



The World of (copywritten) Barefoot Trims

by Cole Henderson, professional farrier

The world of Barefoot Trims for horses has never been more complicated or so fiercely competed over by the world of business. All over the popular equestrian press are advertisements for courses offering diplomas, certificates, franchises, association memberships and licenses in trimming horses feet. Most offer a cheaper quicker way into the hoofcare world than a farrier training course or apprenticeship. You will notice that all but one of these marketed trims have been developed by farriers. I have several friends that are barefoot trimmers and I keep in touch with them because I want to share my experiences with them and share in their experiences. What we find is that when a horse is healthy with healthy feet they do well barefoot depending upon how they are used.

I thought I would put together a little comparison of some of the trademarked/branded trims that are being taught and a little explanation of some of the theories behind them. These are in no way all the trims on the market- this is just a taster. Please don't take offense if you are a trimmer of a certain type, I hope you find the other trims of interest. I'm not writing this to pass judgment on any of them. This is just meant as an introduction and if anyone wants more detailed information these trims all have websites and books that extol their individual virtues.



THE HIGH PERFORMANCE TRIM

This trimming technique is not really that radical and is explained in detail by its inventor K.C. La Pierre, a farrier from Delaware in his book "The Chosen Road". He advocates holistic hoof care (adequate turnout, nutrition, exercise, herdttime) and does state that not every horse can go barefoot. In the trim he is looking for the horse to operate barefooted at extreme levels of performance. His plan is to keep the live sole plane and establish it by finding the widest part of the foot and the widest weight-bearing part of the frog. Using this to make a triangle lets you find the weight-bearing plane. There seems to be nothing unhealthy in that.

Note in each picture the trim is on the right side only, the left side is the foot before trimming.

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THE FOUR POINT TRIM

Ric Redden, a farrier and veterinarian from Kentucky advocates anticipation of the foot's wear pattern, preferring to "square the breakover not the toe". The concept behind the four-point trim revolves around the four pillars of support for the foot, those being the toe quarters and the heels. Dr Redden indicates the technique involves pulling breakover back to within 1 inch of the coffin bone by shortening the toe and keeping the angle of hoof in line with the pastern. The trim was designed to prevent or treat long toe/low heel syndrome that so many performance horses seem to develop. The trim is not new and was developed from studies of the manner that wild horses wore their feet down. The problem is wild horses are in a totally different environment than our domestic performance horses. They have different exercise and nutrition and as such trimming the feet the same as wild horses is not necessarily correct in all cases.



THE NATURAL BALANCE TRIM

This is a widely accepted trim process developed by Gene Ovnicek, a farrier from Colorado which has gone on to spawn the Natural Balance range of horseshoes and pads. Gene stresses the concept of moving the breakover back from the edge of the toe and preserving the bars as well as most of the sole. It's a concept that is fairly similar to what you'll find in many traditional farrier books highlighting weight bearing on the callous. Much of Ovnicek's research is also based on studies of feral horses but he bases a good deal of his work in biomechanics and anatomy. One of Ovnicek's most important points is that the horse should land heel first, to maintain the proper alignment of P1 and P2, as well as help to normalize the circulation, all good stuff. Many horses seem to do very well trimmed like this but it might not suit all. Some performance horses need toe purchase to perform to the utmost of their ability and moving breakover too far back can cause distortion in the hairline in some horses.



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THE HOOFTALK NATURAL TRIM

This trim was developed by Lyle Bergeleen, a farrier from Texas, and stresses the importance of hairline distortion in reading hoof stresses and follows a rigid measurement guideline to trim the horse resulting in a fairly short foot. The trimming recommendations relate to a horse's weight and do not seem to account for conformation differences and foot size. There are a lot of big horses with small feet and small horses with big feet- and then there is the issue of toe in and toe out or distorted feet. Bergeleen's book suggests a toe length of 3 1/2 inches for a 1400 pound horse and 3 1/4 inches for a 1000 pound horse. For a bare foot horse that could end up being a short foot. Again there is a good deal of emphasis on holistic care and nutrition in this book written by an experienced horseman.



THE STRASSER METHOD/TRIM

Developed over the last 20 years by Dr Hiltrud Strasser, a German veterinarian this method also stresses a holistic approach to horse care with turn out, variety of footing, herd time but no use of stalls. Behind this method lies a philosophy that opposes the exploitation of horses- such as using a horse for work or show purposes or pleasure riding. Dr Strasser also condemns any use of horseshoes. The method does have rigid guidelines for trimming, resulting in loss of heel and sole mass, especially in the posterior part of the foot because her plan is to make the foot as flexible as possible. Horses can be lamed by this trim, some for up to a year, and this is justified as the price of getting the horse back to its state of nature. Many people follow Dr Strasser's doctrines almost as a religion and many more argue that her findings are unsubstantiated by research. I personally have trouble with deliberately/potentially lamming a horse for any reason.



THE UNIVERSAL SOLE THICKNESS METHOD/TRIM

This system can be acquired for free and has appeared in many magazines and talks over the country. It is based on the anatomical research of Mike Savoldi, a farrier from California, and endorses the old practice of trimming that portion of the sole that is no longer exfoliating. It does take a bit of practice to tell the difference between exfoliating sole and live sensitive sole so this is not a trim for beginners. By trimming to Uniform Sole Thickness (which defines the plane of the hoof capsule) the true foot reveals itself regardless of breed or conformation. In easy terms the sole is made equal thickness wherever it connects to the hoof wall and from heel to toe. Of all these trims this one seems to have the most anatomical basis behind it.

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I've put this together as I find that actually copywriting a type of hoof trim bordering on the absurd. I have tried some of the above methods over the years with limited success and I really think that there is no ONE right way to trim a horse. Personally I've found Pete Ramey's policy of trimming to the anatomy of the hoof capsule to work better than anything else I've tried. It's different for every horse but my results seem to be 100% successful up to now.

Trimming is the most important thing we do as farriers- either for shoeing or barefoot. One thing I've learned over the years is to trim completely differently for going barefoot from preparing a foot for a shoe. Most farriers never get taught that and it's a pity. Teaching barefoot trimming can be difficult as it requires the student to visualize the whole finished foot and not just the sole—some people find that hard to do.

I hope that this has been interesting and not too overwhelmingly technical. Its easy for us farriers to become "hoof bores" and ramble on about anatomy and biomechanics and I've tried to avoid that. There are lots of myths and claims talked about natural trimming but I wanted to avoid that and just try to give an introduction to some of what is currently going on in the "natural hooftrim" world.

While I think it's true all horses can go barefoot it isn't always the straightforward best choice for every horse. The going barefoot decision depends on the hoof quality, diet, where the horse is kept and how it is used and not just a simple case of pull the shoes off. Owners interested should discuss the matter with their farrier or a trimmer and try to read as much as the can.



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25 year old stallion



25 year old mare

Finally, and just for those who have always wondered what all the fuss is about.....

photos of wild horse feet from the Nevada Wild Horse Range.
(next page)

You can see their large frogs, short rolled toes and thick hoof walls.
Desert environment and traveling 10 to 20 miles a day make a difference.