

HoovesN'



Horses

by Jaime Jackson

Barefoot Performance Horses

It's been a long-standing tradition to shoe performance horses – whether they be racehorses, dressage horses, jumpers, endurance horses, or reiners. As more riders realize their equine partners can soundly perform barefoot, and may even enjoy increased performance, they are spreading the word.

Horse owners who want to know if their horses can perform well barefoot also need to consider the trimming methods and other factors that come into play to create a happy performance horse. All horses can perform barefoot, or in some instances when professionally fitted with hoof boots (worn only when the horse is being ridden).

But whether or not they can do so successfully will, perhaps

ironically, largely depend on the same kind of care given to shod horses! This would include:

1. Not riding or training the horse in a manner that overstresses his natural athletic ability, thereby causing pain, breakdown and lameness anywhere across his musculoskeletal system, not just his feet.
2. Not feeding a diet or medications that predispose or cause the horse to become laminitic, an epidemic problem across the equine community.
3. Failing to trim the hooves so they are naturally shaped.

"Natural horse care", as I call it, incorporates natural boarding, riding and trimming. This collectively facilitates a tough hoof, enabling the horse to go without shoes (or in some instances with professionally fitted hoof boots). It has been well documented historically that shoeing weakens the hoof and causes hoof deformity.

Today, we know this is true from experience. As well, compelling anecdotal

evidence from leading endurance riders has shown that shoeing obstructs circulation and causes fatigue, thereby precluding optimal performance. This idea applies not just to "performance horses", but all horses!

With so much buzz on the internet, the worldwide rise of numerous pro-barefoot associations, and the many books and journals espousing the benefits of going barefoot, it astonishes me that so many riders and professionals (farriers, vets, trainers) remain either uninformed or misinformed of – or resistant to – the burgeoning "barefoot revolution". In large part, this can be attributed to the pseudo-scientific claims of the "farrier culture" itself, which have gone unchallenged for centuries until the recent rise of natural care advocates. Shoers, and even vets, continue to believe and widely pronounce that selective breeding is the culprit behind weak, inferior feet ("we have bred the hoof out of the horse").

Advocates now know this isn't true at all, and that weak brittle walls, soft hypersensitive soles, less than optimal circulation and so forth can be attributed

hooves - Cont. on pg. 46



LEFT: "Perseverance Orient," an Arabian endurance horse living in South Africa (at Perseverance Endurance Horses breeding farm), is among a growing number of horses around the world who regularly competes barefoot (and bitless). His hooves are trimmed by his owner, Francois Seegers.

Photo by Laura Seegers



ABOVE: Eight year old Quarterhorse/Arabian moves effortlessly over the rocky footing where he lives at the AANHCP field headquarters.

Photo by Jill Willis



Barefoot success depends upon a species-appropriate diet, naturalized living conditions, a competent natural trim and genuine natural horsemanship which means riding in harmony with the horse's natural gaits. A Paddock Paradise simulates the natural habitat of horses living in the wild in a number of ways and helps to build and maintain strong, healthy hooves. Photos by Jill Willis

directly to the deleterious effects of shoeing. Remove the shoe, provide a regular regimen of natural trimming and boarding, and that "inferior" hoof suddenly heals and becomes a superior foot.

For millions of years, the equine hoof has been under the full force of natural selection. Within the evolutionary timeline, selective breeding is very new and genetically limited – it does not override the timeless latent "adaptation"

of *Equus caballus*' foot. The latter is "hidden" or suppressed by domestic care practices within every domestic horse – from miniature to draft, Thoroughbred to Arab, and everything in between.

This is amply demonstrated today by the feet of wild horses of the U.S Great Basin, and similar arid biomes around the world. All these "feral" horses were originally derived from domestic stock, and all have overcome the adverse effects of domestication on their feet.

Given the chance, any domestic horse turned loose into the wild will immediately start developing the ancient genotypical adaptive hoof form. And let me be clear on this point: the hoof is not adapting to the "wild conditions" – the adaptation occurred millions of years ago, or more precisely at the dawn of the species, *Equus caballus*. It is merely shedding "waste material" caused by domestic conditions, and remodeling itself though natural patterns of growth

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that are obstructed by shoeing and unnatural trimming practices.

Any horse can make the switch. The answer lies once more in the fact that the core natural hoof (adapted) lies dormant in all equine hooves. The challenge is to awaken it through holistic natural care. Today, thousands of horse caretakers are discovering how to do this. They have rejected the specious farriery science that ruins their horses' feet, educated themselves about the horse's natural state, and found ingenious ways to stimulate that core natural hoof out of its dormancy. They have learned that the natural hoof is capable of enduring and supporting any reasonable equestrian discipline, and that there are fewer lameness issues when barefoot than shod. And they have done all this without the professional support of the farriery community, which continues to labor under the misguided belief that domestic practices have genetically ruined the horse's foot.

This is not to say, however, that there aren't serious concerns in regards to traditional practices – in particular the damage to feet caused by shoeing, unnatural boarding and riding practices, and/or invasive podiatric veterinary procedures. If the damage is permanent and devastating, then no amount of natural trimming or shoeing (or natural boarding for that matter) that is going to change this! But, 'going natural' will unquestionably minimize suffering and won't exacerbate matters further and there is considerable anecdotal evidence that many hoof pathologies, once thought to be "incurable", heal readily under genuine regimens of natural care. For this reason alone, I recommend that all horses be exempted from shoeing.

Debilitating pathology aside, age, breed and shoeing history are never grounds for keeping any equine in shoes. It is the horse's "way" to be barefoot. The belief in trimming one horse differently from the next, based on equestrian discipline, conformation, breed, etc., has its roots once more in the farrier culture of "corrective shoeing". It is presupposed that horses "naturally" move differently from one another – due to breed, work, conformation and so on. Hence, it is essentially gospel that they must be trimmed and shod differently. This logic is specious because it ignores the species' natural gaits and the latent adapted






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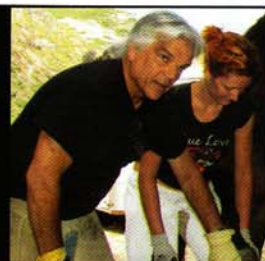
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hoof. Many of us now recognize that the natural trim generates the most optimal biomechanical hoof conformation possible, because it mimics the wild horse foot and supports the natural gaits. A horse moving naturally is biomechanically more efficient, less stressed, and less prone to breakdown and lameness. Moreover, his individual conformation, the nuances of his gaits based on his individual musculoskelature and temperament (e.g. breed), and the demands made on him by a knowledgeable rider who understands what it is to be a genuine natural rider, are all best served by the biomechanically efficient, naturally trimmed hoof. Arguably, virtually all equestrian based lameness in domestic horses is caused by unnaturally trimmed/shod horses ridden in violation of their natural gaits.

A natural trim alone will not increase or reduce the amount of time between trims. All horses should be trimmed when they need it. Excessive growth (tantamount to waste material normally worn away in the wild) creates a teetering fulcrum for unnatural lever forces and unbalanced movement, and can wreak havoc. I recommend that

horses be trimmed at no more than four-week intervals unless natural wear (as seen in some natural boarding environments) renders it unnecessary.

My recommendations for natural boarding and general hoof care are described in my book, *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding*. I feel the subject is so important that I would be remiss in discussing what it means in the space of a paragraph or two. Briefly, PP provides a vision and method for boarding horses based on the band (family) movements of wild horses. It works, and many horse caretakers are writing to say they are successfully incorporating the basic principles of PP and are spreading the word.

Naturally trimmed barefooted horses, whether at liberty or mounted, are able to move more naturally than when shod. The equestrian's overriding focus and objective should be to become a (genuine) natural rider so as to bring out the best in their horses. My philosophy is that horses, regardless of how they are to be used, should always be ridden naturally (in harmony with their natural gaits), and performance should be measured against

this holistic standard. Horses commanded to ride in violation of their natural athletic abilities, particularly at high performance levels, are inevitably doomed to lameness, suffering and sometimes destruction by euthanasia. On a much happier note, readers should be pleased to know that in the wild, horses are naturally competitive, love to run and jump, and are even prone to showing off on occasion. Horses are cooperative by nature and seem to enjoy human company when it is respectful and non-threatening. I think there's an important message in all of this – horses instinctively want to cooperate and perform their very best for us. But in return, and so as not to cause them harm, we should keep it reasonable and keep it natural.



Jaime Jackson is the author of 5 books, a hoof care professional & natural horse care consultant. He is the founding member of the non-profit equine advocacy organization, Association for the Advancement of Natural Horse Care Practices (www.aanhcp.net) & the principle instructor for the Institute for the Study of Natural Horse Care Practices (www.isnhcp.net), which he and his business partner, Jill Willis, created in 2009. He can be contacted at jacksonaanhcp@gmail.com and his website is www.jaimejackson.com

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