

Barefoot Trimming

Shorten Those Toes!

by James & Yvonne Welz

What if there truly was a “magic bullet” technique for trimming, something that you can apply to nearly every hoof to create a healthier improvement in hoof form? Believe it or not, there appears to be one such concept for balancing a hoof, advocated by Dr. Robert Bowker, and proven to us throughout our own years of experience. That simple, effective concept is shortening horses’ toes.

Dr. Bowker strongly recommends keeping the toes short. He emphasized in a recent seminar, “99% of horses’ toes are too long.” When he refers to shortening toes, he is quick to clarify that he means “backing up” toes from the front edge, and not actually shortening the hoof from the solar surface. He adds, “If you do nothing else but back the toe up, you’ll have a good foot.” Balance the foot, and it will gradually change into a healthier form.

Long toes create major problems for horses, with the breakover too far in front of the coffin bone, and stress on the laminae, wall, and internal foot structures. Shorter toes are also the remedy for many common problems, such as underrun heels. Bring the foot underneath the bony column, and everything starts to work more correctly.

An experienced trimmer should be able to guesstimate where breakover needs to be based on the visual balance of the hoof, but for precision, Bowker recommends using x-rays. The hoof should be well-marked before taking the x-rays. A thumbtack should be placed at the apex of the frog, some sort of measurement increments laid out at the base, and a keychain or flexible metal taped to the front of the hoof wall for reference. From the x-ray, drop a perpendicular line down from the front of the coffin bone to the sole, measure 6 mm (1/4 inch) in front of that, and begin the mustang roll right there.



↑ Coffin bone line
Breakover begins 6 mm in front

From the x-rays, draw a perpendicular line down from the front of the coffin bone. Measure 6 mm in front of this line, and begin the mustang roll (breakover) there.

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Here are a couple examples from our clinics, with the typical “long toe” problem. These are healthy, sound, long-time barefoot horses without issues—but their excess toe is not getting any better by itself. Because of that, there are some negative health consequences going on in these feet (can you spot them?). There is much room for improvement! The toe correction will need to be maintained with frequent trims, and over time the hoof will change shape, and the toe will become more naturally correct.

While the hoof should not be shortened from the bottom (in general), there are breakover techniques that can be successfully used, such as toe rockers that leave the toe floating. However, we have seen the best results using the mustang roll. If needed, excess toe wall can be removed directly from the front of the hoof at ground level in a straight rasp cut, then the mustang roll applied on top of that.

When correcting a really long toe, Bowker recommends beveling to the inner side of the white line, and repeating every 2 weeks, slowly getting more aggressive if need be, until the toe is back in balance. For normal horses, he still recommends frequent trimming—4-5 weeks—to put the least amount of stress on the hoof. Breakover should be maintained, rather than the horse allowed to progress into a state of imbalance. The cycle of toes too long, then MUCH too long, as is usually the case with 6 week (or longer) trims on the majority of domestic horses can become quite damaging.

During this past year, we did a great deal of traveling around the country, giving our Healthy Hoof Clinics. We asked that the demonstration horses be healthy, sound, barefoot-trimmed horses—because our interest was in training people to understand a higher level of hoof health than they were accustomed to. The one thing that really struck us at

every clinic was just how long every single horse’s toes were!

We do realize that some philosophies and barefoot programs advocate doing minimal corrections or trimming of the toes. Usually everyone agrees upon the desired end result of a healthy hoof, but there are many opinions as to how to get there. Some people feel that breakover will be created by the horse, and we should not create it for him; unfortunately, we don’t see this to be true for the overwhelming majority of domestic horses. Too many horses are suffering the very harmful consequences of long toes. The occasional horse that takes care of his own breakover is a genuine rarity, and should be recognized as such—so general trimming recommendations for the majority of horses should include instructions to shorten toes to the correct breakover.

With a very long-toed horse, it certainly is possible to remove too much toe at one time and make the horse temporarily sore, so proceed with caution. In our experience this has been fairly rare, and doesn’t cause too much of a problem, considering that the alternative was keeping the horse in that previous state of imbalance. Fitting the horse with padded boots usually solves the problem for the owner. Our personal experience, and the research of Dr. Bowker, strongly suggest that this one single technique could be the most helpful thing you can do to a hoof. 🐾