

FOREVER *young*

Managing “senior” horses with NHC.

BY JAIME JACKSON, *Certified AANHCP NHC Practitioner*

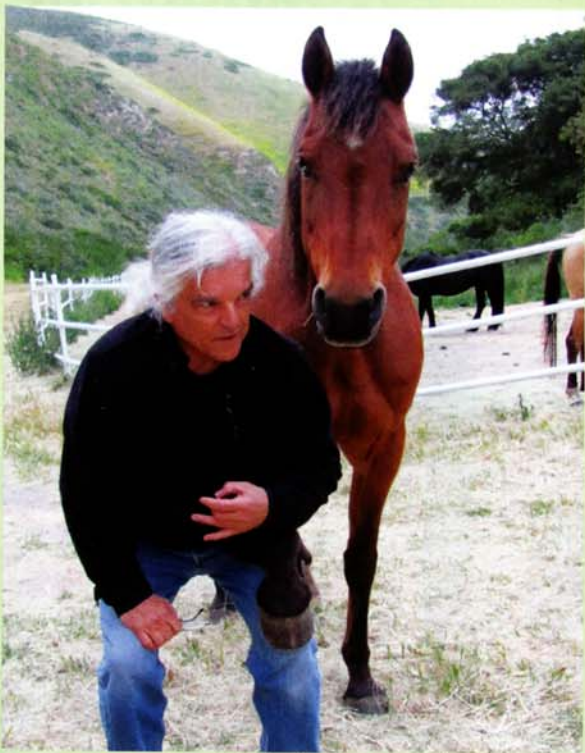


Photo: © Jill Willis

Apollo, an Arabian gelding at 24, with Jaime Jackson.

I clearly recall an important moment during my wild horse studies in 1982 at the BLM's processing corrals in Litchfield, California. I was taking hoof measurements on one of the restrained horses when the attending BLM vet called out the age of this particular mare as 20 years. There had been a succession of 20s, but never more than that. So, being somewhat naive at the time, I asked the vet, “Do wild horses ever get older than 20?” He responded, “Of course they do.” But using dentition as a means of aging the horses only allowed BLM vets to age them up to 20 with any degree of reliability. So that's what they reported to the BLM bureaucrats who educate the public.

Obviously, this process generated very skewed data, leading many to believe that “old age” among horses in their natural state isn't what it really is. In fact, as I learned during my field studies over the next four years, horses live well beyond their 20s in the wild – soundly and healthfully so. The long-time Great Basin ranchers I talked with, men who knew mustangs living on their leased

rangelands “by name”, made it clear they lived well into their 30s. In her book *America's Last Wild Horses*, Hope Ryden describes a wild mule that local ranchers claimed was 60 years old. Of course, BLM mustang gathers complicated matters then as now, by removing horses before they were/are able to live their lives out in nature.

Lessons from the wild

The “key” to equine soundness in the wild at any age lies in lifestyle: a natural diet, natural herd socialization, and natural movement 24/7. Wild horses in their late 20s, 30s and beyond were as healthy and vigorous as their younger counterparts. The vital “lesson from the wild” is that we shouldn't perceive domesticated horses in their late teens or 20s as being “over the hill”. In fact, horses in their 20s are probably in their prime, not “knocking at death's door”. Some interesting examples exemplify this:

- The late Colonel Alois Podhajsky, long-time Director of the Spanish Riding School (Austria) – known for their performance horses ridden into their late 20s – wrote about his Lipizzaner stallion, Pluto Theodorosta, in *My Horses, My Teachers*. “When he had attained the age of twenty-nine, I wanted to retire him and give him his well-deserved rest. But he did not seem to be of the same opinion. One day he took advantage of the fact that the door of his box was always open and trotted through the time-honored courtyard and across the street to the indoor riding school. Appreciating his zeal, I continued to ride him for another year in the beautiful riding hall.” Pluto died at age 31, but it is worth noting that he lived part of each year in a box stall (turnout was during the summer at the SRS), and could very well have lived longer had his boarding conditions been more natural year round. Nevertheless, he lived with other stallions (as we see among bachelor bands in the wild), and was exercised, trained and ridden daily in the true tradition of classical horsemanship. “His advanced age was not only proof of the strength of the Lipizzaner breed but also and above all proof of the correctness of the training that had maintained his health and stamina until the very end in spite of the demands made upon him,” wrote Podhajsky.
- Several years ago, I was consulted about NHC (natural hoof/horse care) by a breeder of draft horses in southern California. There were a dozen or so in his herd, but one in particular caught my attention – a gelding the owner's family had raised since he was born, now aged 48! I was stunned. The family said he was in such fine shape and spirit because he had spent a good deal of his adult life eluding an aggressive alpha mare who chased him every day and, in more recent years, round and round a “track”

they put together after reading my book, *Paddock Paradise*. As of 2010, I heard through the grapevine that this gelding was still alive (and, I assume, running), which meant he was 52!

- A long-time client of mine lives in an equestrian “neighborhood” in Los Angeles. For nearly four years, her four horses were in a large sand paddock by day and stalled at night. About six months ago, she decided to reconfigure her steep property and connected the paddock to a track that went up a hill behind her property. In all, she probably has no more than 1.5 acres available to the horses. But as a result of tracking the property along a steep incline, the horses – most around the age of 20 – experienced dramatic transformations in their conformation.
- My colleague Jill Willis and I are putting together our own Paddock Paradise here in the rugged coastal mountains of central California. Our herd includes Jill’s 24-year-old Arab gelding, Apollo. The ascent from the lower to the upper reaches of the track would cause most stalled horses half his age or younger to huff and puff to reach the top. But Apollo easily trots – and sometimes gallops – with his herd as though it were nothing. But then, this is what he and the others do every day! The ground is gravelly, and with all the non-stop natural movement these horses get, my work as an NHC practitioner couldn’t be better!

NHC and the aging equine

My advice to riders who want healthy sound horses well into their 20s and beyond is to practice the principles of NHC. I refer to these as the Four Pillars: natural boarding, a reasonably natural diet, natural horsemanship, and the natural trim. Here’s one thing you can do from each pillar:

Natural boarding – put together your own Paddock Paradise and let your horses move 24/7 as a herd.

A reasonably natural diet – oats, handfuls of mixed fruits and vegetables, a free choice mix of grass hays, free choice salt, and water.

Natural horsemanship – your best immediate example of how to ask your horse to move (short of visiting wild horse country) is what you’ll see in your own Paddock Paradise. You will be amazed!

A natural trim – follow nature’s model, the wear patterns of U.S. Great Basin wild horses. That’s what I do, and all my clients prosper! 🐾

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.

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