



Healthy Hooves, the Natural Way

By Lisa Ross-Williams

“A loud rustling in the bushes alerted the colorful herd to possible danger. Lead by the ghostly gray, this herd of many colors, breeds, and ages tore through the natural terrain at breakneck speed, numbly navigating the uneven rocky ground. Even when crossing the wet river bank, not one horse, even the 18 hand gangly draft colt lost their footing on the slippery clay. Mother Nature had indeed given this herd a gift for survival—strong, healthy, natural hooves.”



“This band’s hooves were very different from the normal shod horses often seen today; compact, short, hard-as-rock hooves with large frogs, these feet give maximum traction, protection, and shock absorption to these horses. Never had they been weakened by a farrier’s hammer & nails, the restricting nature of steel hooves, or have been afflicted with the common hoof diseases such as laminitis, navicular, thrush, and white line disease.”

Although the norm in horse care has been to shoe horses in the past without a second thought, a new enlightenment toward natural hoof care is growing strong. More and more horse guardians and even some open-minded farriers and veterinarians are starting to question this practice and through educating themselves, are turning to the barefoot approach.

However, simply removing the shoes will not produce a high performance barefoot horse. By understanding why horseshoeing began, what a natural hoof is, the adverse affects of shoeing, and what other care factors are involved, horse guardians are able to break this long standing belief that horses need shoes and more toward a natural, healthy hoof.

History of Shoeing

For over 8,000 years, mounts of the great horseman; the Greeks, Romans, Huns, Berbers, Egyptians, Mongolians, and Bedouins, were ridden barefoot and accomplished amazing feats. It wasn’t until the Middle Ages when horses were brought into the castles that metal horseshoes came into play. Because these horses were now stalled, standing in their own

waste with no movement, the hooves could no longer hold up to the rigors of carrying heavily armed knights into war. This practice, although unnecessary for most horses, slowly began to take hold and by the late 18th century it was commonplace.

However, it isn't just recently that shoeing was being questioned. In fact, Bracey Clark, a veterinarian and PhD with the London Veterinary College around 1800 writes,

“It is clear, from the readiness with which people consent to have their horses shod at any age, that they view the shoes merely as protecting the foot, and are not aware of it's insidious effects; but would rather as we often observe, treat the proposition of its removal as a piece of inhumanity.”

-Page 4 of Podophthoral; Demonstration of a Pernicious Defect in the Principle of the Common Shoe, 1829-

Why Not Shoes

Most people shoe their horse because they believe it protects the hoof, but are often unaware of the negative effects of this practice. Although a metal shoe may protect the hoof wall from chipping, it impedes other natural functions and causes adverse consequences. Some of these include:

Decreased Shock Absorption: Shoes decrease the hoof's ability to absorb shock by 70-80% by not allowing the hoof to expand properly upon weight bearing. In 1983, a study at the University of Zurich found “a shod horse walking on pavement receives three times the impact force as an unshod horse trotting on that surface.” The excess force must then be taken up by the legs damaging joints, tendons, and even the lungs which were not designed to deal with this force.

Metal Vibration Damages Tissue: A doctoral thesis at the University of Zurich found that metal horseshoes vibrate at about 800 Hz, a frequency damaging to living tissue. This type of circulation and neural conditions in humans is called Raynaud's Syndrome. We must realize that every step a shod horse takes is damaging tissues throughout the body, setting him up for chronic conditions such as arthritis.

Decreased Blood Circulation: Each hoof is actually a secondary circulatory pump which supports the heart in circulating blood throughout the body. When the natural expansion and contraction of the hoof is diminished by shoes or unbalanced hooves, this important blood flow is hindered, putting the horse at a disadvantage not only in his hooves but his whole body.

Decreased Traction: Metal shoes do not give the amount of traction on slippery ground, pavement, or rocks as an unshod hoof. A natural barefoot uses the skid-break action of the bars, suction-cup effect upon weight bearing, and the ability to “feel” the ground as an all-terrain tool.

Damage by Nails: Nails weaken the hoofwall in addition to contributing to tissue damage from the vibrational frequency. Since old nail holes do not close-up, they leave the hoof vulnerable to bacteria as well as temperature extremes.

Hoof Contraction: When a hoof grows, it does so not only in length but also in diameter. Since the metal shoe doesn't become wider, it contracts the growing hoof in a squeezed position. Proper hoof function (contracting and expanding) is hindered and the hoof is forced into the all too narrow hoof shape. Contracted hooves are oval rather than round and have very narrow frogs and heel bulbs.

Prevents Development of Young Horse's Feet: A horse's coffin bone grows and develops until they are about five years old. If a horse is shod before that age, the constricting influence of the shoe prevents normal growth of this all important bone, predisposing the horse to lifetime hoof problems.

Differences Between a Balanced Barefoot and Shod/Improperly Trimmed Hoof

The differences between a balanced natural hoof and a shod or improperly trimmed hoof are easy to see when the two are compared.



Natural Hoof

- *Short toes 3"-3 1/2"
- *Low heels 1/2"-1"
- *Large frogs



Unbalanced Hoof

- *Long toes 3 1/2"-4 1/2"
- *High heels 1 1/2"-3"
- *Narrow frogs

*Hairline undistorted	*Hairline distorted
*Straight angle of hoof growth	*Growth concave or convex
*Frog active upon weight bearing	*Frog always passive
*Passive & active wear areas	*Only shoe is active

How Can We Help

Simply removing the shoes from your horse will not produce a sound high performance barefoot horse. Correct frequent trimming, natural living conditions (A Natural Way of Living), proper diet (Feeding Naturally), and understanding are all important.

Most horses unless they have many acres to move and frequent riding will need to be trimmed every 4-6 weeks by an experienced barefoot trimmer. The normal pasture trim done by farriers is very different from a balanced, natural trim and will not afford the same positive results. Many horse guardians are learning to do the regular maintenance trim themselves through clinics, books, and videos and are having excellent results. One main point to keep in mind is every horse is an individual and there is no exact formula that can be followed. Being able to read what the hoof is telling you is more successful than forcing the hoof into certain measurements.

There will be a transition or healing period after the shoes are removed. This varies from horse to horse depending on the current damage from shoes or improper trimming and the healing ability. During this time hoof structures are rebuilding and sole callous is being built. Horses may be tender on rocks or hard footing so hoof boots may be used when riding on this terrain. There are many boots on the market and are listed in the resource information.

Of course, nutrition is also a key element in building strong, healthy hooves; without the proper nutrients and mineral balance, hooves will be weak and inferior regardless of whether shod or not. Stay away from high amounts of alfalfa, sweet feed and grain which have detrimental affects on hooves.

Finally, one of the most important keys to healthy natural hooves is understanding. Learn all you can about hoof care so you can makes informed decisions. Thousands of horse guardians are being empowered by the fantastic resources on barefoot horses including clinics, books, videos, websites, and internet groups throughout the world. More and more performance horses in endurance, dressage, show, and even race horses are excelling in their disciplines due to balanced natural hooves.

Natural horse care is the wave of the future and the barefoot approach is one of the main principles. Remember that Mother Nature has given these magnificent creatures all they need to be happy, healthy horses. It's up to the humans to support them by becoming knowledgeable about what is truly best for them, naturally.

Recommended Books

Horse Owners Guide to Natural Hoof Care by Jaime Jackson. www.naturalhorsetalk.com

Making Natural Hoof Care Work for You by Pete Ramey. www.naturalhorsetalk.com

A Lifetime of Soundness by Dr Hiltrud Strasser. www.thehorseshoof.com

Recommended Websites

www.barefoothorses.com

www.tribeequus.com

www.ironfreehoof.com

www.naturalhorse.com

Hoof Boots

Old Mac Boot www.oldmacusa.com

Swiss Boot www.star-ridge.com

Horsneaker www.horsneaker.com

About the Author: Based in Arizona, Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant, freelance writer, clinician and host of the If Your Horse Could Talk show, which is available via internet webcast at www.naturalhorsetalk.com. Lisa has dedicated herself to extensive research, hands-on experience, and attending many clinic and seminars including natural horsemanship, hoof care, massage & stretching, homeopathy, animal communication, essential oils and nutrition. She has completed the Basic Veterinary

Homeopathy course through the British Institute of Homeopathy and working on her certification course in Iridology. She is a regular writer for both Natural Horse Magazine and Animal Wellness Magazine as well as a resident expert on the popular websites, www.naturalhorsepeople.com and www.allabouthorses.com. Her herd of six have been some of her best teachers and her passion is educating horse guardians to a more natural approach. **www.naturalhorsetalk.com**

Showing how individualized hoof size and shape can be.

Natural barefeet of a 2000 lb Percheron and a 800 Lb Mixed breed.



Star-Before and After

Initial Trim