

By Darlene Craven, Freelance Writer

Remember the feeling of running through the soft green grass of summer in your bare feet? There's a growing movement within the equine industry that advocates letting horses enjoy the same pleasure.

Jumping, racing, cutting, reining, trail riding and even dressage—barefoot horses are doing it all. You've probably already heard the buzzwords: "wild horse model," "mustang roll" and "natural balance trimming." And if you've been around the horse business for any length of time, you know that asking 10 people about barefootin' will get you 10 different opinions.

Scads of Internet sites, hundreds of articles, books, videos and clinics are dedicated to the barefoot horse movement. Veterinarians, farriers and trainers are advocating the natural horse, and decades of extensive research shows that it can be a valid resolution to hoof health issues.

Ancient Times—Ancient Methods

The famous fourth century Greek general, Xenophon, wrote this: "the same care which is given to the horse's food and exercise, to make his body grow strong, should also be devoted to keeping his feet in condition."

To that end, he ordered that the horses on which his armies depended be exercised regularly on specially built cobblestone areas in the paddocks. Iron shaped like a horse's hoof also was used in early Christendom. Roman armies formed a crude protection for their valuable mount's hooves when their enemies started using the caltrop, a nasty spiked metal "jack" strewn about the battlefield to stop mounted attacks.

As villages and towns grew, horse-using migrated from the fields to the rough and rocky cobblestone streets. Tradesmen first used rawhide wraps to protect their business partners' feet, giving way to metal as blacksmiths began to ply their trade.



A horse's hoof that is specially trimmed to function without an iron shoe.

“Eloquent writers on both sides of the shoeing debate appeal to our sense of logic in their arguments. For the conscientious horse owner, it is difficult to reach a correct conclusion when both sides are so passionate and convincing. Logicians might point out that both sides post valid arguments in that their conclusions follow logically from their premises, but it is the soundness of the arguments that is in question.”

Robert M. Miller, DVM and Rick Lamb

“The Revolution in Horsemanship and What It Means to Mankind” The Lyons Press, 2005

Back to Basics

The most common denominator for barefoot horses is a healthy hoof. Dr. Tomas Teskey's blunt statement sums up the barefoot movement: "What we do know is that when steel contacts a horse's foot, damage occurs."

An extreme opinion, yes, but Dr. Teskey can walk the walk. The trend is progressing toward natural hoof care as an active choice rather than a last ditch effort.

The "wild horse model" studied by Jaime Jackson, a Georgia farrier and self-professed "barefoot goofball" and Gene Ovnicek, a veteran farrier and dedicated researcher in Colorado, has concluded that horses in their natural herd environment, with plenty of room to roam, good forage and water, can grow and keep healthy hooves. Wild horses roam where the sidewalk ends, and over the centuries, their hooves have adapted.

Though there are many pampered equines grazing wide open spaces, most horses live in confinement. They stand in a stall in the muck, are ridden once a day or once a week, and get too much sweet feed. Yanking shoes and expecting immediate results isn't the answer.

"Barefoot hoof care is more than just taking the shoes off of your horse," said John R. Graves, a farrier turned AAN-HCP-certified practitioner from Pueblo, Colo., quoted in *Paint Horse Journal* in February 2007.

To promote healthy hooves, it is the owner's responsibility to ensure that his horse gets plenty of exercise, good nutrition

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