

Paddock Paradise



Jill Willis explains the philosophy behind the increasingly popular track system for managing horses

If you are among those readers who have often felt frustrated by the limited options for housing horses but have never encountered the concept of paddock paradise, it may well be that this article will change your and your horse's life with a fairly simple premise based upon horses living in their natural habitat.

The most common traditional choices are fraught with problems. When horses are confined to stables or small paddocks they have no ability to freely exercise and no way to meet their inherent need for socialisation, they are, essentially, relegated to a prison like existence. But if they are turned out on grassy fields, they are at risk of developing laminitis.

Paddock Paradise: A Guide for Natural Horse Boarding is the 2006 book by wild horse expert and natural hoof care pioneer Jaime Jackson, which offers a

way for horses to live with all the benefits of being turned out on vast acreage in a herd but without the debilitating risks associated with freely grazing on sugary domestic grasses. Although the book has made a significant impact in the global horse community, the concept is still relatively unknown and often misunderstood by those participating in the traditional equestrian world where the health and happiness of the horse is often viewed as incompatible with the demands of riding, training and competition.

Many horse owners do want what is best for their horses, once they understand what that means! And just as every other species on the planet has its unique and optimal natural habitat, natural diet and lifestyle, so does the horse. The concept behind paddock paradise was directly inspired by the lifestyle of the naturally healthy and sound wild American Mustang horses, and conceived as a way to provide domestic equines with an environment that more closely

resembles their natural habitat in a manner not unlike the enrichment programmes being implemented at many zoos in order to better the lives of the animals in their care.

The paddock paradise concept does not use paddocks in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, the most basic element when designing one is to create a track by running an interior fence-line adjacent to the outermost perimeter that surrounds a pasture or property. The reason is a direct result of wild horse behaviour. While conducting a study on the hooves of wild horses during the mid-1980s, Jackson also spent much of his time during the four year period simply observing the horses in their natural habitat. He noted that the various bands of horses moved across the same well-worn paths as they travelled, primarily in a single file formation, to different destinations in their vast habitat.

Because the concept was patterned after nature, it is not very surprising that the tracks seem to trigger the horses' instincts not only to move but

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also to do so in a more natural manner. Rather than standing head down for hours on end in a grazing position as they typically do when turned out on a grass pasture, horses 'on track' are on the move and quickly demonstrate their connection to this formation by creating narrow, worn down paths just like they do in wild horse country.

It is also important to learn, or to be reminded, that there is very little grass in the horse's natural habitat, which is arid, semi-desert. In fact one of the primary reasons we encourage horse owners to feed unlimited amounts of grass hay is because this forage is most like the tall, bunch-grasses and shrub materials growing in this sort of biome.

Although it is one of its most distinguishing characteristics, paddock paradise is far more than just a track that runs around a field. When implemented properly, the system will encourage more natural behaviours by providing the horses with the ability to live in a manner that more closely resembles the way they live in their natural habitat. The whole point of naturalising their lives is to facilitate health and soundness because they have genuine biological, psychological and instinctual needs as a species that, when not met, result in disease,

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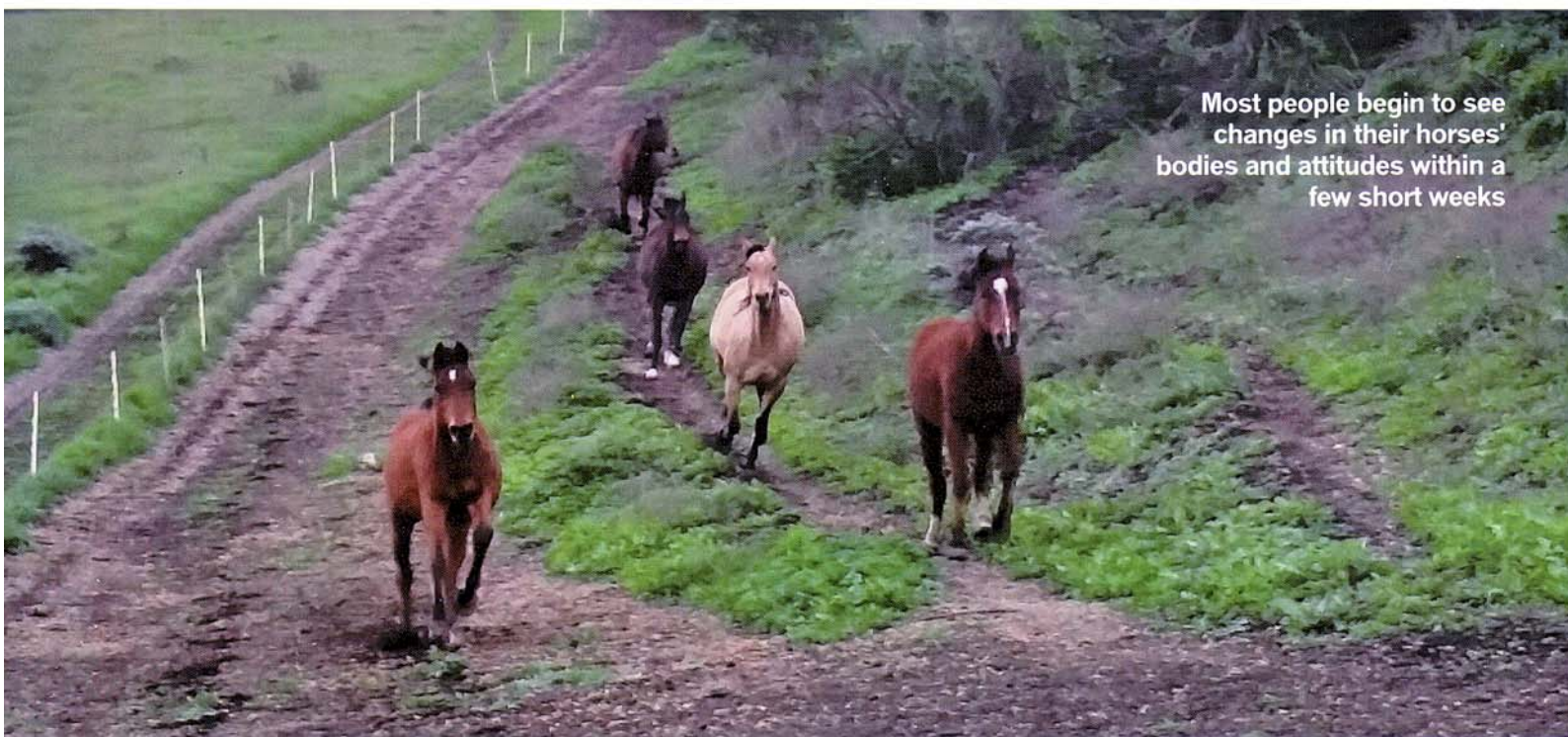
disorder, frustration, stress and illness. But when these needs are met, the result is optimal health, soundness and genuine happiness.

Practically speaking, horses living in a genuine paddock paradise get the healthful benefits of little to no access to rich, sugary domestic pasture grasses, as they would when living in a dirt paddock, but also have a large amount of space to roam and ability to easily interact with other horses as they would if turned out on a large amount of land. Regardless of the property size, a paddock paradise can be started by running an interior fence adjacent to an existing perimeter fence. In the UK and similar climates where there is both a lot of clay in the soil and high amounts of rainfall, mud is definitely one of the most frustrating elements for horse owners to contend with if it is not dealt with in a strategic manner. In these climates, it may be necessary to create a track with the same planning, design and construction one might use for a foundation for a building or better yet, in a manner similar to

the way that raw land would be developed to create dirt or gravel roads. Certainly, drivers would also find that their cars would sink if there was no foundation or preparation of a plot of raw land before using it as a road.

If your budget does not allow for preparing the terrain properly, you could simply have some extra dirt brought in to create some high points to get the horses out of the mud and onto higher, dry ground along the track while the centre can become a hay field or a restored wildlife area. You will, of course, want to include other basic elements such as a shelter appropriate for the climate, areas of interest for them such as a sand pile for rolling or camping, hills to walk up and down to build stamina and tone muscles, turning mares and geldings out together, and placing water as far as possible from areas where hay is provided. Paddock paradise can be a perfect approach to managing our horses but it is important that we exercise common sense when creating this habitat.

If your horses have never been turned out with other horses, it



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is possible to put them together but it needs to be done in a slow, deliberate manner. When horses are suddenly fed in a natural manner where they have access to food on a constant basis, they may eat far more in the beginning than they will at a later date when they realise they will no longer face the pangs of hunger or the burn of ulcers from having sustained long periods without food.

This is an ideal time of year to be planning your paddock paradise before the spring grass pops up. If you don't have electricity don't worry! There are electric fence energisers that run off batteries or from solar energy, or both. With the proper amount of grounding rods, just a strand or two of a powerful polywire will keep your horses on track and out of the centre field. If you need an area to feed horses with special needs, you can create a small paddock inside your track using a portable system similar to what might be used if you take your horse camping.

Don't own your own property? Neither do we but there are ways

to be creative and minimise expense when creating a track on leased property. Our perimeter was mostly fenced with a permanent structure but we alternated using metal t-posts with a number of plastic "step-in" fence posts that are inexpensive and easy to install and remove. We have a solar powered fence charger and a large water tank that sits on a trailer to provide water since we do not have electricity or plumbing.

Just remember that there is a remedy for just about any challenge you face, most of them quite easy to resolve. Start by reading the book to best understand how the premise connects with the species and have fun with your creation. Most people begin to see changes in their horses' bodies and attitudes within a few short weeks. Watching horses transform in this manner will forever change the way you approach how they live during all those hours when you are not around while you are at work, at home, at school, sleeping or out with friends. The good

news is that not only will you never feel guilty for not spending more time with your horses, they will, through this lifestyle, condition themselves and are always 'warmed up' and ready for a ride after just a bit of grooming.



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Paddock Paradise
A Guide to Natural
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Jaime Jackson

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