

Institute for Barefoot Equine Management Ltd.

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NO SHOES: THE TRANSITION SHOD TO BAREFOOT

In the interest of their horses' health and welfare, more and more horse owners are turning away from the traditional horseshoe. A successful transition from shod to barefoot, however, depends on a certain amount of knowledge and specific conditions to enable the horse, after a time of transition, to be ridden or driven over any terrain without problems

For most horses, the transition from shod to barefoot means some amount of stress and discomfort. Not only do they have to grow accustomed to a new way of movement, they must also contend with changes in the shape of the hoof, the corneal coffin joint and the joint ligament. The discomfort or lameness in the period after the shoes have been removed are NOT due to excessive wear of the hoof; with the few hours of daily exercise most horses get, this is not a danger.

THE REASON FOR THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED AFTER REMOVING THE SHOES IS THE HEALING OF A DEFORMED HOOF, ALTERED FROM ITS NATURAL, PHYSIOLOGICALLY SOUND SHAPE.

Two hundred years ago, the English vet Bracey Clark already stated that a hoof, AFTER ONLY A SINGLE YEAR OF SHOEING, becomes deformed, ie. contracted.

How severely the deformation of a shod hoof is depends on several factors. Among these are: how long the horse was shod, what type of shoe was used and at what intervals the horse was shod, the type of work it was used for, and whether, as a young horse before its first shoeing, it had good conformation and sound hooves.

However, even an unshod hoof can, through incorrect hoofcare, lack of exercise, drying out, and lack of varied terrain, become considerably altered from its normal, functioning form, and present problems without ever wearing away too much horn.

In a deformed hoof, the shock absorbing mechanism cannot function as it should. This results in pressure, crushing and inflammation inside the hoof--which the shod horse does not feel since, as a result of the reduced blood circulation caused by the shoeing, the hoof's nerves are numbed. The unshod horse, however, can clearly feel the discomfort from pressure or infection, and therefore goes short or even lame, especially on stony ground.

Deformed hooves must be healed in order to relieve the horse's suffering, as pain-free movement is only possible with healthy hooves.

BUT A CRIPPLED HOOF DOES NOT HEAL BY ITSELF, JUST BECAUSE THE SHOE HAS BEEN REMOVED.

Even boots are not the answer in such a case: with them, a horse with deformed, crippled hooves can walk reasonably well for years, without any healing taking place.

After the removal of the shoes, it is essential that deformed hooves be professionally trimmed (by someone who understands about the NATURAL HOOF) once a week, for about a quarter year, in order that the hoof and the coffin bone regain their

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natural, healthy, physiologically correct (and functioning) shape. This reshaping process, understandably linked with some inflammation and pain, can take weeks or months, and for severely deformed hooves even a year or longer (in such a case it is advisable that the treatment take place in a clinic for the first few months). The transition period is necessarily a time of restraint for the rider; he must make allowances for the horse. It would be unrealistic to ask for the same performance during the changeover period as while the horse was shod. Anyone who is not prepared to take all these things into consideration would be well advised not to attempt the transition to barefoot.

Moreover, success can only be expected when, at the same time, the living conditions of the horse are optimal. Providing this flight animal with freedom of movement around the clock (through an open stall with paddock, allowing the horse to choose whether it is outside or in), is an essential prerequisite for the successful healing of deformed hooves and the transition to barefoot.

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