

HoovesN'



Horses

by Jaime Jackson

The Spirit of the Natural Horse

THE SPIRIT of the NATURAL HORSE, an article written by Jaime Jackson nearly 10 years after he first set foot in wild horse country, is as relevant to the horse world in 2014 as it was when first published in the American Farriers Journal in 1992. Only when those in charge of the care and management of domestic equines make the 'wild horse/natural horse' connection and provide what is truly natural for these animals will they have the opportunity to achieve optimal health, happiness and soundness. The following is an abridged of that article.

The idea of what it means for a horse to be "natural" is a notion I have thought about for as long as I've worked with horses. Indeed, the word natural has been exploited to such ends that it can mean just about anything. As one who has been in the trenches for fifteen years with domestic horses, it was clear to me that the concepts of nature have been shaped by hearsay, advertisements, or the intimidating harangues of experts who profess to know everything there ever was to know about horses. What all of this boils down to is that the meaning of "natural" has been held hostage to a reign of unsubstantiated opinions - derived entirely from horses in captivity!

For years, I had been aware of wild horses roaming in America's

outback in the high desert country of the U.S. Great Basin. I, like many horse enthusiasts had allowed my thinking about these animals to be influenced by rumor, myth and Old West stories. On one level, my understanding was that the vast majority of wild horses were poor, unsound, inbred, equines. But my intuition told me this view was problematic. And with further reflection, I began to see beyond the stereotypical illusion into the potential reality that perhaps nature has provided us with a living model of the horse's natural world. I remember this day well, for not long after, I packed up my belongings and headed alone into the outback. I was going to wild horse country to see for myself what was going on out there and I was about to make the "wild horse/natural horse" connection.

My first day in the outback was one of my most memorable. After driving all day in my four-wheel-drive truck, I

reached the area where locals had told me I would find wild horses. I fell in love immediately with my new surroundings and noticed an immense butte a short way off in the distance. This would provide me with the perfect vista I needed to find the wild ones still beyond my view. But two steps toward the butte's western flank. I realized immediately that the desert floor beneath me was a carpet of abrasive volcanic rock. My mind reeled, 'How could any horses, especially unshod ones, possibly cross such terrain, when I could barely walk through it myself wearing thick-soled hiking boots? I also discovered that its steep, craggy, boulder-strewn slopes, surrounded by deep canyons, sparse stands of twisted juniper, and an endless sea of bush, would provide no easy path. Nevertheless, up I went, at times climbing on "all fours" to keep my balance. Halfway to the summit, I stopped to

catch my breath, and there in the cracks and sparse patches of earth, I began to notice that some kind of plant had rooted itself upon the slope of the butte. Amazed by the plant's tenacity, nature swooped on me again in another frenzy of stark awareness, for there, scattered in between the sharp rocks, large smooth boulders, and plants, was dried horse dung!

Those horses had climbed up the side of this steep, rugged butte to eat this plant life. Finally, when I reached the summit, I saw them.

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(AANHCP Mustang Cadaver Hoof) Cutline: "Their health shows up in their hooves! A typical representation of the hoof of a wild, free-roaming mustang (this mare had been euthanized following an injury during a gather) is the picture of health, thus the reason they are worthy of our emulation." (Photo by Jaime Jackson)



Unfortunately, many domestic horses suffer from ignorance and myths about horse care and a typical horse out on rich, sugary green grass pasture ends up suffering from a host of metabolic and immune system disorders - such as laminitis - whose symptoms show up in the hooves." Photo by Jill Willis of a client horse who will soon be moving 'on track' and into a large Paddock Paradise.

Hoof Health

In virtually every nook and cranny were small "bands" of horses. There were probably several hundred of them in all. It was like watching a movie about horses made just for me. There were buckskins, grullas, one albino, paints, chestnuts - every color combination I'd ever seen. There was so much interesting activity below me that I didn't know how to take it all in. With my binoculars, I could see clearly their immaculate hooves and vibrant, healthy coats.

I have been among them now, off and on, for ten years. They have taught me what the meaning of "natural" is for their species. In fact, it is through them that I have been able to make what I call the "wild horse/natural horse" connection, a mental bridge that spans the real world of the wild horse and the abstract paradigm of the natural horse. It is the philosophy by which I now gauge all my activities with domestic horses.

As history will show, all breed, conformation, and temperamental types are represented in the wild horse population. By virtue of his natural way of life, the wild horse provides us with a working model through which



Domestic horses can achieve the outstanding health and soundness of their wild cousins through an understanding of the natural horse connection! The four pillars of natural horse care include a reasonably natural diet, natural trimming, a natural lifestyle/boarding environment and natural horsemanship." Photo by Jill Willis at the AANHCP headquarters in Lompoc, California

his species can speak for itself of the real meaning of the natural equine state. Here in the outback, there is no human-based opinion to muddle one's thinking about the horse's natural world. Horses simply do what is natural for horses to do-whatever that might be. We have only to observe and learn ... simple as that.

And I had many questions. What are the natural front and hind hoof shapes supposed to be? What range of toe angles and toe lengths might I find? What forces come to bear to shape the hooves? Does laminitis occur in the wild? And, if so, are you able to treat it effectively with what nature provides? What means of veterinary care do you provide for yourselves- for it is apparent that they are almost always healthy and seldom lame.

These horses know nothing of the distressing confusion that pervades, troubles, and numbs the lives of domestic horses everywhere. What is more, lameness - the archenemy of all domestic horses - is virtually not found among them

But it does no good to describe what I've learned unless the reader is prepared to abandon all previous beliefs. Once this is done, the magic of nature will help answer the tough questions.

Opening oneself thoughtfully and cautiously to the mysteries and uncertainties of the unknown will not jeopardize one's relationship to the horse. The horse instinctively will sense this effort and respond in kind. Believe me if you can: It is within the nature and spirit of the horseto acknowledge and affirm this kindredship when possible.

"Take the trouble to find your way into your horse's mind," wrote Richard Watjen, "without trying to make it human. Only those can become experts who are in tune and as one with their horses both physically and mentally."

We owe it to ourselves and our mounts to look into that special difference to see clearly what nature has breathed into the soul and being of the horse, then to develop an orderly and intuitive system of honest, compassionate horsemanship around that understanding ... one system that applies to all horses equally. A horse is a horse. But let's not start where horses are forced into the image of man.



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