



A Dozen Ways to be the Best Human in the Herd

Consider these the 12 Commandments for Better Horsemanship...

1. RELEASE is the reward.
2. Petting -- not slapping (SLAP, SLAP, SLAP, GOOD BOY!!!!...huh????), not feeding treats -- is the most appropriate, most understood way to convey your appreciation.
3. Initially, reward the slightest try.
4. When working a horse from the ground, watch the horse's feet, not his head. Your goal is to put the feet precisely where you want them. Looking at his head or eye won't help you do that, and it won't allow you to see when he gets it right. It also distracts the horse!
5. Don't drill him. If he gets it right, and your release is well-timed, he understands. If he gets it right, and you miss your release, or you simply ask again, he will understand that to mean he DIDN'T get it right. If you simply ask again and again and again, just to make SURE he gets it, he's likely to become dull and even resentful.
6. Try to make your requests have a purpose. There's nothing like pointless repetition to dull and sour a smart horse.
7. In any one session, working on any one NEW task, let "close" be good enough. You'll be amazed when, the next time you work on it, he'll have it all figured out.

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8. Be the most interesting thing in his immediate surroundings until he makes a habit of focusing on you. If he looks away, do something to make him look back...stamp your foot, say something, take just a little slack out of the lead rope to encourage him to look back.
9. Be incredibly, invariably consistent. There is no excuse for "letting him get away with it just this once". If you let him get away with it once, you've changed the rules, and there's no reason to expect him to understand exceptions.
10. If you're in a bad mood, if you're tired, if you don't have time to get it right, don't even put a halter on him. Chances are excellent you'll just set yourself and your horse back in your communication.
11. Have a horse rescued from a bad situation? Then treat him like every other horse in the herd. Don't coddle him. Don't make excuses for him. Give him exactly the same good deal you'd give any horse. Be incredibly consistent. Be reliable to a fault. Watch how quickly you no longer NEED to make excuses for him.
12. ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS end on a good note. If the major breakthrough you wanted doesn't materialize, set him up to succeed at some small task that he knows well, pet him like he's the most special horse on the planet, and try again tomorrow.

"One day, we took a road trip to a BLM holding facility. Some of the horses there had arrived from the wild only six weeks ago. We were eager for the opportunity to get some close-up photos of them, but they were not even remotely similar to their brothers and sisters in the wild. The care of the horses at the facility was great, by domestic standards; in fact it was exactly what I recommend at home. They were kept in herds, with clean, dry, hard packed footing, and were fed free choice grass hay. They had "plenty" of room and reason to move. I would consider it a perfect spot to rehabilitate a foundered horse. In spite of this, the glow, the vigor, the energy and the startling health was gone, and so were the perfect hooves..... After only six weeks of domestication in what I would consider a "natural boarding" situation, the spell was broken. There were nice horses there, don't get me wrong, but they were only shadows of their former selves. The magic was gone. This proved to me beyond all doubt that these "magical creatures" are not a "super breed" or a separate, genetically selected species. It is the diet, the environment and the movement alone that makes them so special."

From Pete Ramey's article, "Wild Horses"

http://www.hoofrehab.com/wild_horses.htm

Change What You Can

Are aggressive, invasive trimming techniques necessary for rehabilitation?

If the goal is a truly sound barefoot horse, and if the key to soundness is proper movement, is it ever a good idea to trim a horse in such a way that he is uncomfortable from the trim itself? A legion of hoof care professionals think not, and I wholeheartedly agree.

Dr. Hiltrud Strasser introduced and advocated an extreme trimming technique. While many of Strasser's ideas are indeed the precursors of a more progressive approach to hoof care, the idea that the horse simply must endure aggressive and invasive trimming in order to be rehabilitated to a healthy bare hoof came under fire early on. Ultimately, what we've learned is that the hoof can be subtly and gradually rehabilitated, while the horse stays comfortable and able to perform, instead of subjected to months of rehab in a sort of hoof care hospital with wall to wall stall mats.

We've also learned that not every hoof is a perfect model, and that that is okay...less-than-perfect hooves do the job just fine for a lot of horses. If the horse is moving properly, and the horse is comfortable and not creating undue stress on the inner structures of the foot or the joints of the leg, then a good, balanced trim respecting the internal structures is probably all the horse needs. In fact, it's probably unreasonable to expect some pathologies borne of long-term problems to ever completely change, and in these cases, it may be literally inhumane to try to effect a change. Sometimes, perhaps good enough is just that...good enough!

Of course, some issues cannot be tolerated, as they deteriorate the health of the hoof. Thrush, white line disease, white line separation, laminitis, coffin bone rotation, thin soles, high heels, flaring, poor hoof quality -- these things should not be tolerated! Diet imbalances as well are critical, and are easy to remedy. And movement is a definitive part of the equation.

Do everything right.

I harp on good nutrition, appropriate lifestyle and movement a lot. Here's why....

Nutrition

The traditional equine diet is loaded with carbs, sugars, and protein, but routinely lacks nutritional balance. Obviously, good nutrition is critical for overall health. But it is even more critical for healthy feet. Diet imbalances, nutrient deficiencies, and immune problems are magnified in the hoof. Horse people are finally implementing forage testing and diet balancing techniques that dairy farmers have used for decades, and seeing the dramatic difference in their horses' feet. Laminitis, white line separation, poor quality/chipping/cracking wall, chronic thrush, and white line disease all respond to fine-tuning the horse's diet.

It is amazingly easy and inexpensive to test your forage, and equally easy and comparatively cost efficient to either purchase the individual nutrients you need, or have someone formulate a custom blend for you. Buying a commercial blend with a sort of lottery

approach to balancing your horse's diet is just downright crazy in retrospect. And the results you'll see when you take the time to do it right are worth every penny and every minute you spend making it happen!

Lifestyle

In his feral state, the horse has been observed to prefer wide-open spaces with the advantage of panoramic visibility. Imagine, then, the psychological mess we make of our horses by housing them in box stalls. Add to that claustrophobia the physiological need for constant movement, and it's easy to understand why weavers, cribbers, pacers, and pawers prevail in even the most upscale facilities.

A horse can take approximately 4 walking strides to cover the length or width of a 24X24 pen. A proportionate "pen" for a man, then, would be 6X6. What about a cushy 10X10 box stall, which allows the horse 1.67 strides? Try a closet measuring 2.5ft each direction! To put that in perspective, the average cell in a U.S. prison measures 8 feet wide, 8 feet high, and 12 feet long.

The best evidence suggests feral horses, and horses in large enclosures, log between 12 and 20km per day. At a walk, 12km equates to around 6,500 steps. To log that many steps, the horse housed in a 24X24 pen would have to make 406.25 laps around his pen!

Beyond the confinement a small enclosure imposes, the inevitable impact on hoof hygiene cannot be ignored. Even if the pen is cleaned daily, the tidiest horse will still be forced to stand in urine or manure much of the day. No foot in the animal kingdom was designed to withstand such an unhealthy environment, and the horse's hoof is no exception. If you wouldn't stand in it barefoot all day long, neither should your horse.

Movement

By his very design, the horse is made for movement. It is an integral part of how his body operates on numerous levels. His spleen, his lungs, his heart, his feet are all designed to perform at their best in motion. The horse in motion is at his most efficient. The lungs operate as a bellows, drawing breath as the horse strides at a gallop. His spleen is activated by muscle contractions as the horse moves that squeeze extra blood from the spleen into the circulatory system. His enormous heart pumps the blood easily. And his hooves, expanding and contracting with each step, help pump that blood back again.

Movement also literally shapes the hoof; each step strengthens and builds the inner structures and moves blood throughout the incredibly complex vasculature in the hoof. Just as a muscle atrophies when it is underused, so does the hoof.

The lesson here? Choose your battles. Never go to war with the hoof itself. Change what you can change -- diet, lifestyle, hoof balance, hygiene. What you'll find, more often than not, is that **those** are the things that are the catalyst for bigger changes.

Fact or Fiction?

Some common farrier's fallacies dispelled....

White hooves.

"One white foot—buy him. Two white feet—try him. Three white feet—look well about him. Four white feet—go without him."
[1882 Notes & Queries 6th Ser. V. 427]

So is it true that white hooves are weaker? Absolutely not. In fact, white feet tend to be less brittle; the wall tends to have a waxier quality. That *might* make a white foot throw a shoe more easily, and hence the rhyme...but now that we know better than to shoe our horses, we don't have to worry about that, do we?

Quarter cracks.

Once a horse has a quarter crack, he will ALWAYS need to be shod.

The theory that a shoe stabilizes a quarter crack seems good right up until you realize that all of the nails holding the shoe on are in front of the crack. Everything BEHIND the crack is just landing on the shoe. Another fundamental problem here is that the trim incorporated to seat a shoe leaves the quarters flat to the ground, putting pressure on the very spot that needs to be relieved. Relieve the quarters, apply a good, balanced trim, take care to mitigate the growth of fungus or bacteria in the crack, and the crack will grow out.

Club feet.

Club footed horses will ALWAYS need to be shod.

Let's assume that we're talking about a horse that has severe coffin bone rotation, bone loss, and damage to the sole corium. If that's the case, the goal should be to encourage circulation, to protect the coffin bone, and above all, to protect the integrity of the laminae. Boots and pads, strict attention to diet, and careful trimming address all of those issues. Shoeing, on the other hand, inhibits circulation and stresses the lamellar connection.

Thoroughbred feet.

We've bred the feet out of Thoroughbreds.

Absolutely untrue. What IS true is that

1. Thoroughbreds tend to have a broad, flat coffin bone.
2. Racehorses are fed a very rich diet
3. Gallop training stretches the hoof capsule forward and encourages an underrun heel
4. Racehorses are often shod with a long toe and low heel with the belief that this increases the length of the stride
5. Racehorses have a higher than average incidence of laminitis. This can easily be attributed to mechanical separation caused by gallop training, toe grabs, and the peripheral loading shoeing creates, and to the practice of retiring Thoroughbreds to lush bluegrass pastures. (Aaaarrggggghhh...)

Support.

Horses need shoes for added support because we make them carry us around.

[Disclaimer: I feel a rant coming on here...] Oh, yeah. This makes all kinds of sense! Let's nail a piece of metal to what is essentially his FINGERNAIL and hang his weight AND ours from his laminae. Does that sound like support to you? That reminds me. Isn't there a form of torture where they rip your fingernails off of your fingers? (And then there's the one where they hammer wedges of wood under the fingernail...any parallel with the occasional stray horseshoe nail that misses the actual hoof wall?)

Have a hoof myth we can dispell? Send it along!

The Big Picture

The barefoot movement is not a stranger to criticism. We are, without a doubt, a bit zealous. Diet! Lifestyle! Hygiene! It's an all-or-nothing proposition. To a lot of casual onlookers, that makes us suspect. It's even off-putting – who do we think we are, mandating these drastic changes? But what we're learning is that because we've been shoeing horses for so long, we've quite literally ignored keeping the hoof healthy. And because we've let "sick" hooves become commonplace, we keep shoeing horses. While nailing on a metal shoe is the antithesis of keeping a hoof truly healthy, and is in itself contributing to many of the common hoof pathologies, it very often effectively masks many of the other problems created by our mistakes. Take a horse barefoot, and all of those mistakes are abundantly clear. Correct those mistakes, and not only do we eliminate the need for shoes, but the whole horse benefits.

For a while, a lot of us tried to take the middle ground, and work

with compromises. And without a doubt, taking the idea mainstream would be infinitely easier if it was as simple as pulling a shoe and applying a physiologically intelligent trim. But the results spoke for themselves. Today, my speech to potential clients is nothing short of adamant: you MUST address diet; you MUST provide a suitable lifestyle; you MUST address hygiene issues diligently; or I will not accept your horse on my roster...for the sake of the horse, for the sake of the barefoot movement, and for the sake of my reputation as a competent trimmer.

The debate, it seems, should never have been shod vs. barefoot. And the message anyone involved in barefoot hoof care should be delivering is the bigger picture: healthier and more appropriate horsekeeping. We learn more every day, and it's reasonable to believe we've only uncovered the tip of the iceberg. But the tip of the iceberg, as it turns out, is a complete and dramatic paradigm change.



The Thoughtful Horseman Barefoot Spokeshorse, Mixer, on the move in the big pasture.

The Thoughtful Horseman

Trimmer/Trainer: Maria Siebrand

Phone:

619-865-9614

Website:

www.thoughtfulhorseman.com

E-Mail:

maria@thoughtfulhorseman.com

About Maria...

My name is Maria Siebrand. A lifelong student of the horse, and a serious information junky, I reside in San Diego, California. With a background in the life science and software industry, publishing electronic submissions to the FDA, among other things, I have a bit of a bent for research. When my corporate career derailed after my third layoff in as many years, I realized it was time to turn my energy back to horses full time.

Ever dissatisfied with the stodgy traditionalist thinking still dominating equine training, veterinary care, and hoof care, I couldn't help but dig deep to find

better alternatives for the horses I knew and loved. The information - the knowledge - is out there, and it seems to be gradually percolating up through the stubborn layers of "but we've always done it this way". If I can help it perk just a bit faster, I will have served my beloved horses well.

I offer barefoot hoof care services, foundation training and horsemanship lessons in the greater San Diego area.

Interested? Please contact me at 619-865-9614 or maria@thoughtfulhorseman.com

We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

www.thoughtfulhorseman.com

The Thoughtful Horseman

P.O. Box 181472
Coronado, CA 92178

