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Where The Rubber Meets The Road: Alternatives to Metal Horseshoes

March 14, 2006 – Our purpose is to discuss the application of horse boots as an alternative to metal shoes. The idea that horses can be barefoot is not new. Horses have a long history of barefoot performance and have carried fully armoured, full sized men into battle. They have been used for fieldwork, war and performance in their natural barefoot state.

When the horse's weight descends, the hoof is sandwiched between that load and the ground. It is meant to spread apart upon weight bearing, with the coffin bone dropping down like a trampoline. This is the natural shock-absorbing feature of the hoof. The walls spread apart (up to 10mm from side to side) and the sole draws flat. Horses with this elasticity and hoof function are most adequately prepared to absorb shock and concussion. When metal is nailed in all around • how does the hoof perform its duty? Where is the shock absorbed? Perhaps it's absorbed in the sensitive tissue of the hoof or further up the structure of the leg. Perhaps the market proliferation of products containing glucosamines, MSM and anti inflammatories are really an indication of our inadequate understanding of the shock-absorbing features of the hoof. Perhaps if we allow our horses to function naturally they would not be showing increasing symptoms of pain and discomfort.

The metal shoe is nailed on when the hoof is in the air. It is at its smallest, most contracted shape. It is not weight-bearing or in movement, and is held firm in this state by the metal - no expansion and nowhere for the coffin bone to descend. As the coffin bone pushes down under the horse's weight, it is then bruising the solar corium which cannot expand and draw flat to get out of the way.

Can Navicular Syndrome be the pain caused as a result of the bruising of the solar corium? Is it the pressure from the descending coffin bone or is it the damaged bone that is painful? Under X-rays the bone is shown to be deteriorating. These enlarged areas and lack of bone structure could be a result of congested blood, and lack of circulation causing the arteries to swell. When the arteries swell, can they then push against the bone and be the cause of deterioration to bone spongiosa? Coupled with the stress on ligaments and tendons, and the irritation of connective tissue, pain results. The horse is diagnosed Navicular. We have bar shoes applied and the horse walks off sound. We think the bar shoes are a fabulous cure for Navicular, when what is really happening may be just the opposite. Even less circulation! In a normal horseshoe shape the frog still was making some contact with the ground and blood was flowing through. Now with a bar across the heel circulation is further limited. The horse walks off sound, because he cannot feel. His hoof is numb and the damage continues.

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, so that the sensitive Lamellae of the hoof is not compromised but supported. The main support system of the coffin bone can remain strong and integral when the high frequency vibration of impact on metal is not constantly jarring.

Circulation is imperative to the distribution of nutrients throughout the system. Healthy blood flow aids in prevention and facilitates healing. When flow is limited degeneration takes place. Encourage the blood to circulate with ease through the proper channels; carrying a host of nutrients; and you will have a healthy hoof. Allow the hoof to expand as it is meant to, and the strain to extensor tendons and lateral cartilage will be relieved. Support proper hoof function and alleviate the devastating results of ossification. Keep your horse barefoot for at least a portion of the year, use horse boots when you ride, and you will have taken the first steps in utilizing the fruits of technology towards a better understanding of our long time servant and companion. We now have an opportunity to re-examine the way we treat our horse's feet. Call your farrier in to discuss the possibilities. Your farrier should be your best friend as you will need him to trim and visit more frequently once your horse has fully functioning, growing and alive feet.

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