

Learning Abrasive Trimming

by Petina Cole, Edited by Phil Morarre

It's the end of a hot southern day in June, and one by one the trailers come up the long driveway to the home of Ellen and Tony Barry in Henderson, Tennessee. We're preparing for a three day abrasive trimming clinic with Phil Morarre, who arrived from Oroville, California with a suitcase full of powered hoof trimming tools. Phil developed the design and contracted manufacturing for his "Softouch Natural Hoof Care" trimmers. This will be my third clinic—I'm a working student traveling from New York to assist Phil and absorb as much knowledge as I can.

As the participants start to settle in, their horses are bedded down in stalls and paddocks. A pet dog gets his travel break. Hay is hauled and water buckets filled. We meet, greet, discuss our plans and refine our schedules. Attendees will sleep in trailers or a local motel. We all aim to be well rested for the clinic.

A day earlier, in the quiet before everyone's arrival, Phil and I spent some time setting up the clinic and addressing some unusual pathology that would require intense analysis and special care. Down at the barn, veteran rehabilitator Ellen Barry brings her two white rescue donkeys in from the pasture. Fans in the stable and awnings around the building keep us nice and cool while we work. Looking at Sally, the 6 year old smaller donkey, Phil says, "That's the worst feet I've ever seen in an animal that's still alive."

Ellen and I take turns supporting Sally's weight so she can stand for the trimming. Initially, Phil thinks the coffin bone may have disintegrated in the front left. After this first trim, he's not so sure. It's a miracle she's actually walking on these feet! Previously, a farrier fitted her with a therapeutic shoe on one front foot to give her a toe extension and prevent her from knuckling over and walking on the front of her pastern joint. That's what she was doing when she arrived at the Barry farm.



Sally, a 6 yo rescue donkey, had been fitted with therapeutic shoes.

The hairline angles on the front feet are almost ground parallel when viewed from the side. That means the heels are way too high. Phil explains to us that while donkey's feet are different from horses, the preferred hairline angle of 30 degrees is still the same even though the donkey's toe angle is steeper.



All photos courtesy Petina Cole

Phil takes off the shoe and lowers the heels. Months ago when Ellen first intervened, these hooves measured almost 12 inches long. The overall transformation is amazing. There's more trimming to be done, but we can't cure the whole problem at once.

Sally, after her shoes were removed.

Exhausted from the effort of standing, the donkey hobbles back to her pasture mates. Two days later, she's walking better, and Phil and Ellen follow up with a little more lowering of the heels. They still have a way to go to achieve a 30 degree hairline.

Phil says, "It will take time for the muscles to regain their proper length. Contrary to popular belief, tendons neither contract nor stretch, it's the muscles that change."



Two days later, Sally is walking better.

Next Ellen brings out June—Sally's 34 year old partner. Before she was subjected to the unspeakable abuse from which Ellen rescued her, she was a cart donkey. She has obviously foundered in both front, maybe all four feet. Despite her age, she's got a great will to live. She gets around better than Sally does. "These donkeys were not ready to die," says Ellen.

Phil trims toward the goal of a healthy foot. He'll do a little more work on June before leaving town.

For these two it's donkey paradise. They graze and rest with their companions while they heal. They'll probably never be 100%, but they'll be functionally sound for their new job of being adored and pampered horse companions.

Friday morning is the first official day of the clinic. The farm is bustling with activity as the last few participants arrive and tend to their horses and equipment. It's going to be another hot one. With a nice buffet of snacks and plenty of cold water, participants gather under the awning for Phil's opening lecture on nutrition, hoof structure and safety with the tools, followed by an hour of questions and answers. We break for a sumptuous lunch provided by Ellen and Tony, and watch videos about the health benefits for barefoot horses.

Now we're ready for some hands-on learning. First up is Beth McCreless, an experienced trimmer. Beth's horse, Grace, is a 6 year old racking horse mare. Grace was shod once at the age of 2.



Beth McCreless and her horse Grace.

Her last trim was about 3 weeks ago. Although Beth has never measured, she's been getting an accurate hairline angle by bringing the heels down level with the sole at the seat of the corn, that triangular area of sole just in front of the heel buttress (where the walls angle in to form the bars).

Beth's horse gets used to the trimmer quickly. Most horses actually seem to like the vibration. Phil starts the trim on a back foot, explaining how with a brand new disc, grit particles will fly off at first. He reminds us to always tie up the tail when working on the hind feet.

He gets the frog about even with the heel, explaining that a little more or a little less is okay, but we don't want the frog loading much

It is emphasized that all hoof measurements are approximate because every horse can be a little different. But these measurements offer a good basic guideline for trimming.



All photos courtesy Petina Cole

Phil reminds us to always tie up the tail when working on the hind feet.

more than the heel. He shows us how to place the ruler across the bottom of the foot to be sure it touches both heels and the frog at the same time, verifying that the frog is not higher than it should be. The power trimmer does a great job on the frog.

The next step, Phil explains, is to fix any medial-lateral imbalance by first studying the hairline from in front of the horse. The hairline should be level from 10 o'clock to 2 o'clock at the front of the foot. In other words, "ground parallel."

When we examine the back of the foot, it turns out this horse has a sheared heel. We learn the heels become sheared due to excess pressure from the heel on one side having been left higher over time. Farriers typically trim sheared heels to a ground level balance—but Phil explains that if you measure the distance from the top of the heel bulb to heel buttress on each side and trim to that measurement equally, although there may be a medial lateral imbalance, that slight imbalance will allow the sheared bulb to relax down and even out the bulbs naturally over time.

I noticed an interesting viewpoint for the heels is to sit 10 feet behind the horse in a chair to see if the heel bulbs, hairlines, etc. are even. If you do see an uneven hairline from the back, you still need to pick up the foot and measure. It may be just a strangely shaped bulb or an unusual growth of hair that looks more uneven than it really is. But you can often see the sheared heel condition by standing behind the horse and looking at his foot on the ground.

Next we check for toe length. For accuracy, we measure the bottom of the foot from the very back of the frog to the tip of the toe. Dividing that measurement into thirds, the frog portion should comprise 2/3 and the portion from the frog apex to toe tip should comprise 1/3. If the toe portion is too long, it should be backed up accordingly. It is emphasized that all hoof mea-

surements are approximate because every horse can be a little different. But these measurements offer a good basic guideline for trimming.

Beth continues with the other 3 feet on her own, with Phil suggesting any necessary corrections. Everything looks pretty good now. Beth is smiling.

Christen Simmons is up next. She has 12 horses and a donkey at home, as well as a busy career riding the show circuit. Never having trimmed with the power tool before, she says, "I might as well just dive in."

Christen has brought Apache, a 9 year old Appendix Quarter Horse she barrel races competitively. Christen tells us proudly: "He has wings under his feet." It's been 3 weeks since his last trim. With Apache barefoot for 4 years in the competitive show ring, Christen's been unhappy with his feet lately. She's used several trimmers with poor results. That's why she's here—to learn to do it herself.

Apache's a good boy, but he's slightly reluctant to pick up the hind. Tip from Phil: If you're having trouble picking up a hind foot, hold the hock like a doorknob and give a little squeeze; if it still doesn't come up, a little twist; lastly if still no response, tickle the hairline with your own foot at the same time. Be sure to catch the foot as soon as it comes off the ground.



Christen Simmons lifting a hind foot on her barrel racer Apache.

Apache takes to the power trimmer right away.

Christen tells us she has a metal plate in her hand from where she broke it barrel racing. But she has no problem handling the trimmer. The new Softouch trimmers weigh just a little over 3 pounds, yet are powerful and durable.

We discover a seedy toe condition. This is thought by some experts to be a benign tumor that starts at the coronary band and grows all the way down,

displacing the laminae. Others disagree. Phil says good timely trims with an adequate mustang roll do seem to reduce this condition.

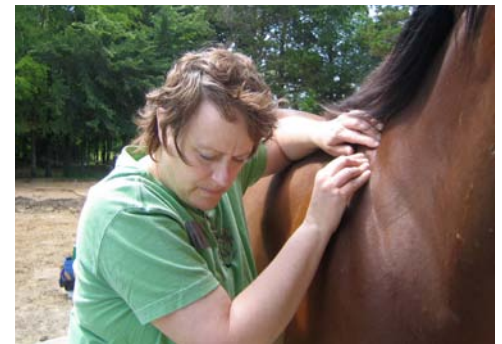


Apache has a seedy toe condition.

This horse and many others will reveal a lot of sole cracks. We learn that these are normal signs of solar exfoliation—a good thing. Christen goes on to trim the other feet with no real problems, and everyone agrees Apache's feet are looking very nice.

Phil then points out Apache's irregular growth rings. He explains that these can indicate stress caused by the environment; either physical or emotional trauma. It can sometimes be from poor trimming, but more often it's improper nutrition, especially carbohydrate overload.

At this point, Elaine Anderson, one of the participants and an equine massage therapist—steps up and offers some hands-on therapy for Apache's shoulders, which appear to be very tight.



Apache receiving bodywork from equine massage therapist Elaine Anderson.

"The rest of my horses are gonna be easy when I get home," says Christen, with a satisfied grin.

Next, Connie Heidelberger's ready with her 12 year old Quarter Horse, Selah. Connie rides this easy-going, friendly horse for pleasure. She's been trimming with a power tool for 2 years and is completely self taught. However, the last trim done on this horse was by a farrier 3 weeks ago.

On initial inspection, Phil says, "Really nice feet
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though you can hardly tell by looking from the top side.”

When he picks them up, he confirms they are, in fact, beautifully proportioned on the bottom. We discover, however, that the right hind on this horse is another case of seedy toe. Beveling the toe to take the pressure off of the resulting split will help.



Connie Heidelberger trimming her Quarter Horse, Selah.

Connie can't find the bars. But as it turns out, this horse just has really odd, very indistinct bars. Connie thinks the front left foot foundered 10 years ago. It has a somewhat unusual shape. Also, the heels are too high and lots of bruises in the walls. While these heels are definitely in need of lowering, Phil cautions that it's better to have the heels slightly too high than too low. You



Observing a coffin bone.

don't want the palmer processes of the coffin bone digging into the underside of the sole. He reminds us of the coffin bone he showed us earlier, and the bony protrusions at the back called palmer processes.

Connie finishes Selah's trim pretty much on her own, with just a little help with the mustang roll. Now these feet are indeed beautiful. Even from the top view!

Then Sue Mohr brings in her Shagya Arabian, Solomon—a Prix St. George dressage horse. This horse has been prancing in the round pen all morning, and calling out to us and the other horses. Solomon has a lot of personality at age 18 and beautiful body conditioning. It's been 4 weeks since his last trim. Sue has been supervising her farrier. She says he's like her avatar. She uses her brains with his brawn. Three or four months ago, Solomon had a bout of laminitis from a sudden change in feed. The laminitis caused extremely stretched white lines. This

All photos courtesy Petina Cole



Three or four months ago, Solomon had a bout of laminitis from a sudden change in feed.

horse also tested positive for insulin resistance 3 years ago. Though this somewhat high strung horse has never had a power trimmer near him before, he doesn't even flinch!

Sue first spends a little time getting the wall down flush with the sole and bringing back the toe, which was really needed. The left front reveals a stretched white line—almost a lamellar wedge, which is much more serious. We apparently caught it just in time. Phil takes over and finishes the trim, because the laminitis affected the foot all the way back to the heel, causing a stretched white line all around the wall. It takes his experienced touch to trim this complication effectively, without over-trimming.



Sue Mohr trimming her Prix St. George dressage horse, Solomon.

We learn more about Sue's horse care philosophy: At Sue Mohr's boarding and training facility, Rock Haven Farms, in Lawrence, Kansas, natural hoof care is practiced regularly.

It's day two. We're inspired and ready to go for more. These horse people are hardy. The hot weather doesn't slow them down. Today, four participants will be working on Ellen Barry's horses.

Karen Cooper, who has trimmed before, but not with a power tool, gets Mia—a registered foundation Quarter Horse. Mia's last job was working a feed lot. She was raced by her original owners, so this mare has some hard miles on her. Mia's current veterinary diagnosis looks like this: a) Low ringbone; b) High ringbone; c)

Navicular disease with bone loss; d) Arthritis; and e) Side bone.

It's been 9-10 weeks since Mia's last trim. Ellen left her that way, so we could see how these feet grow out over time. Phil palpates and confirms the side bone. Phil says that in his experience “side bone is more likely to cause lameness than ring bone.”



Above & Below: Quarter Horse Mia has ringbone, navicular, arthritis and sidebone!



Her left rear is the opposite of cow hocked—the hock turns out, and as a result the hoof turns in. With this horse, we learn that if she wears the foot down on one side, we can take down a little more on the other side, and then reshape the toe to shift the break-over closer to the center of the toe.

Also, if the apex of the frog is low enough to allow for concavity, you don't need to lower it more. Part of its function is support and shock absorption at faster gaits.

Phil spots an imbalance in one of the hind feet and explains that a common oversight, easily made, is leaving the inside heel too high, especially with the hind feet. If you're in doubt after a visual check, just measure each side of the foot from the top of the bulb to the point of the heel (where it touches the ground).

This is Karen's first time using a power trimmer. She grins and says, “Let's just do it and see what happens.” It's a lot easier than she expected, and she quickly gains confidence and proficiency.

The toes are still a bit long even after Karen backs them up. Phil demonstrates giving this mare a “toe rocker,” which is actually just a more pronounced bevel.

Hoof care is a continual learning process. There are lots of resources out there, and Phil encourages us to keep our fingers on the pulse of new developments.

Next up, Brian Cooper gets to work on Glider, a 6 year old foundation Quarter Horse. Born at the Barry farm, Glider's last trim was 2 ½ weeks ago. This is Brian's very first time trimming. The horse has unusual bars. One zigzags as if it was once broken, and the other is extremely curved. These bars are very overgrown, and apparently haven't been getting trimmed. Glider is also pretty flat-footed in the front. He likes to pull his leg away quickly, an added challenge which Brian rises to surprisingly well. Phil shows us that by lifting the foot and locking the knee joint, the horse is less likely to get the foot away from you. Horse handling is a big part of this job. Brian and his wife adopt and train mustangs from the BLM. That's a world of horse experience! Brian's handling is gentle, but firm and confident. Phil encourages us to keep our horses as relaxed as possible while we're working with them. Let them know what to expect and what's expected of them in a non-violent way.



All photos courtesy Petina Cole

Brian Cooper's very first time trimming.

Elaine Anderson—our resident clinic horse masseuse—is up next. She's brand new to trimming. Elaine first touches the horse all over, explaining that it's so he knows he's going to be handled and that it's okay. Sam is a 9 year old Norwegian Fjord trimmed 2-3 weeks ago. Looks like he's been getting pretty good trims and has good concavity.

Phil trims the first foot. He lowers the heels just enough to bring them even with the back of the frog and trims the wall to the level of the sole. Then he bevels the wall over and adds a scoop to the quarters. Next he adds to the bevel, creating a mustang roll all around the front two thirds of the foot. Lastly, smoothing out that roll all the way around, he makes sure it continues evenly up to the top side. Elaine picks up the rest of this trim, and her first trim turns out well.

Helpful hint: human knee wraps work to keep the feathers of a drafty type like this Fjord from interfering with your work.



A human knee wrap keeps the feathers out of the way for trimming!

The last person trimming is Pam Dailey, who has limited experience trimming but a lot of horse sense and enthusiasm. She unfortunately gets the most difficult horse to handle.



Pam Dailey got the most difficult horse to handle: Norwegian Fjord Kerri.

Kerri, a 7 year old Norwegian Fjord, is 2-3 weeks from her last trim. This is the first horse at this clinic with a negative hair line angle. It's a tiny bit steeper than 30 degrees. She also has under-slung heels due to her toes having been left too long over an extended period of time. Other than that, she's got really good feet.



Phil takes Kerri out and moves her around to improve her attention.

This mare gave us a lot of behavioral problems at the very end of the day. Phil takes her out and moves her around to improve her attention and attitude. He explains, "We try to make the ani-

mals comfortable, but we can't tolerate potentially harmful behaviors like kicking and biting."



For safety, Pam watches Phil finish the trim.

We're not here today to harm any humans, so Pam lets Phil finish the rear feet, while she watches intently as he explains in detail what he is doing. He demonstrates some techniques in hoof handling for the rear feet. For instance, bringing the leg out to the side makes it more difficult for the horse to kick and encourages the horse to relax when you return the leg to a more comfortable position to resume trimming. Throughout this clinic, Phil's extensive natural horsemanship training background has been a big help. It was well worth the effort, as the horse ends up with lovely, balanced feet.

Conclusion: Eight well-trimmed horses and tired people later, we breathe a collective sigh of contented relief. Everyone has increased their knowledge by practicing on their own or borrowed horses, as well as watching each other's trim lessons. They're all ready to either trim on their own or get the kind of help and results they need from hoof care professionals back home, now that they can consult and advise in a more knowledgeable way. Hoof care is a continual learning process. There are lots of resources out there, and Phil encourages us to keep our fingers on the pulse of new developments. Phil reminds us that when we get home and start trimming other horses, if we have questions, rather than take a wild guess, he is available for consultation.

On a personal note, this was the most graciously hosted clinic I've ever attended. Ellen and Tony Barry and all the critters gifted us with an atmosphere of learning and fun. For information, tools and education materials visit Phil Morarre's website: www.softouchnaturalhorsecare.com

About the author: Petina Cole resides in Pomona, just north of New York City. She learned about Phil while attending the Oregon School of Natural Hoof Care. She rode 6 years with The NYC Parks Mounted Auxiliary Unit, is a PATH Int'l Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor, EAGALA Equine Specialist and attends Parelli Natural Horsemanship Clinics. Her horses Hank and Juliet live at Country Lee Farm.