

HOOF CARE THROUGH THE AGES

Equine hoof care has traditionally been the specialty of the village blacksmith, who's talents evolved in to a special field of farrier science. The first veterinarians were farriers--they were close to the horses under their care, and it was a natural extension of their abilities to care for the horses' medical problems as well as their feet. When veterinary science became it's own specialty, it was logical for farriers to continue in their expert care of the feet while veterinarians cared for the rest of the horse, each staying out of the other's "territory". This relationship is respected to this day, but more veterinarians are understanding the intimate workings of the hooves, and no longer just expect farriers to "fix them". Traditionally, horses seen at medical clinics for hoof lamenesses often end up being referred to the "corrective" shoer. Many equine veterinarians are also farriers and do specialized shoeing. The farrier is supposed to know what "correct" means and many specialize in therapeutic shoeing, so the veterinarian trusts they will remedy the problem; after all, if the problem is in the hooves, the farrier must know how to fix it. Very often the horse becomes "sound" and both the veterinarian and the farrier are praised for the good results...for a while.

Studies focusing on how the hoof functions are becoming more prevalent. Domesticating and confining horses means we must provide everything for them, including the best feeds, the benefits of open spaces, life alongside other horses, and appropriate hoof care. Trimming hooves in order to nail on shoes versus trimming to maintain barefoot soundness are very different things. As horse owners and their veterinarians become more aware of normal hoof function and how different shapes and shoeing change that function, tensions often develop between all concerned parties. The horse's hooves are no longer the sole responsibility or territory of the farrier, and those farriers that once felt comfortable in their position as THE hoof specialist are having to learn along with horse owners and veterinarians new facts about hoof form and function. Farriers are in the perfect position to learn and implement this new information which increases their business and offers horses a new-found, honest soundness.

Traditional farriers are often hesitant to further their knowledge of natural hoof care, thus many owners are learning how to keep their horses' feet properly trimmed, easily using hoof knives and a rasp every few days to keep horses feet properly cleaned and formed. Once the horses achieve and maintain good hoof form, they achieve a true soundness previously unknown to their owners. Our studies have focused on how and why feral horse's feet are shaped the way they are, because these self-trimming feet are as sound as can be, beautifully shaped as they travel 20 to 30 miles per day over rocky terrain in an environment that allows them enough movement, within a herd, day after day. When we apply what we have learned from these horses and trim our horse's feet in a similar fashion, we see a nearly magical transformation take place. Not only do they remain honestly sound, but they are healthier overall, with fewer metabolic problems, healthier skin, stronger muscles and bones, more alertness and less digestive upset. We have terribly underestimated the damage we do to horses entire bodies by shoeing and not managing their hooves properly!

Horses requiring the most hoofcare are those doing the least amount of work. Steel shoes were developed to keep horses' weakened hooves from falling apart due to confinement in small spaces and an inability to escape their own waste. There have always been plenty of horses that go miles and miles every day doing their work, without shoes, just like horses do naturally when given the chance. Though domestic horses' hooves can eventually be conditioned beyond the level of feral horses' hooves, many occasionally require some protection against excessive amounts of wear. Horses are best served with a boot design that complements the hoof, allowing it to function with each step, providing vital circulation, shock absorption and proper sensation. Boots can be removed at will when the horse returns to familiar surroundings, but nailing steel shoes to a horse's hooves harms the horse's ability to normally sense it's surroundings, destroys the hooves' shock-absorbing functions, stifles their circulation and excretory functions, and takes years of the horse's usefulness away. "Incurable" lamenesses

such as "navicular syndrome" and chronic laminitis before the age of ten are commonplace in horses with poor hoof form or constant steel shoe usage. Boots are also perfectly suited for rehabilitating hooves damaged from shoeing, allowing horses to move about comfortably and perform a little work while attaining better hoof form. We give up nothing when utilizing boots for hoof protection, and more fully harness our horses' power and potential. Shoes were historically thought to offer hooves protection, but we now know that they harm our horses, limit their natural abilities and afford them a handicap and a liability with which to work.

The belief that we have "bred the feet off the horses" is erroneous. Breeding experiments with supposedly "inferior" stock produce horses with big, beautiful feet at age four, when the feet are finished growing in size. Mares moving in a herd, foaling in a firm, open area and racing around with their foals from the moment of birth do not raise foals with small, deformed, lame feet. Inferior feet, legs, bodies and minds are produced by keeping mares confined during pregnancy, foaling in a stall and keeping mare and foal confined. Such practices seem correct due to tradition, but are harmful to our horses. Then we nail shoes on young horses, often before they are two years old, thinking that our extra weight and a little work somehow necessitates it, or simply out of tradition. We are not doing right by our horses keeping them this way or treating their feet this way. Steel is an unacceptable material for protecting the specialized skin that is the horse's hoof. Though many of us are disturbed or angry when discovering these things, I assure you that such a discovery is a necessary step on the road to a wonderful new respect and relationship between you and your horses.

There are lots of examples of folks keeping horses in larger areas and in herds that keep their minds and bodies perfectly sound--they have never been shod and move around enough to only need occasional trimming, and therefore do not suffer any of the traditional lamenesses that veterinarians and farriers deal with on a daily basis. Horses have a magnificently engineered structure on the end of each of their four legs. We should think of these hooves as the horse's hands, respect their natural form and function, and allow the horse to have control of them, granting them the freedom of exquisite function, rather than stifling this function with steel shoes.

Veterinarians and farriers everywhere all ready have, or will soon have the opportunity to learn about the beauty and magnificence of the horse and its feet. Many of us will come to know the horse in a deeper sense and develop a deeper bond as we take more interest in appropriate hoof care--we are freedom lovers like the horse. We can see and feel the difference in our horses that enjoy truly sound feet.

Learning about natural horse and hoof care is a fun and adventurous process, providing interested students with a fascinating look in to their horse's world. It fits in extremely well with the natural horsemanship practices that are also popular with today's discriminating horse owner. Questions invariably come up and I am happy to help answer them as you and your horse journey towards better health.

My best wishes to you and your horses,

Tomas G. Teskey D.V.M.