

Performance Hooves: Making the transition to barefoot

It goes without saying that all horses are born barefoot, so why can't we just keep them the "natural" way? Well, that would be fine, just so long as we never want to ride or work them in more demanding circumstances. The problem for the modern domestic horse is that living out at pasture, or in a stable with mats and soft bedding, does not require very strong feet. But then we ask the horse to work on a completely different surface, even tarmac or stony tracks, while adding about 20kg extra load to each foot while we're at it. Wild horses' feet just don't have to cope with sudden changes like that. By the way, it's a myth that all wild horses have good feet. In fact, the closer their environment is to that of domesticated horses, the weaker their feet tend to be.

Even with good trimming, unless we give our horse the environment and conditioning work that he needs to develop and maintain strong performance hooves, he is unlikely to be able to cope with big workloads, roads or stony tracks without his feet getting sore. Bearing in mind that shoeing weak feet instantly adds about 3 points to the usability score, it's easy to see why metal shoes appeared in the first place. Of course there are exceptions to the rule. A horse with genetically strong feet, capable of a usability score of 8/10 in an ideal environment, is still likely to score a 5 even if just kept in a field with nothing more than pasture trims from the farrier. But the reality for the vast majority of our horses, unfortunately, is that they will drop to a 3 or less in these circumstances, a score that would barely be good enough for schooling on a soft surface.

Why take the shoes off?

While adding shoes artificially increases usability in the short term by providing extra structural stability, it's important to understand that shoeing does nothing to promote the strength or quality of the underlying tissues of the horse's foot and hinders their growth and development in the longer term.

If you are considering taking your horse barefoot - and there are many good reasons for doing so - I strongly advise you to think carefully and do your research before going ahead. Compassion without understanding can result in terrible pain for the horse.

If you do decide that barefoot is the way for you, a successful transition is not just a case of taking off the shoes and turning the horse out in the field. This approach can be disastrous, resulting in flare, cracking and rampant infections.



[Caption: Simply removing shoes and hoping for the best resulted in flare and severe cracking]



[Caption: The same foot after four months' ideal care and conditioning]

Making the transition can be easy or hard, depending on the state of the horse and level of knowledge, commitment and preparation of the owner. If your horse has very bad feet, there is a lot you can do to make the process easier. Even if your horse has good feet, there may be times when you will question yourself. As the owner, you need to be well-informed, have supportive people around you and be well prepared, both mentally and in terms of the environment your horse is going to live in during the transition process.

BE CRYSTAL CLEAR ABOUT WHY YOU ARE DOING IT.

Some bad reasons for going barefoot:

- It'll be cheaper than shoeing (it isn't)
- It'll be easier than shoeing (it isn't, at least not in the early stages)
- I won't have to bother about hooves, the EP or trimmer will take care of everything for me. (They won't, but then neither does the farrier once the shoes are on!)

Some good reasons for going barefoot:

- To begin rehabilitation of hooves that have become weak or deformed
- Reducing wear and tear on the horse's legs and body
- Improved performance from the horse - more speed and better grip
- To help give the horse a longer working life
- The horse is not in work
- Reducing risk of serious injury if horses are living as a herd

What to do *before* removing shoes

- Get an EP to assess your horse's feet and your environment.
- Get the horse's weight under control – excess weight adds unnecessary stress to the feet
- Treat hoof infections, especially deep central sulcus (see article on Frog care)
- Get your horse ready for a CleanTrax soak. If necessary, get professional help to train your horse to stand quietly while wearing soaking boots. It usually doesn't take that much if done correctly and I can recommend someone who can help if required.

How to make the transition as easy as possible for your horse

It's essential to prepare a foot-friendly environment for your horse. Feet straight out of shoes are very vulnerable to bruising. Loose stones on concrete or tarmac are just about the worst thing a weak hoof can stand on. So sweep up and, if necessary, put down old carpets over areas of gravel. Think about the rest of your horse's environment too. Will he have to negotiate stones to get to the water trough? Is the deep mud in the field gateway hiding sharp rocks underneath? If your horse has very weak feet he may have to wear hoof boots on every journey between the field and his stable.



[Caption: Hoof boots can be a great help in keeping your horse comfortable during the transition]

Prepare a dry, hoof-friendly area where you can thoroughly pick out your horses feet, treat them daily for infection as necessary and leave them to dry slowly for several hours.

Identify or prepare a range of surfaces for hoof conditioning work. A bare minimum is smooth concrete or tarmac where your horse can be hand-walked daily. If your EP recommends hand walking in Sole Mates pads, you will need a way to keep the pads on, either with duct tape or, more conveniently, with boots. Check that the journey to the conditioning surface does not involve walking over stones or be prepared to use boots each time.

If your horse's feet are very weak and he lives in a herd, he may need to be protected from the other horses for the first couple of weeks as he will not be able to move away quickly without hurting his feet. A separate paddock with a good friend is ideal.

Are you prepared for your horse to be unable to work at his current level, perhaps for several months? Removing the shoes is a big change and even strong feet will need a few weeks to adjust. Transitioning a horse with poor feet requires a great deal of patience and it can be very upsetting to see him hobbling over surfaces on which he was previously apparently comfortable. It's very important to be clear about why you are doing this and stay positive about the outcomes, concentrating on your horse's progress and the end result, not any initial backwards step.

Be prepared for adverse reactions or comments from other people on your yard. This can be the most difficult thing of all to cope with and feels worst when the comments come from a farrier, vet or well-respected trainer. The best way to deal with unhelpful comments is knowledge. The more you know about your horse's feet, what you and your EP are doing and what you are working to achieve, the better.

What can I expect when the shoes come off?

The EP will assess your horse's gaits before shoe removal. He or she will then take off the shoes and use hoof testers to find out whether the horse is sore. EP's make 8 different tests on each foot, assessing toe, bar, heel, frog and joint sensitivity. This is an extremely important base marker, as any pain present now is due to weakness or even damage in the foot which was there with the shoes in place. Sadly, many horses do show soreness at this stage.

The EP will then trim the feet and re-assess the gaits. The good news is that we quite often see an immediate improvement, unless the feet are very weak. The EP will also take photos as a record of the starting point and make recommendations for treatments and daily conditioning.

Quite often the feet will become hot for the first few days. People in some branches of hoof care believe that this is a good indicator that "circulation has returned to the foot". Bear in mind, though, that increased circulation and heat can also be a sign of inflammation. If I hit my thumb with a hammer it will get pretty hot too! We find that in most cases the hooves return to a more normal cool temperature within a week or

two. Feet that feel hot should be a cause for concern, as should heat anywhere else in the horse's body. Monitoring the digital pulse in each foot can be a good indicator.

By taking note of the pulse before removing the shoes you will have a baseline to compare once the shoes are off. A stronger pulse is an indication of inflammation in the foot. If this occurs, the foot (or feet) should be protected from any further damage. Stop any conditioning work until the pulse has returned to normal for at least three consecutive days. Careful monitoring of the pulse in the early stages and extreme patience is the way to making good progress.

After that it's up to you to follow the EP's recommendations and, above all, stay tuned in to your horse. If things are going to go wrong, it usually happens at an early stage. Many horses that are taken out of shoes with insufficient knowledge or preparation are back in shoes within a month. If you have any questions or even the smallest suspicion that all is not well, contact your EP for help. There is a lot of knowledge available to you and a lot of happy horses and owners out there who have gone before you.

Jo Clark specialises in rehabilitating horses with poor quality feet and is a qualified Equine Podiatrist, trained by KC La Pierre.

For further information, please visit her website at www.performancehooves.co.uk