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Your Healthy Horse: The Barefoot Horse

March 14, 2006 – Many of us are happy to allow our horses to 'go barefoot'. We see the benefits of a more natural program. We don't like pounding nails into the hoof every 6 weeks. We understand that metal may not be the best composite to secure live tissue. Shoeing is expensive and good farriers require excessive love and adoration, but what choice do we have? If we consider pulling the shoes, our horses may well be lame. Then when we put the shoes back on, he trots off happily. What is the difference? How can some horses go successfully barefoot and others have no end of trouble?

There are many factors that contribute to the long-term success of a barefoot program. When a farrier comes to shoe your horse, he trims him flat and level, even and balanced. He removes the sloughing off dead tissue and makes the hoof look neat and tidy. He is aware of the shape of the frog, bars and sole but needs only to clean this up and get a clear picture. His job is to make sure the shoe goes on securely and will shape it to the trim he's done. The nails should not go through sensitive tissue and it all needs to look good, consistent and uniform. The only thing making contact with the ground is the metal shoe.

Let's talk about what happens when we don't put the shoes on. What happens when the trio of significant structures, namely the frog, bars and sole are not lifted by the metal shoe? What happens when the bars end up level with the wall? What happens when the frog makes contact before the walls? How does it feel when the sole makes contact with the ground at the same time as the outer walls? The sole's function should be secondary, not primary; passive, not active. So let's answer this simple question - it hurts!

A miraculous structure, the hoof supports the weight of 1000 pounds in motion. The walls expand and widen apart to draw the sole flat. With the sole's leveling downward towards the ground, the bone column is invited to descend. Now there is no bruising of the solar corium. Now shock and concussion are absorbed the way they were intended.

If the bars make contact at the same time as the wall, the expansion function is immobilized. The bar contact, does not allow the sole to draw out. Its position just keeps the hoof static, and the pressure of making this primary contact actually exerts upward on the internal structures. Our goal is to allow the hoof to do its job. That means it must function with mobility, elasticity and as a unit. One function cannot suppress another. Simply remind your farrier to pair out the bars so that they can function together with the sole. Ask for attention so that the sole does not make contact at the same time as the walls. Simple? Yes. Understood? Probably. Practiced? Rarely, because there is no need with a traditional metal shoe job.

The third party in our trio of significant structures is the frog. Although it can be quite malleable, often compared to the consistency of an overaged dairy product, it is tough and conducts a systemic symphony with the horse's most important organ: the heart! It's all about blood, nutrients and circulation. That's the key. We really don't want to compromise this gelatinous big cheese. The frog should at least not make contact with the ground before the walls do, and at best, be recessed to make secondary contact as the sole draws flat.

The most important factors in a successful barefoot program are proper hoof function and hoof mechanism; movement and exercise; hydration; hard ground; frequent trims tailored to the barefoot horse; and, last but not least, friends and socialization. Addressing all of these factors will help ensure that your horse is as close to its natural state as a domesticated friend can be.

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