

## The Barefoot Life

**If you are considering pulling your horse's shoes, or have already gone the barefoot route, three hoof care experts offer their advice.**

*By Marcia King*

You've decided to let your horse go barefoot but are receiving conflicting advice on how to best manage him. You thought you could just have the shoes pulled and let your horse go, save for the occasional trimming.

Before you decide to pull your horse's shoes for good, consider his living and working conditions. But some friends have given you a big, fairly complicated Must-Do list, culled from various sources, and now you're not sure what to do—which is no surprise to Walt Taylor, certified farrier, Albuquerque, N.M. Taylor knows a thing or two about hoof care: He's been a farrier since 1948, is the founder, former president and current secretary of the American Farrier's Association (AFA), and creator of the World Farriers Association. He says, "I am a bit nonplussed by all the fuss over this subject. It seems that we are making the proverbial mountain out of a molehill, in the worst possible way. When we intellectualize and extrapolate some of the most simple subjects, they become much more than they actually are."

To help you skirt those unnecessary mountains, Taylor, along with Lisa Simons Lancaster, who is a DVM and farrier, and Jeff Ridley, a certified journeyman farrier, give you practical advice you can use. Dr. Lancaster, of Eden Prairie, Minn., is the author of *The Sound Hoof: Horse Health From the Ground Up*. She has also collaborated with Robert M. Bowker, VMD, director of Michigan State University's famed Equine Foot Laboratory. Ridley, of Leighton, Iowa, has earned the AFA's Therapeutic Endorsement, a program that addresses strategies for horses with specific lameness problems.

### Barefoot or Not

The most important issue is, can your horse go unshod? If health and conditions are such that hoof wear does not exceed hoof growth, the answer is yes. If the hoof wears down faster than it grows, then you're either going to have to shoe your horse or alter the conditions that lead to excess hoof wear.

Good candidates for going barefoot are horses that: have sound, healthy, normal hooves have reasonably good conformation live and work on the same surfaces: If a barefoot horse lives on soft bedding 23 hours a day and is then expected to work one hour a day on hard terrain, he's probably not going to do well. But he might be fine if he works only in soft, even footing.

Dr. Lancaster explains the benefits of working and living on the same surfaces: "In the dry rocky terrain of Colorado, I had many clients whose barefoot horses were living in hard-packed dirt paddocks, and they were sound on the most rugged terrain."

In general, unlikely barefoot candidates are horses that: have poor conformation: Taylor cites conformation examples including severe to extreme anterior or posterior and/or medial or lateral imbalance, angular limb deformities affecting fetlocks, knees or hocks, et cetera. work extensively and/or primarily on hard, abrasive surfaces work on a surface that's different than their housing surface

There are exceptions to these rules, of course. Due to genetics or other unknown factors, some horses just cannot seem to tolerate going barefoot, even under ideal circumstances. And then there is the opposite: A few years ago, the late Emil Carre, former AFA president and certified journeymen farrier, recalled a Quarter Horse endurance mount he once owned. "By the time [the horse] was 23, he'd gone on eight 100-mile rides, and over 3,000 miles in National Trail Ride Association competitions, and that horse practically lived barefoot. We trained him four to six months a year barefoot. He had thick walls and thick soles. It was through genetics and breeding."

"There is no sure way to know ahead of time if the horse will do well barefoot," Dr. Lancaster explains. "Generally, owners curious about barefoot just go ahead and try it!" That said, prior to pulling the shoes, have your farrier or veterinarian examine your horse, as they might notice something questionable that you were unaware of.

If you can, wait until the off-season before removing your horse's shoes, Dr. Lancaster advises. "That way the horse has some time to adjust before being asked to perform," she says. "For horses that perform year-round give it a try any time, but be prepared to reduce the workload for a while."

Note that while some horses have no problem adjusting to being unshod (usually those that work only on soft ground), other newly barefoot horses can become lame. “Sometimes a perfectly sound horse becomes quite lame when the shoes first come off if the owner rides on hard-packed terrain; these horses will need a period of adjustment with a slow-riding, easy workload before the feet toughen up,” Dr. Lancaster says. “How long that adjustment takes is difficult to predict and depends on many factors—how much work they are getting, how different the terrain is from their living surface, in what condition their feet are in to start off with, whether the owner wants to do light pleasure riding or compete in a hard-terrain 100-mile endurance race. But keep in mind that some horses never adapt to hard surfaces. The feet look good, the horse is sound on soft surfaces, but [the hooves] just never get tough on the dirt roads or rocks.”

#### Maintaining the Unshod Horse

Numerous variables dictate how you will manage your barefoot horse, but here’s what you can expect:

**Altered farrier schedule.** “Frequency of farrier appointments for the barefoot horse depends on how the foot wears,” Dr. Lancaster says. “Some horses need to be trimmed more often (as frequently as every three to five weeks) because you can’t take as much hoof off; they become sore post-trim if more than 1/8 inch is removed.”

On the other hand, some barefoot horses do best with a longer interval of eight to 10 weeks between trimmings, according to Ridley. “Many barefoot horses can go a little longer because they are wearing off foot daily.”

“I have not found any need for different angles or other trim parameters in horses to be shod compared to those left barefoot,” Dr. Lancaster says.

Taylor agrees, as does Ridley. “Angles will remain the same, but the foot should be left a little a longer as it must maintain concavity, and vertical depth will be more conducive to staying barefoot,” Ridley says.

“Trimming the foot that is to be left without shoes should be more conservative than if the horse will be shod,” Taylor adds. “Extra length of wall, less frog paring and removal of less dead sole are all indicated. The hoof-pastern axis must be kept straight or slightly broken forward.”

**Seasonal adaptation.** Your horse’s trimming schedule—and even his ability to go barefoot—could change with the seasons. For starters, hoof growth varies under different weather conditions. Seasonal changes can also alter the terrain, thus affecting the feet.

This can be challenging if the horse has a tendency to be sore on variable terrain,” Dr. Lancaster states. “Many horses have trouble in the winter on uneven frozen ground, and may need shoes if they are expected to work on such ground. The wet spring and dry summers can also cause horses some foot pain if they work on ground much different than what they live on.”

Then, too, Ridley points out, a change in season sometimes brings a change in the work schedule, which, in turn, could affect hoof wear, trimming schedule, or the need for shoes. If hoof wear exceeds growth, it’s clear that the horse needs hoof protection and that may mean shoes.

**A different work schedule.** “Sessions may need to be altered when you first start a horse barefoot,” Lancaster says. “You have to give the feet a chance to adjust and to get used to the new demands. Keep in mind that it is not practical to remove shoes during the middle of competition season and expect the horse to continue the same level of performance.”

Even after a horse adjusts, you may sometimes have to back off your schedule if hoof wear exceeds growth; reducing the horse’s work or training allows the hoof capsule to regrow to a comfortable length, important for protecting interior sensitive structures, Taylor says.

**Monitoring your horse’s hooves.** “Wear on the hoof wall is the critical factor, in my opinion,” Taylor says. Watch for signs that your horse is beginning to react to too much wear or ground injury; signs include an unwillingness to move out, tender-footed or lameness, changes in his way of going, et cetera.

“Bare feet should be examined or trimmed by a competent farrier to determine if the hoof capsule is withstanding the wear that it is being subjected to,” Taylor suggests. “Look for collapsed or underrun heels, a broken wall that threatens sensitive structures, corns or sole bruises, or a torn or injured frog.”

#### Good Advice

So can your horse go barefoot? Perhaps the only way you'll know for sure is to give it a try. "Put the horse in the best conditions that you can provide, and evaluate whether or not he can be maintained barefoot," Ridley says. "It is great if your horse can stay barefoot—some can, some cannot."

Read more expert opinions on care of the barefoot horse.

Marcia King is an award-winning freelance writer based in Ohio.

This article originally appeared in the November 2006 issue of Horse Illustrated. [Click here to subscribe.](#)