

Saucy Night Makes UK Racing History by Winning Barefoot

Eamonn Wilmont's barefoot racehorse Saucy Night won the 2 1/2 mile Steeplechase at Folkestone, UK, on January 3, 2005. Eamonn, of Wiltshire, UK, was interviewed by Ysabelle Dean for The Horse's Hoof.

"I've always used my intuition on new ventures and directions. I remember sitting in a cold tack room on a winter's night a few years back and hearing about going barefoot, and feeling my internal radar click."—Eamonn Wilmont, Managing Director, Equine Health Centre, Ltd.

Ysabelle Dean: How long have you been working with racehorses and what got you started?

Eamonn Wilmont: My first experience with horses was at age four, back in Ireland on holiday at my mother's family farm. They were yet to buy a tractor, and were still using a horse and cart to bring in the hay. We would sit on the back of the cart on bright summer days that were magical. The mare was huge and very scary to us, but I somehow picked up how important it was to the family that the horse was well.

My lifelong love affair with racing started as a teenager at Windsor races in England, continued while I lived in California in my twenties, and I made the life-change to be involved in it full-time in 2002. Over the previous ten years, I'd become more and more passionate about healing and a holistic approach to health, due to my own battles with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). Bringing alternative thinking on health, diet, and training to racehorses made perfect sense.

Back in the real world, I started off in publishing, and launched "Supercomputing Review" while living in San Diego. I later launched the world's first commercial Internet service, and most recently developed the leading web development company in Europe, AGENCY.COM with revenues of \$50M and over 500 staff. So I did a fair bit of pioneering—and I think the experience of doing something not many people have heard of or believed in has been useful as we have brought holistic care and barefoot into racing.

YD: What do the English rules stipulate for racing horses barefooted?

EW: So far there is no specific rule, we have been



Saucy Night arriving at his new home in October, 2002.

in touch with the Jockey Club and have been informed the horse must simply "be sound."

YD: Did you (or do you still) have your horses shod for training and/or racing, and what made you decide to try the barefoot approach?

EW: We have two businesses running side by side: the Equine Health Centre that focuses on getting horses well again, and Simon Earle Racing, which takes horses directly from outside owners, and also trains horses that have come through the Equine Health Centre. Both businesses run under holistic principles, and horses are turned out all the time whenever possible, and kept chemical-free whenever possible. Right now, about half of Simon's horses are shod, and the rest are barefoot.

We are going barefoot for a number of reasons, and the main one is that our company motto is "Horses First"—and I think it's clear that barefoot's better for the horses (although obviously many people still disagree with that). Commercially, we are going barefoot because we are convinced it will reduce tendon and leg injuries, and we are seeing this confirmed already. In the UK, we race mainly on grass, and being able to race horses on all types of going—especially firm—is potentially hugely beneficial.

YD: What is the conventional life-style set-up for racehorses in the UK?

EW: 23 hours a day stabled, with one hour exercise is pretty standard. Some horses swim or do other work in the afternoon. Some are turned out

All photos courtesy Eamonn Wilmont

for a few hours. When they are turned out, rugs are normally used. Feed is often high-sugar, processed type. Sadly, most racehorses—estimates are 90%+—suffer with ulcers.

YD: Do you still follow the conventions with regard to equine lifestyle, or have you implemented a more natural approach? Does your training regime differ?

EW: We are committed to natural boarding for all our horses, including those that are shod. Even before we started on the barefoot route, our trainer and business partner, Simon Earle, was keeping all his horses out as much as possible. We feel it's the best way to keep them healthy and happy.

Part of our ethos is balancing science and nature. Thus, along with natural boarding, organic or biodynamic feed and supplements, and holistic treatments, we also use thermography, regular blood



The Seawalker, the world's first salt water walker.

tests, ultrasound, equine weighing scales, and we use heart rate monitors in our daily training and monitoring. I feel there is a lot to be gained in being open to all sides of the spectrum. While we use a homeopathic vet, I would never deny a horse pharmaceutical antibiotics when they are needed (although as a last, not first, resort).

Due to the fact that we turn our horses out, we find they are much fitter and suffer less from respiratory problems.

YD: How do your riders and colleagues feel about your barefoot venture?

EW: Sadly, it can still be a struggle. Unfortunately, many people look on what we are doing with some derision and scorn. We try to keep a low profile, as I've spent my life evangelizing about this or the other, and now I just want to "do it" rather than talk about it. This is the first article we've ever done about what we are doing.

On the other hand, I've been staggered by the support and kindness shown to us by people in the barefoot community—it really has been heart-warming. That has helped us think that we don't



Saucy out in his paddock with some friends.

Barefoot Racing, Cont.

have to do everything by ourselves. Fortunately, all the staff here are completely committed to racing barefoot.

YD: What sort of terrain do your horses live and work on? Does this create any disadvantages or advantages?

EW: We have 220 acres of free draining, chalky soil, which is a big advantage, and a major reason we chose this location. We also have a hill that rises 257 feet over a little more than half a mile, which is where our all-weather gallop runs. We returned 60 acres of arable land back to pasture using a mix that is as close as we can get to the pastures of 100 years ago. I'm super-passionate about the quality of soil and the quality of grass and how that impacts horses. We are using Biodynamic preparations on a number of paddocks—unheard of here in the UK horse world. Biodynamic methods promote truly live soil, increasing not only the nutrient levels of the soil and grasses, but also the ability of the grass to be absorbed into the metabolism of the grazing animal.

YD: Do you have any special facilities to train barefoot?

EW: We've designed and built what we believe is the world's first **salt water walker**. The Seawalker has been developed to help horses transition to barefoot, recover from injuries, and to give horses in training the benefits of a healing walk in the sea after their day's work. The Seawalker allows controlled movement and encourages healthy circulation (especially so for barefoot horses). It took over two years of research and investigation to develop, and has involved travel to Australia, Germany, Holland and Ireland to speak to leading experts in the fields of equine hydrotherapy spas, horse-walkers, and equine medicine. The Seawalker is over 50 feet in diameter and can be used at variable depths of water. The water is chilled to 3-4° celsius (37.4-39.2° F) and has a very high raw sea salt content of about 5%.

Scientific studies already show that immersing horses' legs in salt water at low temperatures is effective in both healing and preventing injury, and it produces exceptionally fast and good quality hoof growth. We are also seeing a reduction in mud fever and other minor infections. The horses using it before coming into training are remarkably fit before they start ridden work.

YD: How are your barefoot horses performing?

EW: Our first horse to race barefoot has been Saucy Night. His form before joining us was: 7 races, never having run past another horse, and on average losing by 50+ lengths. Saucy was being retired from racing when we took him on,



Saucy in top racing form, putting in his winning effort at Folkestone on January 3, 2005.

and we decided he would be the first horse to go through our barefoot program. His previous form has been described unkindly as "the worst in England." His first run for us was in August, 2004, when after not racing for two years, he finished like a train to come third. The next day, his regular rider said he felt like a king as she rode



Down the homestretch. Eamonn says, "Look at the happiness in that horse compared to the day he arrived. Wow, I'm more proud of that than anything else. WHAT a horse!!"

him. He had clearly needed restoring mentally, as well as physically. His next two races also saw him in the money—a remarkable turnaround given his previous record.

His fourth race for us was a two and half mile Steeple Chase on January 3rd, 2005, at Folkestone. He was in a tough race with 12 seasoned performers that included a horse rated 60 lengths better than Saucy over hurdles, and another horse that we used to train with, who had won by 12 lengths on his previous start. In the paddock, Saucy looked superb, the energy was bursting out of him and it took four people to tack him up. He padded around the pre-parade ring silently, while his opponents clip-clopped noisily, and you could see people in the crowd looking at him quizzically.

All photos courtesy Eamonn Wilmott

Saucy bounced off in third and jumped like a cat for the first mile, absolutely loving it. They went a fast pace, and the 12 runners were well strung out, as they came past us with a circuit to go. With 4 fences to go, there were only 4 or 5 who could win, and our fella was still going beautifully. The favorite loomed up ominously (there had been a full page on him in the Racing Post as a bet of the day), and as they turned for home, it was just us and him, both going well. Kelly, his groom, started to cry right then, the crowd started to cheer wildly. I could hear the commentator saying the favorite is going very well, but I'm watching Saucy's every step, and boy—he still looked good.

They ping the second last fence, and we out-jump the favorite in the air, landing true, and we begin to pull clear. For a moment, all the pain and effort, all the dreams and hope in getting him back racing, are framed before me. Then a split second later, Saucy flies the last with his best jump of the day, a sight to see, and he wins by 6 lengths unchallenged. Pandemonium!

A piece of racing history, a step forward for all of us in the barefoot community, and I couldn't be happier it was the great Saucy Night who did it!

YD: What are your long-term goals/plans/dreams with respect to training and racing horses—barefoot or otherwise?

EW: Our plan remains to prove that alternative methods are not just kinder on the horse but also can produce longer and more successful careers for performance horses. We are operating in a commercial world where owners pay us to train their horses to perform, so while more and more owners are becoming interested in how their horses are kept, they also expect—rightly—their horses to do well.

We need to increase our skills and understanding of everything about barefoot, and we understand it's an evolving science. We will be looking to hiring our own in-house trimmer this year (maybe one of your readers!), continue to train our existing staff, seek out the best holistic practitioners, and look to add to our facilities to continue to offer the best care possible.

By enabling the horses in our care to be as successful as possible, we hope to set up a virtuous cycle of improving horses, and investing in our staff and facilities, leading to more horses coming to us. 🐾

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