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Natural Horse Care

A new paradigm for healthy,
happy horses sound in mind and body

BY JILL WILLIS | PHOTOS BY JILL WILLIS, COURTESY AANHCP



Although many people perceive a lush green grass pasture such as this one to be an ideal environment for horses, it is the equivalent of turning a diabetic child into a candy store. In fact, the horse on the left, an Arabian gelding, was diagnosed with acute laminitis in July 2005, a year after this photo was taken. A radical change in his environment and diet following his laminitis diagnosis has kept him completely sound and healthy ever since. UPPER RIGHT: Here, the same Arabian gelding who was diagnosed with acute laminitis in 2005, is shown in the lead in 2014—fit, healthy and sound while easily traveling over the naturally firm, rocky ground in his “Paddock Paradise.” Although he was shod at the time of diagnosis, his then-farrier recommended removing his shoes as soon as possible so he could heal barefoot, and he has remained free of shoes ever since and in the care of a natural hoof care practitioner since 2007.



Although many people have been managing their horses using principles of Natural Horse Care (NHC) for years, it is still a relatively new concept for much of the horse world. One might think that with some 60 million horses in the world we

would have and adhere to excellent, well-researched information on caring for these beautiful animals. But the reality is that very few of the most common and accepted traditional horse-care practices actually meet even the most basic needs of the species. As a result, very few models exist on how best to feed them, how to provide ample and healthy living conditions, knowing when and how to ride them and/or how to care for their feet without risk of causing them harm.

It can be tough to accept, but many debilitating conditions afflicting our domestic horses are caused by traditional management, boarding, feeding and riding practices. Symptoms of various immune and/or metabolic disorders are among the most common and typically show up in the hoof. But the reality is that the remedy or treatment of such problems cannot take place exclusively in the hoof. Instead, we have to look at *healing the horse from the inside out* rather than attempting to repair the symptoms through quick, temporary fixes. Natural Horse Care remedies are often so simple they are frequently dismissed.

A SHIFT TOWARD NATURAL PRINCIPLES

The good news: a growing number of people are adopting the principles of NHC to manage their horses, often seeing tremendous improvements soon after making these changes and, in turn, serving as an example to others. An acceptance of the intelligence of nature seems to allow many to embrace the logic of genuine NHC principles and practices which, in practical terms, is simply meeting the physical, mental and emotional needs of the species. In other words, NHC is a concept that looks to the diet, lifestyle and habitat of sound, healthy horses in the wild as the optimal model for how best to manage our domestic equines. But it is not always easy for horse owners to make the leap from what they have *always* been doing to provide a more species-appropriate system of care.

For example, many horse owners have long believed there is nothing more “natural” than a horse standing head-down, knee-deep in green grass, but the truth is that the equine species did not evolve to safely consume endless mouthfuls of the stuff. And the situation has only been made worse for horses through the engineering of richer, higher calorie grasses designed to fatten livestock faster than ever.

The reality is that unless the horses are grazing in a high-desert biome, or ecosystem, such as the Great Basin, most pastures are far too rich in sugars, fructans and/or carbohydrates to be easily processed by the equine digestive and metabolic systems without risk of harm. As a result, many horses succumb to laminitis, a debilitating condition in which the most obvious symptoms appear as pain in the hooves. If one can appreciate that the fit, healthy and sound Great Basin wild horses live in an environment with far more dirt and rocks than green grass, one might better understand how our

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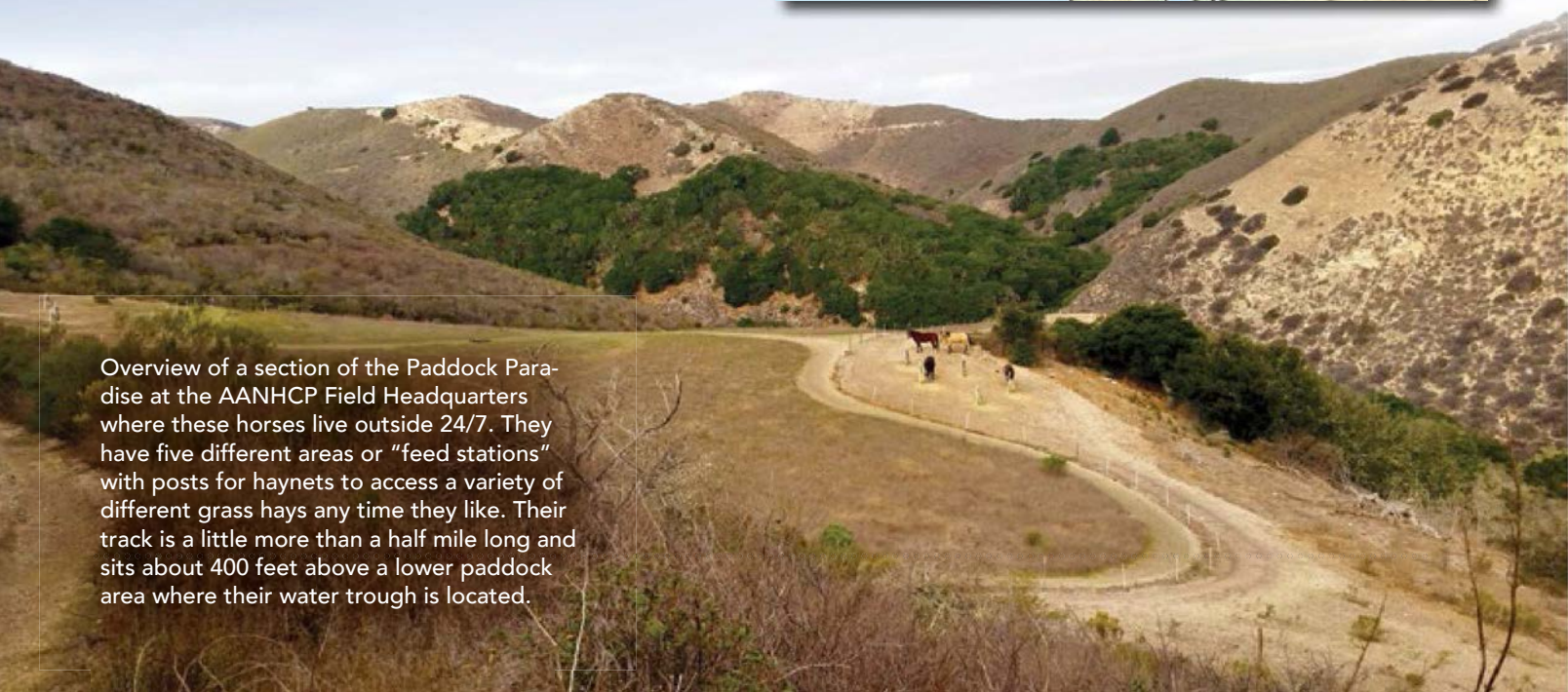
As animals of prey, horses are very sensitive to their surroundings. One of the benefits of providing a more natural environment for them is that they seem to naturally straighten themselves as they do when living in the wild by constantly using their bodies to look from left to right, and in the process, they naturally straighten their spines which then allows them to round their backs for natural collection. In the book, "Paddock Paradise," Jaime Jackson talks about the benefits of the threat of predation on horses' bodies, and this particular activity is likely the reason that one veterinary researcher was unable to find a single incidence of clubfoot in some 1,800 Great Basin wild horses. Clubfoot is a common occurrence in horses whose spines are "crooked."

cultivated pastures provide an entirely unnatural and abundant source of rich food.

Horses in wild horse country typically take several steps just to bite a single blade of grass and rarely come across areas where they can consume mouthfuls in a manner similar to their relatives living in domesticity. In fact, when well-known veterinarian Ric Redden, DVM went out to wild horse country in 2000, he was astounded by the lack of vegetation and wrote in his paper, *The Wild Horse's Foot*, "There is more grass growing on the paper I (use to) write this report than could be found on 100 acres of their natural habitat."

So, when we know that unlimited grazing in most grass pastures is unnatural and puts the horse at risk of laminitis, why not just limit the access? This brings us to that fork in the road where many people feel they are left with few options. They can either put their horses in a small dry lot or out in the lush, grass pasture. The first choice limits movement—and presents new, additional consequences for their horses, and the other is like turning a diabetic child loose in a candy factory.

But there is an excellent alternative—for both prevention and cure—called *Paddock Paradise*. In 2006, Jaime Jackson wrote the book, *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding*, and there are a growing number of horse owners around the world who have embraced this concept and are doing what they can to turn this into the future model for horsekeeping or boarding, whether privately or commercially.



Overview of a section of the Paddock Paradise at the AANHCP Field Headquarters where these horses live outside 24/7. They have five different areas or "feed stations" with posts for haynets to access a variety of different grass hays any time they like. Their track is a little more than a half mile long and sits about 400 feet above a lower paddock area where their water trough is located.



This photo was taken several months following this Arabian gelding's 27th birthday. Although he is certainly in excellent shape, he is rarely ridden any longer and maintains his physical condition simply through lifestyle in this hilly, rugged environment where he lives outside in a herd 24/7 and is provided all the grass hay he can eat free-choice. Managed under the principles of Natural Horse Care since 2007, Apollo is a horse who stocked up when kept in a stall, was diagnosed with bone spavins before the age of seven and had other intermittent lameness issues when living in an Arabian show barn where he was in training for reining in isolation and confinement and fed three large meals a day. He was retired to a life as a trail horse when he was 12 in order to live more naturally (following both Top 10 National Championships in open reining and a National Championship with a youth rider). In the past six years, he has only had one veterinary appointment in which a loose molar was removed.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

Essentially the concept starts with creating a "track" around the perimeter of a pasture or property. This is similar to the way horses move when traveling from one destination to another in the wild (for example, to a watering hole). The track encourages the horses to move more—a basic element of their biology—and to eat small amounts of free-choice grass hays that are provided along the track throughout the day. What they don't have is access to the lush grass pasture in the center.

Although most people will readily pay for the cost of diagnosing and treating an illness, many are reluctant to incur any expenses for prevention, such as providing free choice grass hays when pasture grass is free. But to those who do not mind paying for health and wellness, then Paddock Paradise is an option worth considering.

Other known products that cause detrimental conditions such as various types of colic or low-level (sub-clinical) stages of laminitis include feeds high in sugar or molasses (or other sweeteners) as well as beet pulp, rice bran, corn, grain hays (such as oat, wheat or barley) and large amounts of alfalfa. A number of medications, including antibiotics, sedatives, dewormers and even vaccinations, can also trigger laminitis.

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The horses these hooves belong to live just a few miles apart, but the horse with the unhealthy hoof (left) is boarded in a small, flat paddock with three senior horses with similar issues where they primarily stand around waiting for the next meal. Although the footing of both horses is similar—dry, rocky, firm ground—there is little indication of natural wear from movement and the separation at the white line (stratum lamellatum) is a telltale symptom of chronic laminitis. The photo on right shows the healthy hoof of one of our horses living at the AANHCP field headquarters and managed under the principles of natural horse care. It is important to illustrate the dramatic difference between the hooves of horses fed and managed differently but living in the same biome as many people think that healthy hooves are primarily a product of the dry biome where they live.

Increasingly there are veterinarians who lean toward a “less is more” philosophy, and try to steer clear of routine annual revaccination protocols. Mark DePaolo, DVM, writes, “Almost all of our horse vaccines last a minimum of seven years, most last a lifetime. Many horse owners continue to vaccinate their horses frequently because they believe vaccines are innocuous (do no harm). Many horses are vaccinated yearly (or more often) for diseases that they are never exposed to or already have immunity to.”

CUSHINGS CONNECTION?

Although beyond the scope of this article, there is increasing speculation that many of these traditional practices are behind the dramatic increase in disorders such as Cushings Syndrome, the trendy label of “insulin resistance” and EMS. What can be tough for some to accept is that just like every other species on the planet, horses have specific biological needs—and from researchers such as Jaime Jackson and Ric Redden, these needs appear to include movement, living in a herd and eating a basic, reasonably natural diet.

Of course, it can be tough—even intimidating—to break away from the crowd. People may fear losing friendships or being ostracized when they begin moving away from traditional practices and adopting more natural ones. Compounding this is the fact

that it is not easy to know who has good advice when there is so much conflicting information through all the different forums, websites, clinics, magazines and tv programs.

As more people understand that the basis of a humane approach to horse care means, simply, *meeting the needs of the species*, the more we will see the disappearance of old practices, such as starting baby horses under saddle as two-year-olds. There are myriad reasons why people do the wrong thing but fewer reasons to justify continuing doing the wrong thing when faced with good information. It is not easy to change and can take some time and possibly some effort and expense to provide for our domestic equines properly. But just as children are expensive to feed, educate, clothe and house properly, as guardians of these wonderful animals, we must strive to do what is best for them because it is the right thing to do. Because it is what the species requires, it is really the only humane option.

Simply aspiring to have a heightened awareness about the genuine needs of the animal will begin to bring about a shift toward wanting to provide a better life and diet for them. Look for models of health and soundness. My five horses now living in the AANHCP headquarters have been managed under the principles of Natural Horse Care for nearly eight years now—and are among the healthiest domestic horses I’ve seen. We encourage people to visit and see them up close.



Napping together in a soft pile of sand is a morning occurrence for our horses and likely an important part of their daily ritual. What is especially interesting is that the horses never soil their sandpile. They were given a pile of sand when they lived in Minnesota and again in California, and they keep it clean. In areas where insects are problematic, providing the horses with a sandpile can help them keep their bodies covered to prevent bites as well as offering them a place for sleeping and rolling.

STEPS FOR CHANGE

So if taking steps to better meet the needs of the equines in your life is of interest, there are some things you can begin doing almost immediately. Some changes cannot take place overnight but many can take place quickly, easily and fairly inexpensively. Here are a few:

- » Limit (or eliminate) free-choice access to most pasture grasses. Instead, “track” the pasture and provide free-choice access to as many kinds of grass hays as you can find. (You can place the hay in small-hole/slow feed hay nets if waste is an issue and place these at a distance from any shelter or water in order to encourage more movement.) Grow your own hay in the center if you are able to find someone to help you. Buy or borrow a copy of Jaime Jackson’s book, “Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding” for more information on this concept. (There are many ways to do this inexpensively even if you are on lease land!)
- » Feed your horse a reasonably natural diet in the right manner. In addition to a foundation of free-choice grass hays, my horses have free choice “plain” loose salt in addition to Redmond salt blocks, and receive a daily mixture of whole oats, a four-ounce serving of a vitamin/mineral supplement, flaxseed, coconut oil meal, MSM and timothy hay pellets to simply add a bit more fiber to the mix.
- » Wait until your horse is fully mature before starting to ride and you will likely have a sound, healthy horse for a lifetime.



We should not underestimate the healthful benefits to horses living together as a herd. Here a gelding and a mare vigorously rub their teeth along the spine of the other. Are they merely grooming one another or is there some other important activity taking place that is vital to their physical and mental health?

Ideally, wait until the age of six when their skeletal structure has completely matured.

- » Cease thinking of stalls as “equine bedrooms” and begin to view them for what they are—cages or storage lockers. Use them sparingly for grooming, tacking up or isolating your horse while he is eating supplements. Unfortunately, many vets continue to advise or prescribe “stall rest” when the reality

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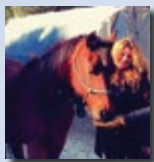
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is that movement is what nature designed to be the best healing remedy for these animals.

- » Often the land that realtors describe as “not suitable for horses” is the best property! Hilly land in which the horses can naturally gymnasticize and condition their bodies is ideal. Instead of putting money into constructing a fancy barn, all you really need is adequate hay storage, adequate free-access shelter for the horses, good footing for the track (if it is not already in place naturally) and a sturdy perimeter fence.
- » Read feed labels carefully. Whether organic or GMO, many unshod horses are “foot sore” or sensitive on hard ground or gravel until the beet pulp is removed from the diet. This and other byproducts and waste products have found their way into our horses and serve no healthy purpose for the horse.
- » The health of the horse shows up in the hooves! The best environment and diet is up to the horse owner and the person trimming the hoof may conduct a great trim but cannot provide a horse with a healthy hoof. That is up to the person managing and feeding the animal.
- » Minimize vaccinations and use fecal exams instead of routinely deworming to target those horses who need treatment. Remember, 20% of the horses produce 80% of the worms.
- » Let your horse live with other equines of all ages, sexes and breeds. It is not natural for these very social creatures to be forced to live alone without the ability to run together, eat, groom, play, fight and bite. It is rare for a horse to get hurt when turned out unless the turn out is only an occasional part of a day that is otherwise spent in confinement.
- » Remove the shoes. It is rare that horses need to be used in a way that exceeds the ability of their feet or bodies. Use boots when needed but let the horse be barefoot as much as possible to develop a strong, callused hoof.
- » Educate yourself so you know what a naturally healthy hoof looks like. See photo albums on the AANHCP and Paddock Paradise Facebook pages. Get a copy of “The Natural Trim: Principles and Practice” by Jaime Jackson. Read “The Art of Horsemanship” by Xenophon—written in 350 BC—one of the first manuals on Natural Horse Care.

Even Ric Redden understood NHC when he wrote this about the wild horses: “One thing is for certain, they are genetically designed to survive without the influence of man and do so with fewer problems.”



Jill Willis is a writer and natural horse care consultant. She and Jaime Jackson have been business partners since 2009 when they formed the Institute for the Study of Natural Horse Care Practices and J. Jackson Publishing. She is a member of the board of directors for the nonprofit Association for the Advancement of Natural Horse Care Practices and a staunch believer that all horses deserve to be cared for in a humane and natural manner. Her herd of five horses serves as the sound healthy models managed under the pillars of Natural Horse Care at the AANHCP Field Headquarters in Lompoc, California.

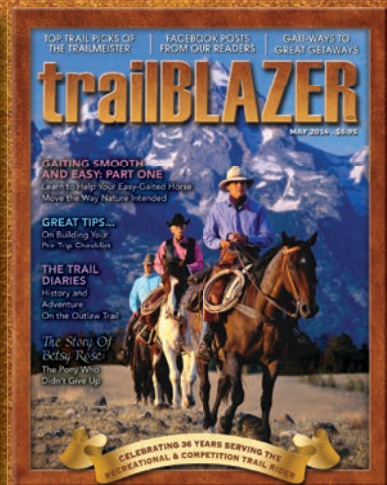
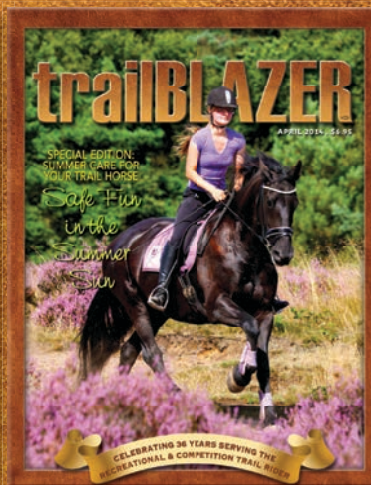
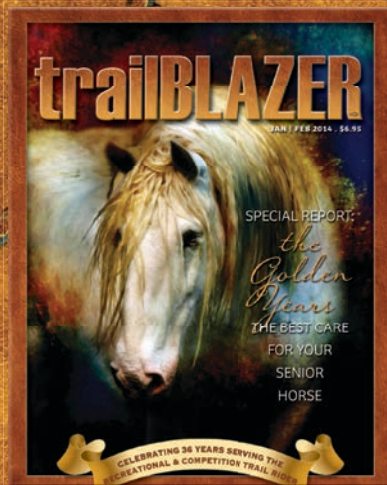


A number of the principles of Natural Horse Care are demonstrated in this photo. Healthy hooves, an exemplary body on this seven-year-old gelding including the important “double back,” the well-developed muscles along either side of his spine that sit higher than the vertebral column, and the free choice provision of grass hays provided in hay nets. Because we live in a very windy area, we began using hay nets to prevent waste. As you can see from the photo, the horses are in two different very natural body positions while eating. Horses are naturally foragers and nibble, browse, reach and graze contrary to the perception that they should only be head down and grazing. The important issue is that they are not fed in hay racks high with hay situated above their heads which require them to only stand with necks strained and reaching upward.

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