

Shoes, Bare or Boots?

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The horse-hoof landscape has undergone some dramatic changes and developments in the past couple of decades. These changes and developments include the advent and popularity of barehoof, the ongoing development and improvement of hoof boots, new and different types of horse shoes, brumby hoof research and even a dedicated four-day "Functional Hoof Conference" that was held at Werribee Victoria early in 2011. www.thefunctionalhoof.com

Scientific researchers around the world are analysing hooves down to a cellular level, and horse therapists, hoof practitioners, forward thinking veterinarians, horse owners, trainers and breeders are often dispensing with the traditional understandings of hooves and embracing the vast ocean of knowledge that is now emerging. This 'new' learning has also allowed many of the myths and misinformation about hooves to be dispelled. For example white hooves are now understood to be just as strong as dark hooves, and there are some barehoof thoroughbreds with hooves as tough as the toughest.

As more horse owners learn about their horses' hooves, many of them realise how variable, complex, dynamic and important they are and so become personally more proactive and knowledgeable, rather than relying solely on their farrier or trimmer. With the correct knowledge many successfully maintain their horses hooves themselves.

This can be a very good thing for the horse, because in the past (and even today) too many horses live with pathological, unsound and neglected hooves. Indeed many horses lives are prematurely cut short because of hoof problems that can now usually be resolved with appropriate, timely and professional hoof care.

Traditionally horses in work were, and still are, shod with steel horse shoes. This practice can be traced back to the times of the Roman Empire. There is no doubt that shoes allow horses to travel on harsh surfaces and hold together an unsound hoof but they do have several deleterious effects on the horse as well. These days horses with unconditioned hooves can be protected, as required, by well designed and sturdy hoof boots. A big benefit of hoof boots is that they are removed after the period of work or exercise. Hoof boots have the added advantage over horseshoes of allowing what is known as hoof function (expansion, contraction and circulation each hoof fall) to take place. Steel horseshoes tend to restrict this vital, natural flexing of the hoof capsule.

Very few paddock horses have the sort of hoof that the wild horse does and may need the added protection of shoes or hoof boots to comfortably cope with an outing on rocky trails, but by the same token, many barehooved horses can comfortably handle all sorts of terrain and surfaces.

Some dedicated barehoofers can and do develop their horses hooves to be able to compete (and often win) 160 km endurance events. Most would use hoof boots over this distance but many do 40 km and 80 km barehooved. These competitors passionately believe in the health benefits for the horse of running their horse's hooves bare or booted.

For horse owners still unsure or unable to do the hard work of hoof care they need the services of competent hoof care professionals. There are qualified farriers and qualified barehoof trimmers and there are others in these important fields of hoof care who are not. Often, as with the advent of anything 'new' like barehoof trimming, unskilled people jump on the bandwagon and give it a bad name.

Some farriers and trimmers are very good and some not so good; qualified or unqualified, and it is really up to the horse owner to thoroughly check out the credentials and reputation of trimmers and farriers when engaging someone to carry out such an important task as hoof care. Ask to see their qualifications! Ask around how such and such a person is thought of by those who have actually used, or currently use, him or her. The horse world is pretty small and usually someone knows something, good or not so good. Take a firsthand look at the practitioners work before engaging him or her.

Often though the horse is the best judge of the hoof care and handling that has been applied to him or her.

As an indicator of the importance some countries place in horse hoof care, it is illegal for an unqualified person to carry out this work. Thankfully in Australia this is not the situation, but there still are a few cases of shoddy farriers and hoof trimmers, qualified and unqualified, doing damage and causing lameness to horses.

Just as critical as having the best, well maintained tyres on your car, for your safety and enjoyment, so too is the need for healthy, sound, well maintained and physiologically correct hooves on your horse. With the wealth of information available to the horse owner there is really no excuse for anything other than excellent hoof care for the comfort and well being of your four legged friend.

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