

## **Dilemma or Drama – Shoes or Barefoot?**

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What a dramatic heading for this short piece on the emerging debate about hooves and shoes.

I'll be up front here and confess that horse's hooves fascinate me. Weird huh? Well we all need to have some weirdness about us or it would be a very dull world. My confession continues with the fact that I am not a big fan of nailing a steel plate on the bottom of what is a beautifully designed and functional living apparatus. Yep, I am a natural hoof aficionado.

This is not just a passing fad. Humans (some of us anyway) have realised that working with nature, being patient, knowing about the structure and mechanisms of hooves, knowing how and why they grow and wear and why they are beset by problems gives us the keys to successful barefoot horsemanship. By and large the horses are happy too.

It makes me cringe when I see some very fine horses with tragic feet. The horse that prompted me to write this lives in a 5 x 4 metre open stable. He also had four rugs on (it was 15°C) and the surface he lived on was a mix of sawdust, sand, poo and pee. His owner must think this is all ok (or he is made to live like this so he is conveniently placed for a ride around the nearby arena). Not a very natural way of living. But wait, there's more. His feet.

This boy was shod. I said shod but soon he could be shot. And I'll explain in a minute. Remember in the 70's some whiz designed platform shoes? The results were that people fell off them and inflicted themselves with all sorts of ligament, muscle, tendon and bone damage. This horse's farrier has revived the fashion. His heels are about 75mm long. His toes are about 120mm long. But the worst thing is the flaring in his hooves. On all four feet the walls are detached from the coffin bone for about 2/3rds of the structure. Ouch!! The frogs are waaay up in the hoof capsule, a long way from the ground. The walls are all long. The soles are being eaten away (along with the frogs) by fungus, thrush and bacteria. If these bugs keep at it then the maxim 'no hoof, no horse' will unfortunately be true. Then he will be shot.

A waste of a damn fine horse if you ask me.

So often I hear horse owners lament the fact that they like the natural/barefoot hoof concept but because their horse is a thoroughbred/warmblood/quarter horse or whatever breed and 'they have had their hooves spoiled by breeding and couldn't possibly go barefoot'. What a load of pony club myth (no disrespect to the pony club movement meant here).

I often inquire if they have tried taking the shoes off and allowed for a true transition period during which the hoof is trimmed to allow correct natural function, the sole regrows, thickens and hardens, the walls grow strong and straight (and attached to the coffin bone all the way to the ground) and the frog is hard and healthy (like a piece of tanned leather) from ground contact. I mean we don't come out of our winter footwear and run merrily down a gravel road, do we? Why then should we expect our horses to do this?

Getting back to the horse owner: the answer to my question is usually 'No!' However these horse owners are happy having a steel plate nailed onto a living structure 24/7. Do you sleep in your work boots? Why should horses be

expected to? There are of course a whole lot of other negative affects of having shoes on a horse. Things like concussion, lack of circulation, lack of traction, lack of feel for the ground, compromised wall integrity, contracted heels, flaring, safety for horse and human, just to name a few.

I suspect I have a reaction now. Well rather than retreating, I reckon I'll just plough on.

I believe that most horse owners have their horses shod because of fear or ignorance or both.

They fear the hooves will wear away. They are ignorant of the fact that a hoof will grow at its wear rate (or in excess of its wear rate) if the hoof is conditioned for the work asked of it.

They fear the horse will get stone bruises if the hoof is barefoot. Question. How can a ¼ inch steel plate nailed onto the outer perimeter of the hoof protect the sole from a 1 inch rock? A horse with conditioned hooves will pick his way when walking on rocks. Wouldn't you? And how many rocks are there in a dressage arena, racetrack or cross-country course anyway?

They fear that the horse will slip in bare feet. Try this: Get an old saucer, take it outside, tip it upside down, push it into the dirt and try to move it forward. That's just like a sole of a bare hoof. It will spin though. So will a bare hoof. If it doesn't, other parts of the hoof/leg break. (Some people put studs on their horseshoes for better grip while doing competitive stuff). Now try the saucer thing with a steel plate. Slip slidin' away.

They fear that not having shoes on will earn them lesser points in the judging. No comment. (Not worthy of a comment).

They are not allowed to compete without something nailed on the bottom of the hoof. With racing (on grass and softened tracks) shoes are mandatory. Why?

They shoe their horses because their father/mother grandfather/grandmother did. Tradition. No other good reason to do something that was invented in the Iron Age. For goodness sakes! Have a look at hoof boots. They are products of research and development using brains, materials and designs from the age of technology. And they are used only when the horse needs them. Not 24/7. Many smart people actually buy and use hoof boots when transitioning a horse from shod to barefoot. This process could take a few days, a few weeks, a few months or years depending on the hooves, the country they live in and the work they will be expected to perform. Often then the hoof boots are no longer needed and the wise natural hoof care practitioner will buy the boots back from the barefoot horse owner. Win, win!

Need I say more?

I will though.

Not all barefoot hooves are natural but all natural hooves are barefoot.

So which group do you belong to? The 'fear' group, the 'ignorance' group or the group who enjoys all the benefits of having natural, barefoot hooves on their horses?

Hoofnote: (August 2006) I had a wager with a trim client of mine about the horse that inspired me to write the piece. I took a punt and predicted 6 weeks ago that the horse would break down within a year. Three weeks later it happened. The horse apparently now has ligament or tendon (or both) damage to both front legs. (Jumping). And it is still in its platform shoes, still in the stall and still has four rugs (plus a neck rug) on and is still a lovely natured horse.

I would like to ask its owner to stand around all day in soft bedding in a cage, wearing platform shoes and four very thick jumpers or jackets for only a week. And on the seventh day ask him/her to do some high jumps for our entertainment. This is about as far from 'natural' as one can take a horse. And now the horse is broken!

Such is life!

Glenn