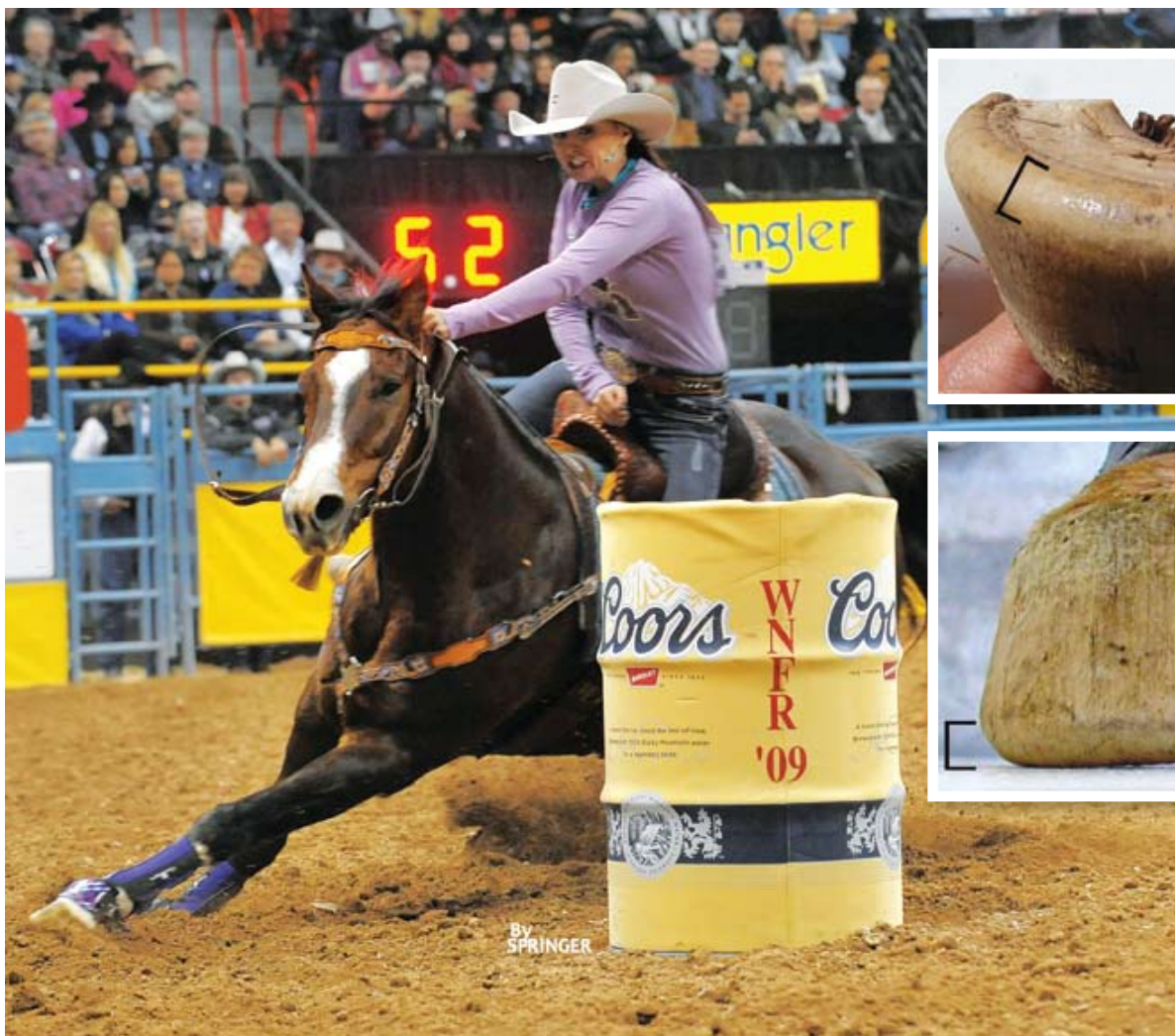


LOSE the SHOES?

Running horses “barefoot” is gaining popularity among barrel racers, but is it the right choice for all horses?

BY ANNIE LAMBERT

REMEMBER THE FEELING OF GRASS between your bare toes on a warm, spring day? How about the rushing tides pulling sand from beneath your feet during a walk along the ocean shore? A growing school of riders believe your horse might “feel the ground” in much the same way when left unshod and “naturally” trimmed.



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. **Left:** Jordon Peterson rode Frenchmans Jester barefoot at their inaugural National Finals Rodeo in 2009.

There is evidence that chronic soundness problems in some horses have been alleviated when those horses' shoes are replaced with a natural trim. 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 professional barrel racers who have transitioned 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 unknown farriers when they are on the road. Even getting a pulled shoe tacked on can be an aggravating experience when traveling far from their home base, they claim, not to mention the damage a ripped-off shoe can cause.

But don't think the transition from shoes to trims is painless. It takes commitment, horsemanship and a dose of common sense.

Still, advocates feel it is worth all that and more. It is not the easy way out, they suggest, but for some it is a better way.

Like Wild Horses

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 thanks to her horse, Frenchmans Jester's, performance there. In fact, more than a few competitors and spectators noted that "Jester" handled the ground better than the other 14 horses.

According to Peterson, however, her gelding had covered all types of ground all year—without missing a barefoot stride.

"I haven't had one single problem with him on any kind of ground," Peterson confirms. "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."

Canadian barrel racer Deb Renger was one rider who watched Peterson and Jester carefully during their big runs last year and also noted the ease with which Jester moved through even difficult ground conditions.

"I watched Jordon's horse run a lot this past year," Renger says. "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."

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 and 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 that has been dubbed the Mustang Roll.

Your Horse's Health

"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 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 themselves.

Jordon Peterson's father, Chuck, of Chilton, Texas, is one example of someone who has learned the finer points of natural hoof trimming and does the work himself at home.

"Chuck is self-taught," acknowledges Peterson's mother, former world barrel racing champion Kristie Peterson. "He's always been around horses and has done some trimming, but just the cowboy type. He started studying the Mustang Roll and it made sense and it worked. It was trial and error for a while. You need to know your horses and figure them out, but it's no different than shoeing in that respect."

The Petersons raise their own horses and have always left them barefoot early, choosing to shoe them when they start hauling to compete. Since beginning the natural trimming style about eight years ago, they say they have seldom found a need for shoes.

"I think once you get it started, it is easy to maintain yourself," Kristie points out. "I don't think people should be afraid to try and do it themselves, even women. I don't have to worry about it because I have Chuck, but I can use a rasp if they have a little crack or anything."

Simplifying Soundness

Kristie's famous barrel horse, French Flash Hawk ("Bozo"), was earning a living before the Petersons began using the natural trim. In hindsight, however, Kristie believes the now 23-year-old retiree would have benefited greatly from the practice.

"We'd keep shoes off him a couple months



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.

PHOTO CREDIT

Give 'em the Boot?

The use of hoof boots during the transition between shoeing and going barefoot with a natural trim appears to be a personal preference based on individual situations. Here are a few comments from competitors:

Canadian Champion and multiple NFR qualifier Deb Renger, of Alberta, Can.

I haul my horses in Soft-Ride boots and I'll use them when walking across pavement or rocks and at rodeos when they are on hard surfaces day and night. They love it. But, you can't run them in boots.

NFR qualifier Jordon Peterson, of Lott, Texas

For your older horses that aren't used to being barefoot I recommend putting the boots on where you're out where there are a lot of rocks. I do have a pair of the Soft-Ride boots that I hardly ever use. I only use them when I have to walk a far distance across concrete or hard ground with rocks on top.

Former WPRA World Champion Kristie Peterson, of Chilton, Texas

I don't find a need to use them. It is like our feet, if you walk around barefoot all the time your feet are tougher than somebody that doesn't.

Holly Foster, of Locust Grove, Okla.

I wouldn't recommend running in boots, even though they say you can. There is a little bit of movement in there, and you might as well be slipping. But the boots can be helpful, maybe for the first few weeks after they're trimmed, to help when they're getting used to being barefoot.

Jaime Jackson, of Lodi, California

I sometimes use a boot made in Switzerland, because it can be modified. I can cut out the toe, add inserts and I can heat the boot and change the angles.

Dr. Britt Conklin, Reata Equine Hospital, Weatherford, Texas

Supplemental boots may be good in the early convalescence or when environmental conditions are bad, but in reality their overuse will only delay the acclimation period.

out of every year," she says of Bozo. "If I knew then what I know now, it would have saved me a lot of headache. He had a contracted heel on his black foot. Now that he's been turned out barefoot for three years, his feet look awesome."

Kristie did go shoeless on her last PRCA caliber horse, Frenchmans Vegas ("Vegas").

"He had a scar on his ankle, and his foot was different because of that," she explains. "He'd pull that shoe off right after they shod him every, single time. By leaving him bare-

foot, that foot got to wear how it needed to be naturally for that scar. I think [going barefoot] will correct a lot of problems because the horse will wear the foot the way it should naturally be.”

Professional Kelly Conrado began trimming all the horses at his facility in Hudson, Colo., about five years ago. His daughter, Ivy, was struggling to be competitive on a mare with serious soundness issues.

“We were at the point where we had the mare on Isoxsuprine, doing special shoeing and they were talking about nerving her,” Conrado says. “They were doing this natural balance shoeing and pulling the toe back, and her foot looked unlevel to me. I pulled her shoes off, leveled her up with a rasp and I’ve been doing it ever since. That mare went from running a half-second off to winning Junior rodeos again.”

Overall, Conrado has noticed less soreness in the hocks of his trainees. He attributes this to the horses getting a more natural grip of the dirt instead of the “hard grab you get with a shoe.”

If Conrado ever questioned his belief in the natural trim, all doubts were forever wiped from his thoughts last summer.

“My vet talked me into putting shoes back on my daughter’s mare because it was so wet,” he says. “With the shoes on, she started running about three to four tenths off [the pace] again. As soon as we jerked the shoes off, she went back to winning. I’m not kidding; I’m a huge believer.”

Conrado’s veterinarian was reluctant to embrace the natural trim theory at first, but has come to be “extremely supportive” now.

No Generalizations

Dr. Britt Conklin, co-owner of Reata Equine Hospital and Podiatry Center in Weatherford, Texas, has dedicated a large portion of his practice to equine footcare. Conklin is also a member of the American Farriers Association and a Texas Professional Farrier Association Certified Farrier.

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

With his expertise on the hoof of the horse, Conklin looks at natural trimming with a balanced, if somewhat skeptical, eye. He believes some horses can, but some horses *should not* go barefoot. Why is this? He is a strong advocate of the idea of natural selection and survival of the fittest when species are subjected to living in the wild. However, during the past 100 years or longer of domesticated breeding, 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 points 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.”

Going Iron Free

After wearing boots all winter, those first few days of running barefoot across your driveway to fetch the mail can be murder on your feet. It takes a few trips to toughen them up. Your horse is no different when he makes the transition from wearing iron to working shoeless under a variety of conditions.

“If a consideration to go barefoot is made,” Conklin says, “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 8 to 12 months is a reasonable time for an acclimation period.”

Holly Foster is adamant that there are

Your Horse's Health

no shortcuts when it comes to transitioning from shoes to a natural trim. Her horse, Gordon, tested her patience and taught her it is easier to start with a horse that had been barefoot rather than one who's used to wearing shoes long-term.

"It took about a year and a half for [Gordon] before I could say he was fine," confirms Foster. "He was a tough case. We'd go back to shoes for a while, then I'd get aggravated with that and we'd go back to the trim. With this type of trimming, you've got to stay on top of it. It is a better way, and it's cheaper in some ways, if you have somebody that knows how to do it right."

Jackson agrees that the key to success is having a knowledgeable person doing the trimming. Finding a good farrier, or rather the difficulty of finding a competent person to shoe, is one reason many people have gone to the natural trim. Many have worked to learn how to maintain their own horses' feet. Foster, who recently moved from Stephenville, Texas, to Locust Grove, Okla., studied several natural trimmers, including Jackson, and now trims her own.

"Jaime Jackson's book is one of the first I got," Foster says. "I love his 'do no harm' theory, kind of like the doctors' creed. As far as the transition, you might not take them from shoes to barefoot and be able to run them immediately. [The natural trim] is for every horse if you take the time to do it right. It is not for every horse if you need them next week."

The Peterson family has found transitioning slightly more difficult with very flat-footed horses. Jordon's 6-year-old backup horse, "Fonzi," is an example.

"Because he has to be on the road with me all the time, I haven't really had time to take his front shoes off, but he is just trimmed behind," she explains.

"I have found that it is really not a big problem," Kristie says of transitioning out of shoes. "If they have a descent cup to their foot, it's not that much of a process. We've had a couple that were kind of flat-footed and kept them shod in front until they got a good cup to their foot. But there are so many that you can just take their shoes off and they're good. It is pretty amazing that way."

Renger has also fought the flatfoot syndrome with her good horse, "Reiner." He has a Thoroughbred-type foot and grows no heel. For those reasons, she plans to



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



leave shoes on the 14-year-old gelding. Her 5-year-old, "Scooter," and any other backup horses she has will be going barefoot.

"Scooter had OCD in his hocks last year, so he had surgery," Renger says. "I just got him back on barrels in January, and I'm hoping he'll be able to futurity later this year. He has not had any trouble going barefoot, turning barrels or walking across the gravel. He's been really good that way. There's going to be certain horses you can't do it on, but if you can, it's great."



PHOTO CREDIT

Do it Yourselfers

Information on the natural trim is readily available on the internet.

♦ **Jaime Jackson:** jaimejackson.com

♦ **Association for the Advancement of Natural Horse Care Practices:** aanhcp.net

♦ **The Horses Hoof / James &**

Yvonne Welz: thehorseshoof.com

♦ **Ivy & Pete Ramey:** hoofrehab.com

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

After searching for a shoeing solution for her own horses, Jill Willis, formerly a public relations executive in the entertainment industry, became a natural trimmer and is now an associate with Jackson's practice. Once she weighed the advantages of leaving her horses unshod, she jumped in with both feet.

"I was real careful about staying off the rocks, gravelly roads or anything during that initial period," she recalls. "A lot of people come into [natural trimming] as kind of a

last hope, with their horses close to being euthanized. They figure they have nothing else to lose at that point. Now they're back riding those horses."

Feeling the Dirt

Curious skeptics have quizzed Jordon Peterson about running barefoot since her success during last year's WNFR. Traction and the problem of needing shoes to prevent slipping and help in driving away from a barrel are in the forefront of their queries. However, those running sans shoes don't seem to have any worry about gripping the ground. The consensus is that the horses "feel the ground" just fine.

"My horse does better in the ground," Peterson says. "He can feel the ground and knows whether he should get into the ground harder or not as much."

Renger, Foster and Conrado fully agree with Jordon's assessment.

"Scooter has been barefoot since late January, and he hasn't slipped or anything," offers Renger. "I'm sure it probably will get even better because it takes a bit longer until they get that natural ridge in the foot, around the rim."

"I ran at an amateur rodeo a while back and everyone that went to the left barrel first either went to the fence, slipped in the hind end or went down," explains Foster. "I felt my horse take an extra step or two, but he darned sure held it. And he's a horse you don't rate; you're either committed or you're not. They know exactly where their feet are, what the ground is and what it isn't."

"Horses develop a natural rim around the foot," Conrado explains of the trim. "That natural rim is a lot narrower and sharper than the rims on the shoes. I was at a barrel race a while back and the ground was deep and shifty; horses were really struggling with it. My horses never missed a beat."

Out of the Ordinary

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 aren't.

Peterson, whose fiancé, Justin Briggs, keeps her horses trimmed, reports the pro-

cess isn't too much more difficult than a regular trim. Her horses are trimmed every six weeks, but Briggs rounds them up every three to four weeks to prevent any chips. And while Peterson has Briggs and her father to help her, many people have found it easy to keep their horses feet in shape between trimmings with a little rasping or they do all the trimming themselves.

When properly trimmed, subscribers to the natural 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 says with a laugh. "You want a sturdy hoof with a thick sole. Anything other than that, they're not going to be comfortable on."

"My horse Gordon has five times more hoof wall on him without shoes than he ever did with shoes," confirms Foster. "He was always thin walled, and we went to heck and back trying to get him right. About a month, after I took the shoes off, he had an awful abscess that I think he'd had going on all along. I think pulling the shoes is what it took to finally get everything out of his feet. That was two years ago, and his feet have been healthy since then."

Foster researched the trim thoroughly before doing her own horses. She recommends trimming a minimum of every four weeks if you are not doing your own horses. To keep her trimming schedule simple, she smoothes up their feet every two weeks with some rasping, nearly eliminating any need for nippers or a hoof knife.

"Gordon, who is club footed, had the most trouble out of my horses," Foster points out. "If you trim out a lot of sole and make it looked concaved with an arch in it, you're not toughening up the sole or making it thicker. The sole, even on a flat-footed horse, will thicken up if you trim them right."

Foster has concluded if a person takes the time, remains diligent and on top of the horse's feet, the natural trim is an asset to performance horses.

"There is an art and a science to it," she says. "It's not a big deal, but there is a learning curve, and it takes a commitment to make it work. It will darn sure work if you do it right."