

Can Your Horse Go Barefoot?

Here's why, and how, he may be happier without shoes.

BY ELAINE PASCOE

IF, LIKE MOST HORSE owners, you believe that keeping your horse shod is the best way to protect his feet, you might be surprised to hear that he could safely go without his metal shoes—and that he could have stronger, healthier feet as a result.

That's the word from advocates of the growing movement called "barefoot" or "natural" hoof care. For this article, we asked a leading natural hoof-care practitioner, Pete Ramey of Lakemont, Georgia, to explain the whys and hows of the barefoot trend.

Although some barefoot advocates say shoeing is always bad, Pete doesn't go that far. But, he says, "There's no question that shoes make the hoof less healthy. In fact, farrier texts all recommend pulling the horse's shoes for part of the year to allow the hoof to recover from shoeing, and most of them firmly warn against the dangers of back-to-back/year-round shoeing."

In practice, few people bother to rest their horses' feet this way. But with proper trimming and good hoof boots, Ramey says, most horses—even those working on rough ground—can reap benefits from going without shoes all year.

Why Barefoot Beats Shod

Nature designed the horse's hoof as a shock-absorber. The hoof wall is thickest at the toe and narrows gradually toward the heels, where it turns in to form the bars. The sole is slightly concave and divided by the V-shaped pad of the frog. This construction allows the

hoof to expand slightly under pressure and spring back when pressure is released. Within the hoof, at the heel, a thick pad of elastic fiber called the digital cushion helps absorb impact.

Pete, who has studied the feet of wild horses extensively, notes that horses in high desert regions develop very short, concave hooves that resist chip-

ping and excessive wear, and these horses move around rocky terrain without any apparent discomfort. The hooves of wild horses in wet environments have slightly flatter soles and a slightly more flared form.

In both environments, however, the hoof wears in such a way that the bony column of the foot and leg, which sup-



The healthy front hoof of this Tennessee Walker, who is ridden over 80 miles of rocky terrain each week, shows how the sole and frog have been built up to help bear the horse's weight.

HEEL

BARS

V-SHAPED FROG

SOLE

HOOF WALL



BARS

BEVEL

Thick calluses have been allowed to form on the sole, bars, frog, and walls of the front hoof of this Thoroughbred, who is doing arena schooling and trail work. In barefoot horses, each of these structures should share the load of the horse's weight.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PETE RAMEY

ports the horse, remains correctly aligned. When he puts his foot down, the heel touches the ground a fraction ahead of the toe. Structures in the back third of the hoof—the heels, bars, frog, and digital cushion—bear much of the impact load.

If a horse is shod, his hooves don't function as nature intended. More weight is borne by the walls, and less by the sole and the structures at the back of the foot. Add in a life spent on the unnaturally soft footing of arenas and stall bedding—plus, in many cases, excessive trimming—and these key hoof structures become weak through lack of use. The underlying digital cushion is less able to absorb impact. The result is that the back of the foot becomes sensitive, and the horse begins to put his feet down “toe first.”

Pads and bar shoes may protect the sensitive area, but they actually make the underlying problem worse by further limiting natural hoof function. To a large degree, Pete contends, this is why problems such as persistent hoof-wall flares, contracted heels, thrush, hoof cracks, white-line disease, and navicular syndrome plague domestic horses.

“Proper trimming and letting the horse go barefoot are the way to fix these problems, period,” Pete says. The reason is that without shoes, the hoof responds to use by becoming stronger. The heels and frog take on a healthy natural shape. Wall flares disappear because the hoof naturally wears in ways that relieve the pressure that causes flares. “I have seen foundered horses with 25-degree rotation grow perfect feet without shoes,” Pete says.

Is “Barefoot” for Your Horse?

So can any horse go shoeless? “Ideally, you'd begin with a young horse and raise him without shoes, so that his hooves develop naturally,” Pete notes. “But I haven't seen the horse yet that could not make the change.”

So life without shoes isn't just for

broodmares, retirees, and pasture potatoes. The hoof's remarkable ability to adapt with use actually makes it easy for a horse that does lots of trail miles in rocky terrain to go barefoot. “Endurance horses, competitive trail horses—the ones people think would never be able to go without shoes—do amazingly well,” Pete says.

This doesn't mean that you can just pull your horse's shoes and expect him to carry on as usual, without being sore. His feet will need time to toughen up and develop a natural shape. He should be trimmed by a trained professional in a way that encourages this de-



Pete Ramey applies a prominent bevel to the outer hoof walls to help stop the pattern of flaring and separation.

velopment, Pete says—and changes in trimming can't be made all at once. If you go too fast, the horse will become over-sensitive at the back of the foot; then he'll walk on his toes, and his feet won't toughen and develop properly. The idea is to allow the sole, bars, and frog to assume their natural role slowly, without making him sore.

Some people think that a barefoot horse needs to be turned out twenty-four hours a day for him to develop and maintain healthy feet. Pete disagrees. “It's true that wild horses don't suffer many of the health and lameness problems of domestic horses, thanks to more movement and a natural diet,” he says. “We compromise the horse's

health by stabling. It's healthier for him to be out more and eat a diet that is made up mainly of forage, without grains and sugars. But that doesn't have anything to do with whether or not he needs shoes. He still can go barefoot if he's stabled.”

A good time to switch, Pete suggests, is in the off season. That allows plenty of time for the trimmer to perfect the hooves (and for you to decide whether to put shoes back on) before the next show season. “The worst-case scenario is that the feet will have a much healthier hoof to nail a shoe to,” Pete says.

The Trim

There are several schools of thought on how bare hooves should be trimmed. We'll describe, in general terms, the approach that Pete has found to work—with the caution that you not simply use our description as a guide for trimming *your* horse's feet. If you decide to try barefoot hoof care, you need to begin by finding a qualified practitioner. (One source is the American Association of Natural Hoof Care Practitioners, which lists certified trimmers at www.aanhcp.org; Pete Ramey is an instructor for this group.) Trimming for horseshoes and trimming a horse to perform while barefoot have few similarities, Pete warns, and improper or

invasive trimming can harm your horse.

One of Pete's main goals in trimming a horse to go barefoot is to preserve the sole and frog so that they build up. “You can't lift the horse off the ground with the hoof wall alone,” he says. The sole, the bars, the frog, and the walls should share the load, and thick calluses must be allowed to form. By sparing the knife over the sole and the height of the frog, he lets dense material pack up over time to form those calluses. He generally trims the heel walls to a height just above the sole—or, if the frog is protruding and sensitive, to the height of the frog.

A second main goal is to grow out any wall flares. Flares appear where the



An endurance horse successfully competes in the 100-mile Tom Quilty Gold Cup in Australia—without shoes or boots.

hoof is under unequal pressure. If the horse is shod, the ground surface of the hoof can't wear in response to the pressure, so the pressure forces the wall to bend outward. That outward flare means that the hoof wall is not helping to support the horse in that area; it also indicates stress on the *laminae*, the fine interlocking structures that attach the hoof wall to the deeper structures inside the foot. "It's very difficult to grow flares out when the horse is in shoes," Pete notes, "but relatively easy once the horse is barefoot"—because the bare hoof can wear naturally.

Pete also applies a prominent bevel to the outer walls of the hoof: from the widest part of the foot on one side, around the toe, to the widest part on the other side. This puts a slight inward pressure on the walls as they press into footing, stopping the pattern of flaring and separation. It also mimics the natural wear pattern seen on the hooves of wild mustangs.

Plan on having your barefoot horse trimmed every four to six weeks—because, unlike mustangs, most domestic horses don't wear their hooves down enough to go very long without a trim. They spend most of their time on soft footing, such as grassy paddocks and bedded stalls; however, they're rid-

den in footing that is generally drier, harder, and more abrasive. Regular trims can help "trick" the hoof into adapting to the riding surface, rather than the living surface.

The Boots

Because use encourages the hoof to develop calluses and become healthier, you can and should both work your horse and turn him out barefoot on any footing on which he's comfortable. Healthy bare feet can adapt to a range of conditions: dry summers, wet winters, and muddy springtimes. As a rule, however, Pete notes, dry ground is better for horses' hooves. Thus, a horse who lives outside in wet conditions may need to be stabled part-time, or moved to drier ground, to keep his feet conditioned for work.

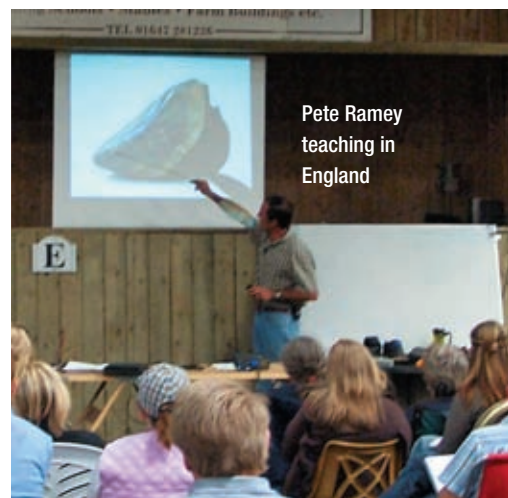
Pete recommends riding a horse in hoof boots whenever the terrain causes him discomfort. "Hoof wear is not a problem; just sensitivity, which occurs if the hooves are unhealthy or unconditioned," he says. "In fact, I have yet to see excessive wear on a well-trimmed barefoot horse, even on endurance horses and carriage horses." The boots aren't "cheating"; they simply allow your horse to obtain the benefits of going barefoot without overstressing his feet. "Don't attempt a barefoot transition without them," Pete cautions. And let the horse guide you in deciding when and in what footing to use them: If he puts his feet down toe-first, shortens his stride, or steps gingerly, put boots on him.

As for recommendations, Pete says he's "found Easyboot[®] Epic boots to be good in most situations," but he adds that "there are other good choices. And with the growing interest in barefoot hoof care, even better boots will likely come on the market." He recommends that you have your trimmer help select the right boots for your horse's needs and fit them to his feet, warning that "blindly ordering

boots and hoping that they will fit your horse is almost a sure-fire prescription for failure.

"A good trimmer will usually stock a full line of several types of boots, and will know how to make modifications to each one to ensure a 'no-hassle' fit. Personally, I carry a full line of three types of boots in my truck, plus other assorted boots and epoxies for different situations."

After four or five months barefoot, your horse *may* not need the boots any more—but that's going to depend on him and his lifestyle. If he's stabled and gets most of his exercise in an arena, his feet won't be conditioned for work on rocky ground, so he'll probably need his boots on those rare days when you take him on the trail. But, Pete says, "In the arena, he will most likely outperform his former self." **EH**



Pete Ramey became interested in the natural hoof-care movement not long after beginning his career as a farrier in 1994. After studying natural hoof-care techniques, he built a reputation for success in rehabilitating lame horses; he is now considered one of the leading practitioners of these methods. Pete lives with his wife, Ivy, and their three children in Lakemont, Georgia, where he maintains a busy hoof-care practice. He is an instructor for the American Association of Natural Hoof Care Practitioners, travels widely to give clinics, and has written a book, Making Natural Hoof Care Work. His Web site, www.hoofrehab.com, lists clinic information.