

Farriery

EVERY DISCUSSION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF farriery invariably starts with the old adage, “No hoof, no horse.” Those four words put into perspective what many horse owners have learned through months or years of frustration, and what many educated farriers have tried to impress upon the horse community via books, lectures, and magazine articles. It doesn’t matter how talented your horse is or how wonderful he is to ride: if he doesn’t have a foot to stand on, so to speak, you won’t be able to enjoy those other qualities.

Unfortunately, it's easy to overlook the humble hoof. It's not soulful, like your horse's soft eye, or beautiful to the touch, like her gleaming coat. No one ever gasps when a horse is led by and exclaims, "Look at those feet!" Even the best hoof doesn't really help a horse's performance, although bad ones certainly can hinder it. Good hooves provide comfort, stability, and shock-absorbing capability for the horse's whole body.

In many horsemen's circles, whether a horse has good feet is an afterthought—it's nice if he does, but not a deal-breaker if he doesn't. This rather blasé attitude has found its way into the breeding shed as well. Horses are bred because they've performed well, not because they have the desirable thick soles and well-balanced hooves.

In our infinite wisdom, we human beings have populated the world with lots of horses who might have ended up as lion food in the wild. (You can't run away from a lion if your feet hurt, after all.) To be fair, there are also lots of horses with decent feet, and lots more whose hooves are downright stellar. If you have an average horse, chances are good that his feet are okay, but might need a little help here and there.

This is where your friend the farrier (a hoof-care professional, as opposed to a blacksmith, who forges iron) enters the picture. While no farrier should be expected to work miracles and turn terrible feet into wonderful ones, a skilled farrier can help manage any small problems and prevent them from turning into big issues. Unfortunately, a less-than-stellar farrier can turn good feet bad in rather short order, one of the reasons why farriery is an art and a skill that takes years to master.

As the owner, your role is to learn as much as you can—about shoeing in general and your horse's particular needs—and to be an advocate for your horse's feet. This means keeping him on a consistent schedule with your farrier, doing your part to maintain his hoof health between appointments, and educating yourself enough to differentiate between a foot that's shod or trimmed well and one that isn't.

Like your own fingernails, the horse's hoof grows continually and must be trimmed periodically to prevent it from getting too long and out of shape. The rate of growth is affected by the weather (the hoof grows more

slowly in cold weather), whether the horse is getting adequate nutrition, and the amount of exercise a horse gets (growth is slower in horses who are idle than in those who are worked).

An unshod horse who travels five miles a day on a good dry surface wears his feet down naturally, making trimming potentially unnecessary. A horse who does not wear shoes and does little to no work may need trimming every six or seven weeks. Shod horses need reshoeing every five to eight weeks.

Waiting too long between farrier visits can lead to lost shoes or cracks and chips in the hoof wall, which can become severe and cause lameness if not corrected. Hooves that are overdue for trimming or shoeing can become unbalanced—asymmetrical and not uniform in shape. An unbalanced hoof does not bear the horse's weight evenly, leading to increased stress in parts of the hoof or leg, and can cause lameness.

A horse's hooves are the foundation of everything he does, so you want to make sure they're well cared for and as strong as they can be.



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Extreme neglect of the hoof can have disastrous results, including cracks and damage to the outside layer.

To Shoe or Not to Shoe?

There's one important difference between the equine hoof and the human fingernail. Since you do not walk on your fingers, the growth of your nails is unimpeded. Horses, however, spend some twenty-plus hours a day standing, walking, and running on their hooves, often on rough or rocky ground. Their hooves wear down over time, at about the same rate as they grow. This was nature's way of keeping a hoof in balance before farriers were invented.

In domestication, however, horses' hooves sometimes wear down more quickly than they grow, depending on the strength of the hooves and the way in which the horse is kept. The art of horseshoeing is thought to date perhaps as far as back as 500 BCE, and had likely become commonplace by the Middle Ages.⁶⁰ Shoes protected the hoof not only from wear, but also from extreme footing that might be found in mountainous terrain or on the battlefield.

In modern times, protection from wear and rocky footing are still primary uses for shoes, but they're also used for performance reasons. A shoe with permanent caulks or temporary screw-in studs (both similar to cleats on athletic shoes) can give a polo pony or show jumper much better traction, allowing for quick stops and tight turns on slippery grass. Reining horses are shod with special "sliding plates" on their hind hooves that allow them to perform their trademark sliding stops, and police horses might wear rubberized shoes to keep them from slipping on pavement.

Shoes also have a number of therapeutic uses. An egg-bar shoe (one that is a closed circle, rather than the usual horseshoe shape) can help horses with under-run heels grow a more normal hoof. Horses who have suffered a bout of laminitis with rotation of the coffin bone can be shod with pads to help realign the bones of the lower leg.

Corrective trimming and shoeing can help alleviate some of the effects of mild conformation problems in adult horses, and help correct some conformational defects in young horses who are still growing.



AARON GYGAX

The simplest, flattest shoe the horse can wear successfully is the best shoe for him.

The general rule is that *how* the horse's feet are trimmed and balanced, based on his conformation, is much more important than the quality of the forge work in making or shaping shoes. A corollary is that the simplest, flattest, and lightest shoe the horse can wear successfully is the best shoe for him. In this case, more (shoe) is not necessarily better.

Most horse owners consider shoeing to be a matter of course today, although some horses with exceptionally good feet can go barefoot while in steady work, and some light-use trail or pleasure mounts can go without shoes. Indeed, many farriers recommend pulling a horse's shoes for the winter, or whenever a horse is not going to be worked very hard, to help strengthen the hoof and give it a "break" from shoeing.

Does *your* horse really need shoes? Bare feet tend to be healthier and stronger and afford a horse better traction on paved roads and snow than do shod feet. If you keep your horses in a group turnout situation, horses whose hind feet are barefoot will cause less damage if they kick a pasture mate. If your horse goes from stall to paddock to bluestone-based arena,

to sandy trails, and back again, going shoeless may be advisable. And, as is true in many instances with horses, there are often benefits to adhering as close to a “natural” existence as is practical. (You will save money as well.)

There’s been a movement within the horse community in recent years toward leaving horses barefoot and trimming their hooves to replicate those of wild horses. Barefoot or “natural” trimming proponents feel that shoeing is unnatural, unnecessary, and causes damage to the foot, leading to many of the lamenesses seen in working horses. They assert that even competition horses can go barefoot if allowed time to acclimate and develop stronger hooves. Various methods of barefoot trimming are taught in certification courses, and farriers who specialize in barefoot trims are found around the country.

This movement is a significant departure from traditional hoof care. While there’s no doubt that many horses can and do go barefoot successfully, other horses may not be suited for going without shoes while doing any kind of significant work. Since this theory of hoof care is relatively new, most of its practitioners have less than a decade’s worth of experience with it, and many have much less.

If you’d like to try allowing your shod horse to go barefoot, consult with both your veterinarian and your farrier and ask for their professional opinions on how your horse might fare, taking into account the inherent qualities of his feet and how you ride him. If he’s not comfortable being barefoot, or if his feet start to chip, crack, or show effects of an underlying problem, he’ll let you know.

As long as your horse seems happy and comfortable, whether he’s barefoot or shod, there’s no reason to feel that you “should” change.

Remember, most of what we do with our domestic horses is not “natural”—riding, trailering, veterinary care, deworming, and shoeing are *all* foreign to horses who are truly living naturally. It’s important to understand how the horse is designed and what his natural instincts are, and it’s certainly ideal to replicate his natural environment when possible.

We urge caution, however, if you are considering doing your own trimming. The horse’s hoof is a complex structure, and without

significant training—more than you can gain in a weekend seminar or by reading instructions in a book or on a website—you should not attempt to maintain your horse's feet on your own. An unskilled and untrained person should never trim a horse's feet. Most horse owners who trim their own horses never get enough practice to become good at it, so their horses are always poorly trimmed.

A Balanced Hoof

To the uneducated eye, a hoof is a hoof—each one looks pretty much the same as the next. But when you know what you're looking at, you see vast differences that can have a significant impact on the horse's soundness (or lack thereof). Far too many horse owners just trust that their farriers are doing a good job without taking a critical look for themselves, simply because they have no idea what to look for.

The overarching concept of proper farriery can really be summed up in a single word—balance. A balanced foot is not subjected to undue stress on any one portion. It supports the horse's weight optimally because the weight is distributed properly.

When you look at a horse with balanced feet, everything should look symmetrical. Stand in front of the horse and look at his legs straight on, drawing an imaginary line down the center of the leg. It should bisect the knee and the fetlock and continue straight on down through the hoof, dividing the leg into two equal parts. A balanced hoof is divided exactly in half, with the portions from each side of the imaginary line being the exact same size. The coronet band should be parallel to the ground when viewed from the front, and the hoof should look like a trapezoid, with both sides sloping away from the leg at the same angle. Both front feet and both hind feet should be symmetrical.

Now, facing the horse's rump, pick up the horse's foot, tucking your head under the horse's body so that your head is directly over the hoof itself, and look down at the exposed bottom of the foot. Draw an imaginary line from heel to toe. The line should divide the hoof into two equal

An overlong but normal foot: the hoof is not deformed, but the toe is just long enough to possibly interfere with normal weight bearing.



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portions roughly semicircular in shape. If one side is flatter or rounder than the other, the hoof is not balanced. You also should be able to draw a line across the foot, from side to side at the widest point, which should divide it roughly in half. If the line is closer to the heel than the toe, or vice versa, the foot is not balanced.

Finally, view the horse from each side—you're not looking at balance here, but rather at the alignment of the horse's pasterns and hooves. The slope of each pastern should match the slope of the front of the corresponding hoof. There is no such thing as perfect conformation, and many small conformational flaws are acceptable and cause no problems to the horse. It is well recognized that trying to correct such natural imperfections by shoeing leads to lameness and shortens the horse's useful life.

The balance of the hoof needs to be correct whether or not the hoof is shod. With a shod foot, you also want to look at the placement of the shoe: it should be just a touch longer than the foot is in back to support the horse's heels. (If it's too far back, though, a front shoe is in danger of being grabbed and pulled off by the horse's hind foot.)



The newly trimmed front foot is on the right; the untrimmed foot is on the left.

TIA NELSON, D.V.M.

A shoeing job should look neat and tidy, although you don't want your farrier rasping the outside of the hoof any more than is necessary to smooth the clenches (the portions of the shoeing nails that protrude from the hoof wall). Chips or flares in the hoof wall should have been removed during the trimming, although old nail holes often remain. The clenches should be in a neat line, and the nails should all be on the half of the foot closest to the ground. Nails placed behind (toward the heel) the widest part of the hoof restrict the hoof's natural expansion in the heel area when it hits the ground.⁶¹

Your farrier should be shaping the shoe to the foot, not the other way around. Rather than rasping away hoof to make the shoe fit, he should reshape the shoe as necessary to accommodate a properly balanced hoof.

If something about your horse's shoeing doesn't seem right to you, ask your farrier about it. It may take several shoeings to change the balance of a horse's hoof, and you might be looking at a work in



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*Holding your horse's feet in your hands is a good way for him to learn to stand for the farrier.
(Restraining the horse in crossties is safer than looping a lead shank, as pictured.)*

progress. Remember, though, that some aspects of foot conformation can only be managed, not “cured.”

If you're seeing consistent problems in your horse's hooves that are not improving, or if your horse is often sore after trimming or shoeing, it might be time to look for a different farrier.

Finding a Good Farrier

Farriers are not required to be licensed or certified. Anyone with an anvil and a rasp can hang out a shingle and claim to be a farrier. You should never choose a farrier by picking a name out of the phone book or just grabbing a business card off the bulletin board at your local tack shop without doing any other research. Your horse's hoof care is much too important to entrust to anyone other than a competent, experienced professional.

Several national farrier organizations offer voluntary certification at several levels. These certifications require passing a written as well as a practical exam. There are also many horseshoeing schools around the



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This thrushy foot is also overgrown enough to make the horse lame.

country that teach farriery. If a farrier has some educational credentials, you have some assurance that the person is proficient at his craft.

Although education and certification are helpful, what really matters is how well the farrier does with real-life horses. Ask your veterinarian and/or trainer for recommendations, or call the large-animal equine hospital that serves your area. You may find that the highly recommended farriers in your area are so busy they can't take on new clients, but ask if there are other up-and-coming farriers in the area whom they would recommend. Most farriers do an apprenticeship before branching out on their own, so it's possible that an in-demand farrier has several protégés also working in the area.

A conscientious farrier is gentle with your horse, taking care not to unduly stress each raised leg or giving a stiff older fellow a break mid-trim if he needs it. If your horse does not stand well for trimming or shoeing, you need to work on this skill with him and train him to be a better "patient" for your farrier. If he is normally well behaved but suddenly



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The terrible result of the failure to trim the hooves of a chronically foundered (and in this case starved) horse is hoof growth abnormalities, often termed “elf slippers” due to the curled up toes.

objects to having one foot in particular worked on, he may be stiff or sore in that leg, or he may object to the way the foot is resting on the farrier’s leg. Regardless, you want to have a well-mannered horse available for your farrier to work on. Otherwise, you’ll quickly find that farriers do not return calls from owners whose horses tried to trample them on the last visit!

A farrier is in a very vulnerable physical position when working on your horse and should not be expected to tolerate misbehavior. Any discipline meted out should be appropriate, however. If you think your farrier is too rough or too harsh, or if your horse seems apprehensive about being shod, it might be time to look for a new farrier.

Routine Care

Although farrier care is extremely important, the owner’s daily attention to a horse’s feet is an equally integral component in a hoof care regimen.

Part of your routine should be picking out your horse’s feet, removing any mud, gravel, or debris from each foot during daily grooming and after



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In the initial trimming of the horse in the photo on the previous page, some of the excess hoof has been removed from the near foot.

every ride. This is a good opportunity to inspect the bottom of each foot for any sponginess, malodor, or oozing of the frog (signs of thrush, the most common bacterial infection of the hoof); lodged stones; punctures to the sole; even skin lesions in the fetlock area (caused by fungi or bacteria and commonly known as mud fever, or “scratches”). Sometimes treatment is as simple as removing a stone wedged under the shoe or daily cleaning of the thrush-infected area with a stiff brush, followed by application of an anti-thrush preparation such as Thrushbuster or Kopertox. A puncture, however, requires immediate veterinary attention. Any injury or abnormality should be brought to the attention of your farrier or veterinarian.

This daily attention to your horse’s feet is also valuable in teaching him to stand quietly for the farrier. Your horse will learn that standing on three legs for foot care is a necessary activity.