar-powered fence charger. "Chance," 6, tested the fence on two different occasions the first week it was installed but has not crossed it ever since.

Building a Paddock Paradise for your horses can help simulate the natural movement and foraging habits of their wild ancestors.

BY JILL WILLIS WITH JAIME JACKSON

For those not familiar with the concept of Paddock Paradise, it's an increasingly popular way of boarding horses. It's based on the naturally healthy lifestyle of U.S. Great Basin free-roaming wild horses as written about in *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding* by natural hoof care and wild horse expert, Jaime Jackson. According to Jackson's research and studies, bands of family members travel along familiar routes he calls "tracks", as they go from one place to the next in their various territories. Because they are animals of prey, wild horse bands instinctively move in close formations across their home ranges as they seek

out forage, water, rolling spots, other bands with whom they wish to interact, and many other activities essential to their biology and survival.

Tracking system

By creating similar "tracks", a Paddock Paradise encourages natural movement or travel in horses, upon which they will create their own "paths" – very narrow, worn down areas where travel or forward movement is the sole activity. As with wild horses, traveling along a familiar and efficient "path of least resistance"

seems to be the unspoken but well-understood objective among domestic horses as well. A track should be as wide as is necessary for the activity to take place – narrower in areas designed simply to move the horses, and wider in places where they'll stop and camp, eat, sleep, rest, play, etc. In either case (track or path), the survival instinct is the driving force behind the movement.

Physical and psychological benefits

Paddock Paradise lays out a broad template for creating tracks and has specific recommendations for stimulating movement based on a variety of natural equine behaviors. The principal goal is to facilitate health and soundness, both physical and mental, in domesticated horses. Paddock Paradise is the “cure” or antidote to the many conditions, illnesses and disorders afflicting domestic horses as a consequence of living in stalls or other forms of close confinement, or being turned out on lush, sugar-laden grass pastures that can cause laminitis.

In addition to preventing or rehabilitating preventable illnesses and diseases, a Paddock Paradise also minimizes or ends boredom, which often means an end to stall vices, irritability or depression. When horses are allowed to live in a manner that more closely resembles their natural habitat, not only are they healthier but happier. A Paddock Paradise allows horses to be outside and moving 24/7, and lets them eat in a more natural manner by having constant access to the right kinds of food.

A reasonably natural diet

The horse's digestive system is not designed to endure long absences of food interrupted by an abrupt consumption of large meals – which is the manner in which many facilities feed. In the past six years, numerous Paddock Paradises have been created throughout the country and around the world – at both commercial boarding



A path in Nevada made by wild horses.





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Question time

Is it possible to create a Paddock Paradise in a 1-acre field?

One acre is about the “lower limit” for a Paddock Paradise (I often joke, “You can’t have a Paddock Paradise in a stall!”) but yes, it can work. One acre is equivalent to about 208’ x 208’, or 43,560 square feet. Adding up the lengths, regardless of the acre’s shape, the perimeter comes to about 834’, or a bit more than 1/8 of a mile – that is, if only the perimeter is used. If the track is designed to wind through the acre, then its length will increase commensurately. I understand many horse owners do it this way, and I think it is a good idea, unless open space in the middle of an outer perimeter track is the objective. Of course, expect the horses to move continuously along the track from one activity to the next. Distance wise, this will add up quickly, and much to the benefit of the horse.

I have a typical field with thick lush grass. What’s the best way to start a track?

Get rid of the grass by whatever means you have. How this can be done will be limited by track width and obstacles positioned in the track along the way. People use tractors with disks and blades, propane torches, non-toxic grass killers, animals like goats and sheep, or landscaping plastic laid on top of the grass and covered with soil, rock and gravel. Running tracks away from grassy areas also avoids these laminitis traps.

Does anyone use an automatic feeder? Or nets over large round bales?

I’m an advocate of any forage feeding system that keeps hay available 24/7 and does not discourage movement. Automatic feeders and large quantities of hay in one place may encourage horses to just stand and eat, leaving only to get water. Throwing hay on the ground along the track is the ideal and easiest way, but there may be aggravating circumstances such as strong winds, rain, mud and excess waste. If wind isn’t a problem, then toss only as much as the horses will eat without trampling, defecating, and urinating on it. Hay nets spaced in groups around the track seem logical if wind, ground waste or contamination become a problem. Of course, waste hay can be raked with dung and composted. You will be surprised how local gardeners will take every opportunity to get what they can off of a track if given permission!

I’m wondering how you would put the principles/ideas of Paddock Paradise into place if you don’t own the pasture, meaning you’re not allowed to make permanent changes?


If the property owner is open to the concept, using temporary, easy to install electric fencing to build a track makes the most sense. “Step-in” fence posts made of plastic are relatively inexpensive and easy to install (and remove). Once this is completed, it is simply a matter of being creative without making permanent changes. Use a solar fence charger if you don’t have access to electricity.



Left: Periodic explosions of excitement - or natural forces of nature - on the track help keep the horses in excellent aerobic and muscular shape.
Top right: The beauty of Paddock Paradise shows up in their hooves!
Bottom right: The hooves of a wild horse living in the High Desert area of Grand Junction, Colorado.

facilities and on private properties.

Providing a “reasonably natural diet” through a variety of grass hays in a free choice manner is a staple of the Paddock Paradise system. Depending on where you live, you may wish to spread numerous small piles of hay throughout various eating areas on the track, or place it inside slow feed hay nets located strategically along the track at designated eating areas or feed stations. The nets help avoid waste from winds and prevent hay from being mixed into muddy areas, or soiled with urine and feces. Mud is definitely one of the most frustrating elements for horse owners to contend with in wet climates. It is worth having dirt or a road base brought in to keep the track dry and well-drained.

In summary, creating a Paddock Paradise for your horses will help them live more closely to how nature intended. The physical and mental benefits are immeasurable and long lasting. 

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.

JAIME JACKSON IS A 35-YEAR VETERAN HOOF CARE PROFESSIONAL, LECTURER, AUTHOR, RESEARCHER AND NOTED EXPERT ON WILD AND DOMESTIC HORSE HOOVES. IN THE EARLY 2000S, JAIME CREATED THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF NATURAL HOOF CARE PRACTITIONERS, NOW CALLED THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF NATURAL HORSE CARE PRACTICES (AANHCP.NET). HE HAS PUBLISHED FIVE BOOKS – *THE NATURAL HORSE: LESSONS FROM THE WILD*; *THE HORSE OWNER’S GUIDE TO NATURAL HOOF CARE*; *FOUNDER: PREVENTION & HEALING THE NATURAL WAY*; *PADDOCK PARADISE: A GUIDE TO NATURAL HORSE BOARDING* AND *THE NATURAL TRIM* (FORMERLY THE OFFICIAL TRIMMING GUIDELINES OF THE AANHCP). JAIME RESIDES IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA.