



What to Expect When You and Your Horse Go Barefoot

Tuesday, August 2, 2011 by [Dawn Willoughby](#)

Going barefoot with a natural trim and boots for riding, is not without its twists, turns and bumps in the road. I was a professional trimmer working in Delaware for six years. During that time, I specialized in teaching owners, mostly women, to trim their personal horse(s). I quickly learned that in addition to teaching them to trim, I had to prepare the owners for issues they might face, if transitioning to bare feet were to be successful.

Some Challenges to be Aware Of

1. Criticism
2. Soundness
3. Chipping of the hoof wall
4. Abscesses
5. Rehabbing cracks, holes and other deformities
6. Concerns post-rehab
7. Building a strong back-of-foot

1. Expect Criticism

Brace yourself! Unless you own the farm, you should expect to get looks ranging from concern to downright disgust from your fellow equestrians and barn manager, trainers, vets and farriers. Many think you are torturing your horse. *'Look the poor horse can't walk on gravel'* is one of the most common remarks. Most people, professional or not, do not understand the hoof. Neither veterinarian nor farrier books are entirely correct when it comes to the hoof and its mechanics, according to [Dr. Robert Bowker](#), world renowned researcher. Farrier training focuses on

shoeing not growing great bare hooves.



Former steeplechaser, Big Band Show, "Banjo", was often described as a hot house flower. But after I pulled his shoes, the debilitating episodes of rain rot and hives and bug bites swelling to the size of my hand all vanished. He was my previous horse and the first I transitioned to bare feet. This proves even a newbie can make a huge difference!



No one can argue with success. Over time your horse's hooves will look fantastic. And most importantly, with correct blood flow, your horse will become *healthier*. There may be a time when most of the shod horses in your barn are covered with rain rot, but you, my friend, will be out on the trail. Commiserate with your friends who can't ride; then plant a seed for bare feet, boots and blood flow!



Until then, I encouraged my clients to educate themselves so they understood the advantages of having a barefoot horse. Personally, if I ever found a horse who could not be ridden barefoot in padded boots, I would recommend he be retired. It's not fair to ride a horse with that much damage. Shoes, whether metal or plastic, nailed or glued, are a short term band aid *not* a fix.

Soundness: I expect most horses to walk soundly after every trim. If there is any tenderness, I figure out what's going on. If I did something wrong, I apologize to horse and owner. Then don't repeat!

2. Soundness. After each trim, your horse should walk soundly.

When I first began trimming, I followed some excellent advice from [Dr. Tomas Teskey](#). He recommended that after I pulled shoes, one nail at a time, I just round the edges of the hoof wall and even-up the heels. "Make no big changes on the first trim," he suggested. "To the horse, it feels like you just pulled off half his hoof. Give him a month to adjust." What great advice that was. The horses certainly appreciated it. I just had to alert the owners about the expected chipping of the walls (more on that below). Most horses walk off from every trim, sound on grass. There are two *major* exceptions: First, 'navicular disease or syndrome'. Second, the overly trimmed horse.



This poor shod guy (not my client) has had Back-of-Foot Pain for years. He points first one foot then the other to relieve the pain in the back of his foot. The traditional world calls it 'navicular syndrome or disease' but the navicular bone is just an innocent bystander. In fact the coffin bone suffers more damage when he lands toe first. Pull the shoes, therapeutically boot if necessary. Apply the natural trim and treat the frog. This will rehab the back of the foot. Rehab

is straight forward. Dr. James Rooney, author of The Lambe Horse, clarified the problem and treatment in 1975 and yet 36 years later horses are being put in bar shoes, being wedged every 6 weeks, having their nerves cut and eventually euthanized.

Many domestic horses, and especially ones who are shod, have a weak back-of-foot. You may see thrushy frogs and contracted heels which are protecting the back of his foot. When I pull shoes on a compromised horse like this, he may well be lame. He walks incorrectly, by landing toes first. This is an obvious compensation for a sore back-of-foot. The fix? Padded Rx boots of course. And time. The conventional world calls this *navicular syndrome or disease*, which in my mind is a misnomer. Back-of-Foot-Pain doesn't exactly slide off the tongue but that's what it is. And it is fixable.

At a rescue some years ago, I put one foot-sore boy in Epics with a half inch pad and off he went. First, he tested the walk, then trot, then extended trot, then all hell broke loose as he galloped off, kicking and bucking. This former racehorse hadn't broken out of a shuffle for five years!

There wasn't a dry eye at the gate. Now I'd use the Rx Boot as there is more airflow and they are less expensive. I would however replace the quarter inch pad included with a half inch one. If there is no thrush, Equicasts are another option, particularly good for the owner who doesn't visit daily.

What if your horse walks off lame after a routine trim? Consider whether he was over-trimmed. Anyone can make a mistake but there are aggressive trimming styles that I don't recommend. You can *not* grow a good foot on a horse who is too sore to walk correctly. If a trimmer is repeatedly over-trimming, fire him. One aspect of correct movement is a flat or heel-first landing at the walk and heel-first landing at other gaits. It's easy to spot a toe-first landing while walking your horse in sand. The toe kicks the sand up. I would be particularly concerned if I saw routine sole and frog trimming. If one more person asks me when her horse can go on rocks, I am taking myself out to the back shed! If your horse lives on rocks, he will adapt. If not, BOOT. Horses adapt to what they live on.



Chipping: Thin, shelly racehorse hoof wall with lots of laminitic rings easily cracks. You can grow a well-connected hoof (wall to coffin bone) in one hoof growth. But it takes a few capsule growths to get a thick, healthy wall.

Another great Thoroughbred foot. Smooth walls devoid of laminitic rings. Mustang Roll on the ground has replaced the chipping. As for shape, it is definitely a more upright foot. Notice the more cone shaped hind feet. This is the foot the horse wants.



3. After the shoes come off, hoof walls chip.

If your horse is coming out of shoes, you should absolutely expect the hoof wall to chip. *Chipping is a good thing.* There is no way your horse can gallop on walls with holes in them. I promise you that the hoof will not fall off. Wall chipping is similar to growing out your own nails after wearing polish for a long time. Nails chip and flake until the unhealthy bit is grown out. Once you get past the nail holes, you should be in good shape.



Abscess: Here an OTTB, Doctor Clayton, has blown out the back of his sole next to the bar with an abscess. Once erupted, he felt great.

4. Some Horses Abscess

During transition to a natural trim, I do not expect a horse to abscess but I let owners know that on occasion a horse can develop them. In some cases, the horse looks like he has broken a leg; we call

that 'three legged lame'. Forewarned is forearmed. After all, I don't want the owner dashing back to shoes! Abscessing can be frightening to an owner. Honestly, during my six year career, I have had only one horse abscess soon after a trim. One of his lateral cartilage looked so laid-over and mushy, that we actually had a vet out to look at him. It took a while but he got himself rearranged.



November. Peanut's abscess exploded through his laminae creating the black hole of Calcutta. He was never lame on this foot! The owner soaked him weekly in White Lightning to keep the area free of bacteria and fungus. Obviously it was full of dirt most of the time. Do try stuffing the area with cotton balls. This is not white line disease.



December. I left sole and wall in place to provide what little structure he had. The wall was well angled so that it pressed in, rather than away from the horse. Traditionalists would have trimmed wall and sole, even resectioning all disconnected wall. That may have made the area look more attractive but by reducing the structure, Peanut may have gone lame. There was no special bandaging. He never took a bad step and was ridden throughout.

Feel free to ask your trimmer what they experience during the rehab. If they expect abscesses as a natural part of the healing transition from

shod or farrier trim to good bare hooves, I would not use them. Over-trimming is a common cause of abscesses.

Just as healthy humans get colds; healthy horses get abscesses. It can be painful to watch, but as long as the horse is generally in good health, I am not disturbed. As any horse person will say, "It's far from the heart." Do call your vet if you are concerned.



Here's a pleasant way to soak! Doctor Clayton, "Doc", former racehorse, is a premier trail horse, as you can see. He is in padded Epics on front. Owner Bette is on board.

Abscesses often release in soft areas like the coronary band, the laminae (aka white line), and around the frog and heel bulbs. One day the horse can't move and the next he is fine. The abscess either

reabsorbed or erupted. If the latter, you can usually find the drainage spot. Some horses don't even go lame. If the abscess breaks out the coronary band, you will notice a horizontal line growing down the hoof in six weeks. When it reaches the ground, expect the hoof to chip.



As I walked into Garwin's barn, I thought, "The excised soles are the least of your problems." Holy Mackerel! Check the flare.

After months of bandaging and stalling, Garwin's sole slowly repairs itself. We put padded Epics on Garwin and he happily trotted in his pasture. He even trotted down hill on the driveway. Sub solar abscesses will drain and

as the underlying "baby" sole develops, the top sole will slough off. No need for surgery.



Typically abscesses resolve in a week or two, but I have seen them last for a couple months. On rare occasions, the horse may experience swelling of the entire leg. Garwin, had sub solar abscesses in both front hooves. The cause of the problem, pathologically shaped hooves, was never addressed. In frustration, the owner learned to trim and has fully rehabilitated him. Garwin is now competing, booted in Gloves, all around.



Owner Lyndsay rehabbed Garwin and here they are in 2011 having the ride of their lives!

As for treatment of abscesses, I am not sure anything really helps. I put Ichthammol, that disgusting black stuff, around the coronary band, frog and heels bulbs to keep the areas soft,

encourage eruption. Soaking would have the same result. I used to wrap the foot in a baby diaper with moistened Epsom salts but honestly I don't think the abscesses resolved any faster. Every one seems to have a different recipe.



Cracks: Wakefield His five year old crack is due to the huge flare and misshapen foot.



I taught his owner to trim and out it grew! He was such a handful to trim: a very large, moving target. In hindsight, I should have taken some time to clicker train him. He never took a bad step throughout the rehab!

5. The Natural Trim facilitates the repair of wall cracks, holes and other deformities.

When I met Wakefield, above, his very impressive crack was five years old. His farrier was preparing to shoe him and add a metal bridge to pull the crack together. I hope you can tell from the photo that the cause of the crack is the flared wall. With each 'pasture trim', where the bottom is trimmed flat, the toe was getting longer and the flare more severe. The trim maintained the crack, as would shoes.

I taught the owner to trim Wakie and within seven months the crack was gone. When there are many cracks or wide ones, I recommend soaking weekly in dilute apple cider vinegar 50%,



dilute bleach 10%, or my favorite, White Lightening. Assume long standing cracks have bacteria or fungus in them. Soaking creates a healthy environment enabling the horse to repair the walls and grow out the cracks. It is a straight forward rehabilitation.

This is a foundation broodmare, former racehorse, with 1" of good connection of hoof wall to coffin bone at the top, then a long flared capsule with deep cracks. Of course the soles are flat because the coffin bone is not fully connected to the wall.



I soaked with White Lightning/Vinegar as directed. The deeply penetrating gases eliminate bacteria and fungus that would thwart our progress. The foot must be bagged to trap the gases, then put in a Soaker, so the baggie won't rip.

This foundation, thoroughbred broodmare was severely flared. It was of special interest to me that she had been barren for a few years. I wondered if

rehabbing her feet, providing ideal blood flow, might correct the situation. By relieving the mechanical stress of the flared wall and eliminating bacteria and fungus with a soak, the hooves began to repair, immediately. I soaked every foot in White Lightning during the trim. In the Reader's Digest version of natural hoof repair, [Dr. Robert Bowker](#) says there are grocery bags of keratin traveling along the laminae attached to the coffin bone. The keratin creates and repairs hoof wall. 50% or so of the wall is created from within, while 50% grows from the coronary band. Her smaller cracks closed with the first mustang roll which relieved some mechanical stress on the wall. I wish I had a graduation photo of this lovely girl but she developed colic and was put down several months after I started working with her.



Cracks etc. on Good Feet, the Good Foot Continuum: Good hooves aren't static. Some days they are perfect, and another there's a crack or thrush, especially in wet climates! Much of this toe crack has healed before reaching the ground. The mechanics were off and the wall cracks to accommodate. That's its job.

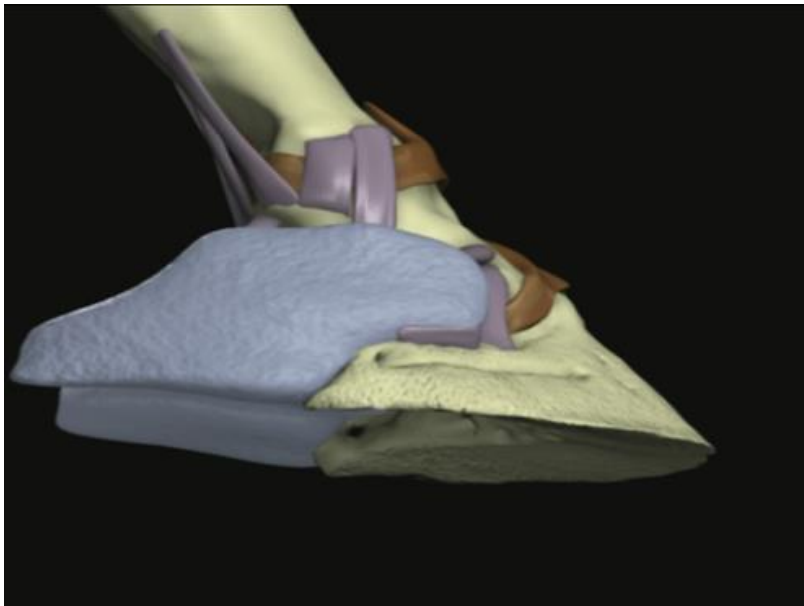


More on The Good Hoof Continuum. See the hint of a quarter crack. This is where the hoof has challenges. Over time, as the hoof improves, many horse develop a 'scoop' or arch at ground level, at their quarters, an area of expansion when the horse is moving. I don't trim (force) a scoop but prefer to wait until the horse creates it. They know how much structure versus flexibility they need.

6. Wall Cracks and Flare on Good Feet.

From time to time, quarter cracks on the side of the hoof and toe cracks in the front will develop on good feet. I have seen this most often on Thoroughbreds whose walls seem to max out at 1/4" thick. If the foot mechanics are a bit off, cracks may appear. Don't apply any goop! Horses like hard hooves.

This is yet another reason to learn to trim your own horse. With a weekly tune up, you keep the hooves just as nature intended on the best feral feet, perfectly balanced.



Even with great hooves, horses aren't impervious to laminitis due to spring grass and the wall flare that is ensues. Certainly a good trim helps but the key is diet. When I experience flare, I trim a steeper mustang roll and grow it out.

Back-Of-Foot: From the The Glass Horse. The front half of the foot is coffin bone and the back half is lateral cartilage. This is correct for a feral horse. In our domestic horses, you would be happy with a cartilage half that length and much thinner. The creators forgot the digital

cushion located in back between the cartilages. (Reminder that none of the texts are entirely correct when it comes to the hoof. Here's your proof.



7. Building a Strong Back of Foot: Frog, Digital Cushion, Lateral Cartilages and Heels.

Your horse must land solidly on the back of his foot, innumerable times, to create a *callused frog*, above it, internally, a *robust digital cushion* and to either side, *strong lateral cartilages*. The internal structures respond to pressure-release. That's why we trimmers hate stalling so much. Find ways of keeping your horse moving, like Paddock Paradise. That's what the equine is designed for.

If shod in metal or plastic, your horse's frog, digital cushion and lateral cartilages are all taken out of the equation. The internal structures stop developing. Proprioceptor nerves that tell your horse where his feet are in space atrophy. The number of specialized blood vessels in all the structures diminish significantly. In other words, your aged horse could be walking around on the digital cushion of a 2-year-old, if that is when he was first shod!



The central sulcus of the frog above is filling in, inside to outside. It blossoms into a sulcus. Don't trim it.



This frog is a bit behind the one above but still on the path to health. Notice how close the heels are. The back half of the foot looks squeezed in. As it all rehabs, the heels will open up, but slowly. The owner's responsibility is to keep the frog healthy and encourage as much sound movement as possible.

In a barefoot horse, a healthy, callused frog is not routinely trimmed.



Just keep the flaps and tags trimmed to avoid thrush. Kitchen scissors work just fine. The pressure-release in all gaits rebuilds the digital cushion, located above the frog. With a strong frog and digital cushion, the heels will usually de-contract and begin work properly.



The frog is thin and unhealthy; can you see the butt crack running up the back? Heels are contracted. I have marked the cartilages in the hair above the hoof to show how shoved up (bad) the leg they are. Granit, shod most of her life and here in her 20's, transitioned out of shoes easily and was ridden in boots. Her heels opened up a lot but not completely.

When contracted, the heels essentially form

protection for the back of the foot, most commonly an unhealthy frog. Every time the horse lands, the heels go in, rather than out. *Even rehabbed horses can develop contracted heels when their frogs are unhealthy for an extended period of time.* My recommendation is to continue treatment until the frog looks and feels healthy. Please don't stop just because the horse isn't flinching from pain. The central sulcus should look like a thumb print. In the meantime, I let the heels grow a tiny bit to protect the sore frog.

On either side of the back of the coffin bone, the lateral cartilages also develop from pressure-release when the horse moves from the right and left side of his foot, 'yaw'. Pressure-release is the only way lateral cartilages develop size, firmness and regrow specialized blood vessels.

The mass of specialized blood vessel provides *energy dissipation* in both lateral cartilages and the digital cushion. Nike could not do better!

In Conclusion

The natural trim, combined with lots of movement heals. Rehabilitation takes a while. Generally, we bipeds are an impatient species. I encourage you to ride your horse in padded boots if he is ouchy and avoid walking on harsh surfaces when he is bare. Get as much *right* about natural horse care as you can. Then enjoy watching your horse blossom.

P.S.: This is one hoof care provider's opinion. We do not agree with everything she says, but respect her view points.