

# Going from Shod to Bare: A Hoof Care Pro's Tips for Success

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*Photo © Andrew Ryback Photography*

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Many equestrians used to think of pulling shoes as just for a horse's retirement or time off work, but that is no longer the case. More and more owners are

interested to see if their horses would do well barefoot, but might not know where to start to ensure a smooth transition out of shoes. Some horses walk out of metal shoes as if they never had them in the first place, while others struggle to handle the adjustment without a bit of help. When the horse does not transition well, many people are quick to assume their horse “can’t be barefoot” and that their horse absolutely needs shoes. While it’s true that the horse might need additional protection to be comfortable, a horse who remains sore once out of shoes is raising a red flag that something beyond the feet may need to be addressed.

There are a few fairly simple actions to take before pulling your horse’s shoes that can make a huge difference in their comfort level during the transition and beyond. Incorporating these changes will ensure a more successful and comfortable adjustment.

## Diet

A diet sensitivity and/or mineral imbalance are the two main causes of hoof sensitivity, weak hoof wall quality, thin or flat soles, weak frogs, and an overall weak laminae connection. It’s not hard to believe that diet alone can affect a horse’s comfort level; if you have tried an elimination diet for yourself, you likely experienced a marked improvement in your overall body soreness, relief from aches and pains, headache relief, and an improvement in your level of fatigue. Feeding a horse a diet overloaded with starch and sugars or one with an imbalance of proper nutrients and minerals can lead to systemic inflammation, which can show up as problems within the hoof capsule. Too

much iron or manganese, for example, competes with the absorption of copper and zinc in the diet. Copper and zinc are needed for healthy hoof wall quality, tight white lines, healthy frogs, keeping thrush at bay, and helping build a better laminae connection, which allows the horse to grow the best sole depth possible. Adjusting to a forage-based, mineral balanced diet 10-12 weeks, or 2-3 farrier cycles, before pulling shoes can kick start healthier hoof growth and improve comfort levels when it comes time to pull the shoes.



*The top third of this foot shows a tighter laminae connection growing down after a diet change. The bottom half, which is flared and has event lines, is the result of a less-than-ideal diet high in starches and sugar, and lack of proper mineral balancing*

# Thrush treatment

Weak, thrush-infected frogs are another common cause of soreness in barefoot horses. The frog is a shock absorbing structure, but it can't do its job if the horse is unwilling to weight it due to pain! A frog with thrush might have a deep split between the heel bulbs (called a central sulcus split), swiss-cheese-like holes, excessive flaps that can harbor bacteria or it might feel soft to the touch. A healthy frog will have a shallow central sulcus (no more than a thumb imprint), a wide back half of the frog, and the consistency of a firm eraser. When battling thrush, look for a thrush treatment that is not overly drying, which can cause microfissures in the hoof and allow more bacteria to take hold. Look for ingredients that target the unhealthy microbes, but are not caustic to healthy frog tissue. Ingredients like zinc oxide, honey, apple cider vinegar, certain essential oils, and clays are typically great for fostering healthy frog growth and keeping the "bad stuff" at bay. Make sure your horse isn't consistently standing in urine or manure and has plenty of areas where they can get out of an overly wet environment. Treating any hint of thrush – even if it doesn't smell and doesn't have a "black gooey" appearance – will help immensely in your horse's overall hoof comfort.



*Left: Hoof with a central sulcus thrush infection and a weak frog Right: The same hoof 5 weeks later, after thrush treatment*

## Boots and pads

We can't predict how well a horse will handle having their shoes removed, even when we've adjusted the diet and treated thrush before the transition. We never want to leave a horse sore or uncomfortable, so having boots and pads ready to use is highly recommended. Choose a therapy boot, such as EasyCare's Cloud Boots, for maximum comfort. Cloud Boots will stay put in light turnout situations and the Cloud Pads that are included with the boots provide an incredible amount of support. In addition to boots, Hoof Armor can be helpful after removing shoes; it is a topical kevlar-based epoxy which helps

prevent wear on the solar surface of the hoof and adds an instant "callous layer" to help provide comfort, as well as build up sole while preventing wear.



*Cloud Boots with bell boots on top to prevent the horse from removing or destroying the boots*

# Movement

Instead of accepting that some horses just “have weak feet,” consider how to strengthen them! Movement over surfaces the horse is comfortable on will help the structures inside the hoof to develop. The hoof is a living structure, and just like we might need a gym routine to get our muscles stronger, the hoof needs proper movement, biomechanics, and challenges to strengthen. For example, a horse that is stalled all the time doesn’t have the ability to strengthen its foot and will often have weak, atrophied frogs and greater hoof sensitivity than one that is moving out 24/7. Notice the emphasis on “comfortable movement” – forcing sore, short-strided movement over ground the horse isn’t ready for will only cause compensatory issues throughout the body. Slowly introduce new footing as the diet changes and thrush treatment “kicks in.”

# Time

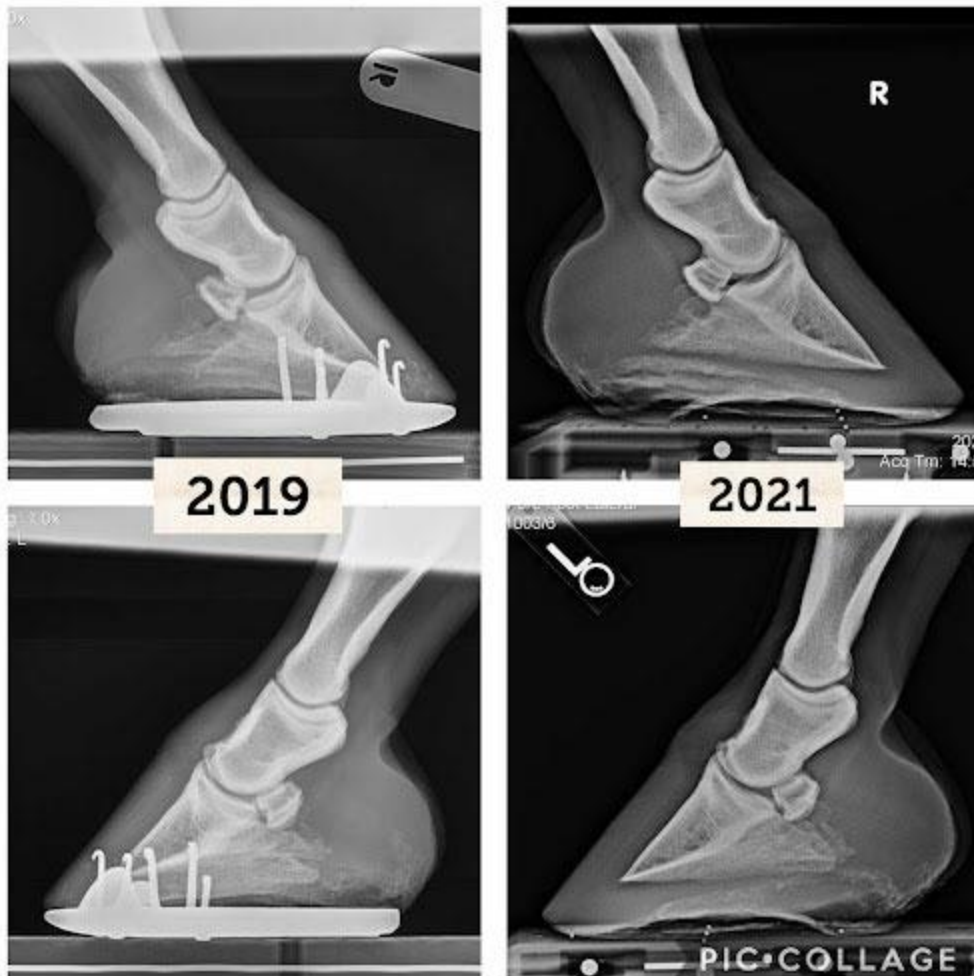
Hoof care provider Casey Sexton of North Georgia Hoof Care often says that “for every year a horse was in shoes, expect at least one month of transition time.” If a horse was in shoes for 12 years, it could take a year, or at least the growth of an entire new hoof capsule, for the horse to be fully comfortable barefoot. With diet change, considerations to environment and management, and movement over varied terrain, the hoof should continually get stronger with each new cycle of growth, but this does take time. As mentioned previously, some horses surprise us and are incredibly comfortable over all surfaces right away, but for those that aren’t, be sure to watch for that tighter laminae



connection, healthier frog, and more extended and confident movement over time to know you're on the right track.

## What to do if you don't see improvement

Always openly dialogue with everyone on your horse's care team – your veterinarian, hoof care provider, barn manager, trainer, bodyworker, etc. – about the progress you're seeing (or not!) in your horse's comfort level. If you don't see the improvement you'd expect, diagnostics can be helpful to determine if there is a roadblock to success standing in your way. For example, radiographs can check for coffin bone loss or other internal pathology, and blood work can address potential metabolic issues or other concerns. If you're noticing a pattern, such as your horse is very comfortable when not grazing pasture or in the winter when grass isn't available, and then becomes footsore once the grass starts coming in, try removing whatever might have changed before the new hoof sensitivity started for a few days and see if comfort improves. Hooves are like the "canary in the coal mine," their comfort level points to how healthy the horse and internal structures are, and sensitivity is the first warning sign that something isn't quite right. Finding the cause can take a bit of trial and error, but finding what might be causing inflammation in your horse's hoof will only help in the long run.



## In conclusion

While transitioning your horse to barefoot might seem as easy as simply pulling the shoes, some horses have a harder time with the adjustment than others. A few simple steps to keep in mind – adjusting to a species appropriate diet full of proper nutrients and treating thrush before pulling shoes, using Hoof Armor and boots and pads as needed for comfort, and involving your vet and other equine professionals to help you troubleshoot issues – can ensure that you're giving your horse the best chance at a comfortable, sound barefoot transition.