

Footnote

“Horses were first shod before we understood the physiology of the hoof and certainly before we had our current level of technology. Today’s compounds have far greater shock absorbing features than metal. If you take a metal shoe and bang it against a rock, you will feel the reverberation all the way up your arm. Horse boots can absorb concussion, rather than transmit it.”

Carole Herder, President
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and the all-essential barefoot trim.

The “mustang roll” refers to a natural barefoot trim that promotes increased traction and durable hoof structures. Noting increasing lameness among his clients, Ovnicek developed “natural balance trimming” that promotes leverage and hoof wall growth for proper shock absorption. More than 60 percent of his clients have chosen to keep their horses barefoot—a strong indication that the practice is gaining credibility. He also has developed a shoeing system that emulates the natural foot by putting the shoe onto the foot where it will function best.

Another consideration that has boosted the idea of keeping horses barefoot is cost. A full set of shoes these days can run \$150 or more, depending on the type. Specialized shoes made of aluminum or barium can run even higher. Customization or special padding runs up the farrier’s bill as well.

Nuances from the Notables

Your customers are listening to lots of learned folks. Pat Parelli, a preeminent advocate of Natural Horse-Man-Ship, promotes a natural barefoot state and his instructors are dedicated and enthusiastic to the letter. Julie Goodnight notes that terrain and use should be considered as well. She points out that horses in the arid Rocky Mountain region develop pretty hard hooves and can tolerate barefoot trail riding if their feet are conditioned.

Richard Shrake, a 41-year veteran in the show horse industry, says that new methods must be time-tested before they are endorsed. The idea of barefoot horses competing may sound wonderful, but are they winning? When a barefoot

horse wins something big, Shrake maintains, the trend will change for the good.

Most farriers are dedicated to keeping the horse sound, whether with a proper barefoot trim, front shoes or a complete set.

“Horseshoes aren’t good or bad—they just are. It’s all in the application,” said John Hilderbrant, president of the Rocky Mountain Farriers Association. Hilderbrant maintains that use, environment, exercise and nutrition should determine whether a horse is shod.

“If hoof growth exceeds no other soundness issues, then there is no reason to shoe a horse,” he said. He notes that as his business has grown, so has a proportionate amount of shoeless horses in the stable.

Breeds, Borders and Beyond

Different breeds, different standards. A Rocky Mountain Horse, genetically inclined toward hard feet, rarely wears more than front shoes. On the other hand, the American Saddlebred wears weighted shoes to accentuate its signature high-stepping gait.

The Mustang is used to being barefoot but the Haflinger usually must have shoes to compete. Those famous draft horses, Priefert Equipment Company’s Texas Thunder Percheron team, wear specially fitted barium shoes with leather pads to protect against miles of hot asphalt. They do spend at least part of the year playing hop-skip-and-go-naked in their native Texas pastures.

Reining horses need shoes to slide and cutting horses need shoes for traction. Endurance riders are going the distance without shoes and urban police forces are mounting barefoot Morgans and Quarter Horses. An Amish horse, valued and treasured, is unshod as it plows the fields but gets to put on shoes for town visits.

There’s no hard and fast rule. Barefoot is often a preferred state but the horse’s comfort and health should be paramount.



A hoof that is traditionally shod with a metal shoe and horseshoe nails keeping it in place.