

The Horse's Hoof



Pokani & Jill

Better Horse Care...
for Better Horsemanship



**The Uphill Trot of Natural
Hoof Care in South-Africa**

Rehabilitation of the Hind Feet

Barefoot Horseback Expedition Across Africa

Mary DeBono: Spine Exercises for Trimmers

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The Horse's Hoof is a generic barefoot resource that supports all hoof care which creates healthy hooves. We believe technology can be useful, and we believe in compromise. We advocate more natural living conditions for all horses. We encourage all styles, methods, and techniques of hoof care that promote healthier hooves. We advocate unity and cooperation within the barefoot movement.

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On Our Cover:

Jill Owens riding her 6 yo Trakehner, Pokani, who lives on her 500-acre hilly California ranch. In addition to dressage, he recently competed in a 23-mile NATRC ride and won his class. Read much more about Pokani and Jill's philosophy of horse care in her story on page 6 of this issue.

Cover photo credit: Bianca Rutledge

Jill was the 2nd place winner of The Horse's Hoof "**Barefooters' Favorite Cover Horse Contest**" as seen in THH Issue 44.

To submit your barefoot cover horse, email: editor@TheHorsesHoof.com



Better Horse Care...for Better Horsemanship

by Jill Owens

Get to know our cover stars: Trakehner Pokani and his owner, Jill Owens!

Keeping my horses barefoot isn't just about hoof care. It's part of a larger philosophy of horsekeeping that honors the physical, mental, and spiritual quality of life of the animals in my care. It implies a deep respect and love for horses—indeed all living creatures—that gives heavy consideration to how those creatures would choose to live.

At the top of the list is a choice that I think all sentient beings yearn to have, and that is the choice of *freedom*. It is the choice that underlies the essence of a democracy, and for horses I believe it includes the freedom to move about, the freedom to eat naturally, and the freedom to choose with whom to spend their time. My goal is to structure a life for my animals that is safe, natural, healthy, and useful—and then within that structure to offer them a huge range of choices. Not surprisingly, this plan meshes perfectly in many ways with the practice of natural hoof care.

When I was searching for my dream dressage horse, my dressage trainer at the time urged me to get a mature horse already trained to Third Level. However, I soon discovered that it is virtually impossible to find a barefoot horse with this level of training. I had already taken three horses through the transition from shoes to barefoot, and I didn't relish the thought of doing it again. Although it was a stretch for a sixty-something amateur rider to take on an unstarted colt, I eventually opted for a two-year-old Trakehner who had never had shoes nailed on his feet.

We all know that there is more to natural hoof care than pulling the shoes and leaving the horse barefoot. Of course, the trim is of utmost importance, and I am fortunate to have a hoof trimmer (Kimberlie Njirich) who is also a horse trainer



Jill's herd enjoys freedom on 500 acres!



Jill with Gypsy and Rocky, both mustangs.

and a body worker, thus bringing a broad perspective to her work.

Freedom of movement is also essential for barefoot hoof care to succeed, but it goes much deeper than that. All animals crave freedom, and horses in particular have evolved to range widely in open spaces. I absolutely refuse to keep a horse in a stall, or even a stall/paddock situation. Because my horses are loose on 500 acres of rough, hilly ranchland, I needed my new dressage horse to be able to live successfully this way—hence, another reason to find a young horse who had not lived in a stall his whole life.

Moreover, horses are social animals, and the company of other horses is essential to their well-being. My herd is small, but my horses have the freedom to be with other horses, which I believe is paramount to the health of their minds and spirits. I found Pokani at Gateway Farm, a California breeder who pasture-raises their youngsters on acreage in groups. When I turned my new horse loose with the others on our ranch, he knew exactly what to do. He knew how to handle himself on natural terrain, and how to show respect to the lead mare and make friends with the geldings.

If I weren't lucky enough to have acreage, I would still insist on an environment that includes as much movement and socialization as possible. Nowadays, there are many good ideas available on how to produce maximum freedom in limited space—for example, Jamie Jackson's *Paddock Paradise* and Joe Camp's experiments in creating habitats for his herd.

I'm lucky that my California ranch is rich in natural species of grasses that have not been altered through selective breeding and do not grow on rich or irrigated soil. There is always something to eat, but the horses have to move around to get it, so they stay fit and it's hard for them to overeat. Horses that are not lucky enough to have this type of feeding situation can still be managed quite successfully. In the past few years, there has bloomed an entire industry offering slow-feeding

All photos courtesy Jill Owens

alternatives that allow horses to eat the way they are supposed to: constantly and in small bites.

The freedom to choose with whom to spend their time is another right I insist on allowing my horses, and this includes whether to spend their time with me. A visitor to the ranch once asked me, "How do you keep your horses from heading for the hills when they see you coming?" People who confine their horses miss out on the exhilaration of being chosen by a horse. But offering this choice requires us as owners to examine and cultivate the relationship we have with our animals.

Recently, I heard a well-known horse trainer talk about his method for connecting with a new horse. "I want him to realize he's stuck with me, and that I'm not going to hurt him." I don't want my horses to ever feel they are stuck with me; I want them to seek my company and to follow me longingly with their gaze when I depart. And while I certainly want them to know I'm not going to hurt them, I want much more than that. I want them to know that life is sweetest when I'm around. This requires working on my relationship with my horses, developing love, trust, and respect in equal amounts, and providing both leadership and safety. It means giving them what *they* need, not what I think they need. I have learned so much about these concepts from my



Kimberlie Njirich, EBW, owner and operator of MIND BODY HOOV Equine Therapy, with Pokani enjoying her trimming and bodywork.



Why shouldn't our democratic principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness extend to our horses?

foundation trainer Susan Dockter, and from Carolyn Resnick and Robin Gates, who both specialize in liberty work with horses.

When it comes to training and riding, I seek to extend my philosophy to these areas, as well. I strive to regard my horse's work as a small—albeit important—part of his life, rather than to view his life as existing solely for his work. Last season, my wonderful dressage trainer, Susan Corrie, competed Pokani and qualified him for the California Dressage Society annual championships. He did well there, but it was a stretch for him to live in a stall for five days and to keep his mind on his work. I watched much younger futurity horses compete with utter focus in tests much more difficult than his, and I wondered how this was possible. I thought about it for a long while and began to form some ideas.

In the Communist countries, athletes are chosen at a very young age, plucked from their families, placed in rigorous residential training programs, and required for many years to concentrate all their focus and energy on their sport. While in a democracy we wouldn't dream of managing our young athletes this way, the way we develop our performance horses is analogous to the Communist model: We start them very young, take away their freedom, house them alone in stalls, and limit their experiences to rigorous training in their discipline and little else. In both cases, extraordinary performers are produced, but at what cost? And for how long, before they break down physically or mentally? Why shouldn't our democratic principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness extend to our horses?

In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink identifies three factors that are present in order for people to enjoy a high level of performance and satisfaction in their work: autonomy—the freedom to direct their own



Jill's happy horses, living naturally.

Photo courtesy Jill Owens

lives; mastery—learning new things; and purpose—reaching higher meaning in life. I believe that if we allow our equine partners some measure of these satisfactions, with a training program that empowers the horse, makes learning joyful, and honors the importance of relationship and spiritual connection—autonomy, mastery, and purpose—they will enjoy the work they do for us.

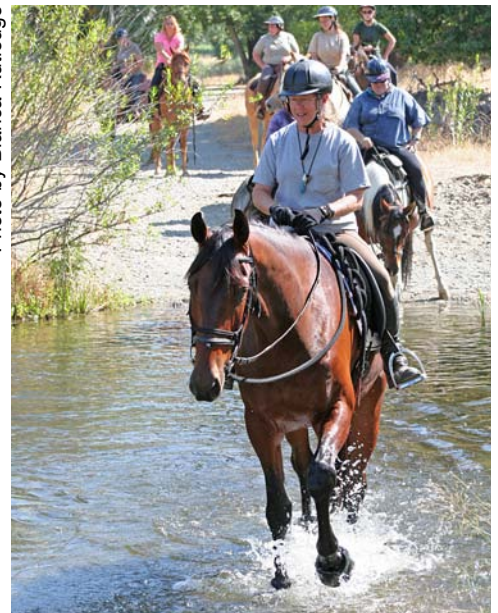
In training, I strive for willingness, consensus, and the absence of conflict. In Dr. Thomas Ritter's new book, *Dressage Principles Based on Biomechanics*, he describes the Aikido Principle of training, quoting C. A. Huang and J. Lynch: "In the martial art Aikido, the fighter melts into the opposing force, moves with it, and uses its power to defuse the attack." This approach can be applied to evasions and resistances that our horses offer in training. For example, when the horse braces and comes above the bit, instead of trying to pull his head down, a better way is "to ride a circle and to move the horse's ribcage towards the outside by following its natural swing to the outside of the circle with our own pelvis. The rider blends into the swinging motion and actively accentuates the movement towards the outside...." Dr. Ritter goes on to explain how—with leg, seat, and rein actions that go with the horse instead of in opposition to him—we can use his power to supple his abdominal muscles, engage the inside hindleg, and eliminate the bracing. The current emphasis in dressage on riding biomechanics implies a deep respect for the horse and compels the rider to use his body to create what Mary Wanless describes as the spiral of ease as opposed to a spiral of unease arising from bad riding and the resulting need for coercion.

Are there risks with my program of horsekeeping? Of course! Barefoot horses are sometimes uncomfortable. Their feet are not anesthetized by shoes. If there is an issue, you can't help but see it. I usually boot my horses for trail rides, which is a little more trouble than just having the farrier come out and nail on some shoes. Pokani has one front hoof that is slightly upright, and he is prone to frog disease in that foot. While shoes would mask this, I notice it right away. I have to be quite diligent about managing the tendency for infection, often with daily treatment.

Once in a while, I have to go out on the ranch searching for my little herd. Because they are free, they occasionally wander off, and I have to go find them. They are not automatons. They are used to having choices and they will let me know in a minute if they think I'm unfair or too demanding in training.

At the championship show last fall, Pokani's trainer Sue rewarded him one day with a trail ride around the 100-acre show grounds. A fellow com-

Photo by Bianca Rutledge



Jill and Pokani during a Trail clinic with Susan Dockter (Susan is in pink at the back).

petitor was shocked that she would dare to take a young horse out alone like that, but Sue knew that Pokani was a seasoned trail horse and had even won highest honors in a 20+-mile competitive trail ride only a few months before. The trouble came the following day, when their dressage class was held in an outside arena adjacent to the trail. He got so excited thinking he was going on another trail ride that he couldn't concentrate on his work and did poorly on the test.

Was it worth it? Absolutely! I want my horse to know what the world is all about, and even if that knowledge produces some unexpected setbacks on occasion, in the long run it will make him a happier individual and a better partner and friend for me. A month later, when I showed him myself for the first time, we won both our classes, along with the high-point award for the entire show.

Recently, two exciting things happened: a former dressage Olympian and S-judge predicted that Pokani will do very well at the upper levels of the sport, and a well-recognized trainer of piaffe and passage introduced him to these movements and discovered he has a natural aptitude for them. I'm excited about his potential and hoping I can learn to ride well enough to keep up with him! While it might be tempting to specialize in dressage alone, this year I also have plans for an introduction to cross-country jumping, several competitive trail rides, and a working cow-horse clinic.

I've strayed a long way from the subject of barefoot hoof care, but good horsemanship is like dominoes: one thing leads to another. In committing to responsible care of the hoof, we are led to consider many other aspects of our horsekeeping practices as well. For me it has been, and continues to be, a fascinating and utterly gratifying journey. 🐾

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