

The Sad Truth of So-Called “Natural Barefoot Trimming”

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One of the main reasons people quickly give up on barefoot, or don't even try it, is due to the infamous “transition period” which follows taking a horse's shoes off. The other major reason that people give up on barefoot is because their horses remain ouchy – for years. This is great for boot companies, but not for owners and certainly not for the horses themselves.

The sad truth is that neither the uncomfortable “transition period”, nor the prolonged ouchiness are necessary. Both are the result of *over trimming*. Over trimming is the removal of material from the hoof which should not be removed. After 12 years of being a barefoot trimmer, and seeing lame and over trimmed horses, I still do not understand why trimmers continue to over trim. Why do they continue – year after year!!! – to accept lack of soundness as normal? To view it as acceptable?

If you were to survey trimmers you would hear how successful they are – how all the horses they trim are doing well (though many need boots). However if you were to survey the owners of barefoot horses you would hear that many are not happy or satisfied with their horse's level of soundness. There is clearly a huge disconnect.

Let me put it in black and white. If a horse is ouchy and needs boots, and has not been diagnosed with founder, navicular, or some other real hoof issue, and has been out of shoes longer than 3 months, the odds are that he or she is being over trimmed.

Dr. Hiltrud Strasser developed a theory regarding hoof trimming which is still causing problems for innocent horses. Her method involved trimming the bars completely down to the corium and cutting the heels far too low. Somehow, heel and bar trimming has become the norm.

Despite nature quite plainly demonstrating that heel trimming doesn't work – trimmers seem deaf to the truth.

The horse has existed for over 65 million years. His feet have served him well that entire time. He has the feet NATURE developed to carry him long distances at moderate speed, and short distances at high speed. He has developed feet that allow him to stand in snow without freezing. He has developed feet to carry him over any terrain. In short he has developed feet *on which his life depends*. In order for a horse to be healthy, his feet have to function as nature intended – and his feet function in very specific ways.

We all understand and respect that the horse's digestive system is very specific in its function. Why, when it comes to the feet, do we insist on fighting nature and trying to impose human ideas on them?

Compare the images of the hiking boot with its sole – and without. If you went hiking on rocky terrain, which boot would you want to wear?

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How would you like to wear the boot on the right in the terrain shown in the photo below?



Does the word “OW” come to mind?

Then why do we force this situation onto our horses?

I have a new email client and I was explaining about the heels to her via email. She sent me the following image after she had an Ah Ha moment. I give her high marks for getting it so quickly – some people never do.



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She saw with new eyes that her horse had a whole foot before she trimmed. And that she cut off parts he needed. Below is what she had to say.

“OMG you are right! Look at the attached photo. It is a trim I did on the same exact hoof in November 2012. See how nice and wide it is before the trim? Then look at the after trim, I took his heels down to sole level, the entire hoof is at sole level, pretty much cut his bars out. geez it looks like it hurts. I am so glad I found you.”

[Note: This appears to be a different foot but it is not. The owner used an angle grinder and trimmed the frog. The owner deserves thanks for allowing these photos to be used so that people can see what over trimming does.]

Below is the foot of an Arab gelding who had been ouchy for 3 years with conventional barefoot trimming. The photo was taken 6 months after starting the HGM trim, and only days AFTER completing a 25 mile endurance race, totally barefoot. He also trained completely barefoot. The foot looks very like the foot above left. It shows what a hoof is supposed to look like if it is to function for the horse.



As you can see, 25 miles of hard riding (including 5 straight miles of gravel and 4 miles of pavement, 25 miles in 3:29 hours*) did not take off much material.

[* the record of this ride is available at www.aerc.org. Click on AERC Records >> Ride Results. The ride was in April 2013 in Indiana, the Chicken Chase I & II, the first 25 mile ride listed. Horse is Ace, Owner is Sharon Knight. The record shows that 52 horses started, 43 finished, and that Ace came in 12th.]

What is my point? If hard riding took off almost nothing, why do trimmers take off way more? For Ace's foot to look like the hoof on the right at the beginning of this article – how many miles would he have had to travel? A thousand? In reality, if that much material had been removed from Ace's foot it should be considered an INJURY – not *trimming*.

Horses are supposed to have *feet*. Not *stubs*.

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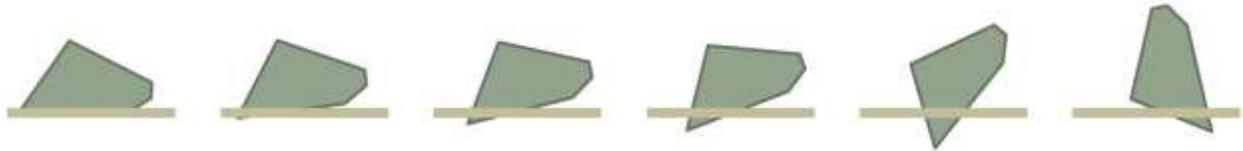
I raise this issue constantly. Why is it that trimmers are so eager to CUT the foot off, and so resistant to the idea of allowing the foot to be truly natural? The truth is that “natural” barefoot trimming as practiced today is far from natural. It is completely unnatural!

If people just stopped to really think, they would realize that, naturally, the heels do not get a lot of abrasion. The heels are supposed to hit the ground first. After they hit the ground, the rest of the foot quickly lands as well. As soon as the hoof begins to break over, the heel is immediately lifted off of the ground. The toe is the part of the hoof that gets the most abrasion, as it must describe an arc in order to be lifted up.

The heels land and then are lifted off the ground. Clearly this is little action.



The toe lands and then describes an arc – experiencing abrasion.



Natural trimming should mimic what happens, therefore most trimming should be done at the toe. Unfortunately logic has nothing to do with most barefoot trimming, and the exact opposite is what occurs. The heels are constantly over trimmed and therefore the horse is constantly ouchy – or worse.

Taking off the shoes

If the hoof is handled correctly when the shoes are removed, ouchiness can most often be avoided. However, this is where the barefoot trimmer is often most eager to get to work! The urge to “fix” the foot is very strong and many lifelong barefoot problems start right here.

When the shoes are first taken off, nothing else should be done to the foot. Literally. Depending on what the hoof condition is, the toe can be very lightly beveled, but that is ALL. Leave the foot alone to handle the transition. It will.

Human nature is to *do* something, and this is a grievous error when it comes to the newly unshod hoof. The foot needs time to adapt to what is a very different condition from the one it has been experiencing. It is not ready for a trim. I advise waiting at least 3 weeks before trimming the newly de-shod hoof. (I can hear everyone screaming as they read this – “but the hoof needs our help!”)

Yes it does, it needs us to leave it alone to gradually get rid of what we are so eager to cut off.

Below is evidence that the foot absolutely knows how to handle this. And for those who disagree – on what basis do you disagree? Have you ever *tried* it? The argument that the hoof must be trimmed is no

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more valid than a child’s argument that vegetables taste bad. Especially the ones that he’s never put in his mouth.

I have an email client who is a trainer. She takes her clients’ horses barefoot (how awesome is that!) and yet she needs them to be sound and rideable – or her clients won’t be very happy. Most recently she sent me photos of a new horse just after she took off the shoes. Bless her heart – she did nothing, she waited for instructions. My instructions were to bevel the toes very lightly, as they were so forward, and to do nothing else for 3 weeks - just to let the horse handle it.

Below you can see the results.



I show the sole view first, because if you look at the 5/28 photo and the 6/17 photo there looks as if there has been almost no change. There are some visible changes to the bottom of the foot - bars are higher, the sole has moved up – leaving the bars and heels above it (NO the heels have *not* grown), the frog has improved slightly. The significant changes are not really visible. The post trim shot shows that the heels have been taken down to 1/4 inch above the sole, exfoliation of the sole actually took off bars that were dead (you can see there are no trim marks on the bars), and most of the trimming was at the toe and on the sides.

The following photo shows how much trimming the hoof did on its own between 5/28 and 6/17. While the wall height looks the same from the solar view, it is now very apparent that is not the case.



On 5/28 the nail holes are clearly visible. On 6/17 the wall has broken off (at its own pace) down to the nail holes – almost an inch. It’s clear that the toe was unable to trim itself and so the hoof angle is off. The post trim shot shows that beveling the wall and toe has adjusted the angle.

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This foot is pretty typical of shod feet. Unbalanced, too long, flared. I like it because it is real and shows how virtually any foot is capable of self-trimming to some degree – a much larger degree than people credit. After 3 weeks out of shoes, and left to its own devices – the hoof has rebalanced itself quite a bit. The hairline is straighter, the toe is not so flared. After the trim, the hoof is well on its way to being a healthy normal foot. All without trying to override nature completely and force the foot into a “perfect” shape.

How is this better than a trimmer just cutting things off and making the foot “look” pretty? This horse was sound and rideable the entire time. No training time was lost. Really think about that. Sound. Rideable. In training.

Below is what the trainer had to say:

“Hi. It has been 3 weeks since I took the shoes off & just beveled the toes back. He has been ridden with no signs of soreness (in indoor arena).”

Shouldn't that be the norm? Why should people settle for less? Why should horses be subjected to a manner of trimming that leaves them sore?

The Bottom Line

In nature horses' feet are trimmed by the ground. The ground doesn't micro-manage, the ground doesn't measure, the ground doesn't try to force its ideas onto the hoof, the ground is passive. In nature a horse would have to travel an incredible distance to take off anywhere near as much hoof as trimmers so casually remove. A natural trim listens to the foot, understands how the foot *really* works, and respects the power of 65 million years of nature in handling things.