

NEWSLETTER

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Bare is Bare, Right?

A look at some of the conflicting theories on barefoot hoof care.

On the surface, the idea of barefoot hoof care, or natural hoof care, would seem to be a pretty straightforward concept. But even as barefoot becomes more mainstream, different schools of thought on what constitutes a good trim collide. While we tend to all agree on the importance of providing a more natural lifestyle and diet as a catalyst to achieving these goals, and that the wild hoof is the soundest hoof possible, the actual trim promoted varies hugely. Some of the theories are nearly as opposite as shoeing versus barefoot, and range from very invasive, aggressive methods, to what has been called a “less is more” approach.

It's often confusing, both for aspiring trimmers and clients, when they hear some of the conflicting ideas. My personal approach is conservative, and largely based upon the principles set forth by Pete Ramey and the American Hoof Association. But I believe

understanding all of the ideas and theories can only help us improve our ability to create a sound, healthy hoof.

Here are just a few of the more glaring discrepancies between some of the more widely practiced barefoot hoof care strategies.

Heel Height and Hoof Capsule Length



While everyone agrees that a short hoof capsule is a healthier hoof capsule,

the methods used to create this differ dramatically.

The most invasive approach uses an ideal based upon the measurements found in the typical feral hoof, and seeks to trim every hoof to those parameters immediately.

The most conservative approach trims to live sole, and seeks to encourage the hoof to approach the wild-horse model gradually by emphasizing adequate movement.

It's important to consider where the internal structures sit within the individual hoof to decide which of these ideas you want to believe. Of great import is the fact that due to their sedentary lifestyle, and also the traditional hoof care most have been subjected to at some point, the bony column in many (and even most!) adult domestic horses sits lower in the hoof

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capsule than their feral cousins. Where those inner structures sit in relation to the ground is just as important -- if not more -- than the overall profile of the hoof capsule. The domestic hoof will necessarily be longer than the feral hoof to accommodate this distal descent while adequately protecting the inner structures.

Heel height is ideally low, to facilitate the frog making ground contact when the foot is at maximum load bearing. Palmar angle is believed to be equally as important; somewhere between ground parallel and 5° is generally accepted, even across diverse barefoot techniques, as appropriate. A negative palmar angle, or a broken-back hoof/pastern axis is widely accepted to put strain on the navicular region.

Finding the right heel height for each individual is a balancing act between keeping the horse comfortable, and working towards the ideal. Things like heel contraction take time to correct, and ideal heel height cannot be forced on a severely contracted hoof. In addition, dropping the heel too quickly can put unnecessary strain on the tendons in the leg. Patience is a virtue here.

The Bars

Some believe that the bars are the root of all evil. More invasive techniques will remove the bars routinely on every foot. Some schools of thought insist that the bars can become

impacted, putting pressure on the sensitive frog corium.

More conservative techniques will only trim bar that is laid over, bar that is crumbling, or bar that is weightbearing before the rest of the foot. There is a great and ongoing debate regarding bar that grows back quickly after it has been pared away: does this mean that the hoof needs it, and is quickly replacing the insult? Or does this indicate the the bar is indeed impacted, and simply “relaxes” as it is removed?

One thing is certain: on a well-balanced, healthy bare hoof, the bars tend to level off and find their own ideal height. They become a non-issue from a trimming standpoint.

Dr. Robert Bowker observed that the bars actually contribute to sole growth. With this in mind, it would seem to be a very good idea not to remove bar material in a foot with inadequate sole coverage.

Solar Concavity



There is no argument that a healthy hoof will have some degree of concavity, or inverted bowl-shape to the sole. Achieving that concavity is a subject of some debate.

The most aggressive techniques will use a hoof knife or even a Dremel tool to carve the sole into a concave shape.

Conservative methods allow the hoof to form this concavity naturally, by encouraging the sole to fill in and callous.

The bowl shape reflects the contour of the bottom of the coffin bone. With this understanding of what really shapes solar concavity, it's easy to imagine how quickly one could imbalance what should be a uniform thickness of sole across the bottom of the foot. In many instances, carved concavity flattens within days of the trim. Concavity that has been allowed to build naturally does not!

Frog Trimming

Some preach never, ever trimming frog. The theory is that the immature, uncalloused tissue is much more susceptible to thrush. Others sculpt the frog nearly to the corium with every trim, believing that this will eliminate the threat of infection. Who's right???

Both sides make good points here, to some extent. Rotted material must be pared away if the frog will ever regain health. Horses with excessive heel height grow tall frogs...perhaps this is the result of the foot attempting to get

the frog in contact with the ground, or perhaps the lack of pressure and release to the frog causes the excess material. In these cases, frog trimming is necessary.

On the other hand, horses with healthy frogs, with little or no heel contraction narrowing the central sulcus into a crease, really require little trimming. They shed old material as needed, and a little attention with the knife to make it easier to clean the collateral grooves with a hoof pick is probably all that is necessary.

The Big Picture

We need to trim the hoof because our horses cannot wear their feet enough in the average domestic situation. That doesn't just apply to the hoof wall, but also the bars and frog. And sometimes, sole material must be removed as well. The key is to evaluate each hoof, and each horse, on an individual basis. While a precise, cut-and-dried approach to trimming -- always take the bars, never touch sole, a hard number for heel height or dorsal wall length -- would certainly take the confusion out of the process, it is completely unrealistic in the real world.

The most successful barefoot hoof care professionals consider all of these ideas, and apply what most fits the horse and hoof at hand. Balancing the horse's ongoing comfort with desirable changes to the hoof capsule can be challenging, but in the end, the horse will thank you.

A United Front

A good friend of mine recently went to listen to one of the prominent proponents of barefoot hoof care speak. This particular speaker is a scientist, which clearly lends him some degree of instant credibility, and my friend and I very much agree that good science is the only way barefoot hoof care will ever reach the mainstream. Much to her surprise, his lecture failed to cite ANY research, and instead expounded on the techniques of just one barefoot hoof care methodology (read: guru), and even nipped around disparaging some others which are too closely similar to be maligned without...do I have to say it?...GOOD RESEARCH.

But the lack of well designed, well executed studies is really a separate problem from the thing that really bothers me about this story. The real problem is the damage that such a tunnel-vision, exclusive mindset rears on the barefoot, or natural, hoof care movement in general.

United we stand, divided we fall, right? Divide and conquer, isn't that the ages old battle strategy? Well, heck, folks, if we continue to fight amongst ourselves, we will:

- a) never, ever gain credibility in the mainstream,
- and
- b) exclude an awful lot of experience, and data, we need to fill in the gaps in our collective knowledge

I would like to strongly suggest, from my very humble standpoint, that we all recognize our common goal to better understand the natural hoof. Instead of this ongoing self-promotion and one-upmanship, a much more productive approach would be cooperation. A meeting of the minds. A profound willingness to put our damn egos aside, and learn from one another's mistakes and triumphs. After all, this isn't about someone's brand name trim. This is about the soundness of our beloved horses.

Or isn't it?????

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A Day in the Life...

Being a barefoot hoof care practitioner is a unique career. The very physically demanding aspect of wrestling everything from massive drafts with their dinner plate sized feet, to minis that don't quite make it to my knee, is the most obvious feature. But there's a lot more that goes into this work on any given day.

The basics are easy to sum up: you must be prompt to your appointments; deal diplomatically with umpteen personalities, both human and equine; be a skilled, empathetic, and patient horse handler; have a strong grasp of the finer points of equine nutrition; and be an excellent educator.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

This is a career where you simply never, ever stop learning. After a long day wielding rasp, nippers and knife, the evenings are for continuing your education, staying on top of new ideas, or researching issues you've not dealt with before. Then there's just running the business: keeping the books, ordering inventory, billing and banking.

Most weeks provide both the highs and the lows, the triumphs and frustrations. You celebrate the victories: the show horses winning unshod, the once unsound now happily logging miles on trail. And then you lose sleep over the horses that just won't heal. Sometimes you want to cry over cases that are impossible because their caretakers refuse to change diet, use boots and pads, administer hygiene, or provide adequate movement, and you struggle with the decision to continue their care or let them go to make room for new clients who might just get it all right.

There's traffic to deal with, scheduling to juggle, and never enough time in the day to help all of the folks who call or email. You eek out enough time to do all the right things for your own herd, horse and human.

There is also the constant controversy that dogs barefoot hoof care to field at every turn. Not just the traditional views, but the disparate barefoot camps as well. And don't think for a moment that you blindly forge ahead -- no, you carefully consider every statement, every question, every challenge, every contradictory idea. Because ultimately, this is about the horse, not your alliance to a brand name trim.



Through it all are the horses and humans (and dogs) you interact with every day, and that's what keeps you smiling through the gauntlet. Long sweaty days in the summer, muddy slick days in winter. But a welcoming nicker when the horses recognize you makes you smile. Horses that no farrier would continue to trim unседated now stand quietly for you with the

lead rope draped across their withers. Clients appear bearing hot coffee on cold mornings, or ice cold Gatorade in the heat of the day. And you marvel gladly at the happy horses in your care with marvelous feet that bear little resemblance to the shod feet of their neighbors.

And there are always shenanigans, and humorous happenings. Equine comedians provide comic relief. There are the tool swipers, snatching your hoof pick from your pocket no less than 6 times in a trim, or my own TWH gelding who will grab the rasp off the stand and wave it around, rather dangerously, with a mischievous glint in his eye. The grateful sorts, who offer to groom you while you work on their toes. The

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pranksters, like the young Andalusian who once snapped my bra strap like he knew exactly what he was doing. And I'll never forget the day a 3 foot gopher snake slithered blythely over my foot as I trimmed the left hind of an 18.2 hand young warmblood. (Fortunately, the warmblood was unaware of our scaly visitor!)



At the end of the day, this work tests just about every aspect of your stamina, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Exhausting, perhaps. But unbelievably fulfilling!

The Zen of Horsemanship

The idea for this article came to me minus the word "zen". At the time, I was merely contemplating the difference between allowing yourself to become angry, and projecting that anger towards the horse in order to elicit life, as opposed to removing the emotion from the exercise.

Imagine you're working with a colt. The colt is, let's say, pulling a foot away from you repeatedly.

What's a good way to change that behavior?

Put him to work.

But...and here's the important part...keep your emotion out of it.

Stay very calm and focused. Without any rise in your own blood pressure, in a very composed and focused manner, ask the colt to move.

I thought of the very calm direction I was envisioning, and the completely controlled demeanor, and I thought "zen".

According to <http://www.urbandictionary.com>, zen is defined as:

"a total state of focus that incorporates a total togetherness of body and mind. Zen is a way of being. It also is a state of

mind. Zen involves dropping illusion and seeing things without distortion created by your own thoughts."

It's no secret that horses pick up on our emotions. If we're nervous, so are they. If we're dreading some behavior, guess what, that's exactly what you get.

But I think this goes deeper than their sensitive sort of empathy, where your state of mind seems to be contagious. Much of that is, research suggests and I am convinced, simply their ability to sense your heart rate and smell the telltale hormones your body secretes.

This, on the other hand, is where trust is formed or broken. This is where you either project the attributes of a worthy leader, or you look like the bully in the herd. Anger conveys a volatile nature. And horses are peace lovers....they will actively seek out the most benevolent leader they can find. If we show anger, we're just that much less trustworthy.

And isn't anger just a distortion of the facts created by your own thoughts?

Temper is a difficult thing to control. But if you can begin to control it in your interaction with horses, I think you'll see a dramatic difference in your horsemanship. And imagine the possibilities for other aspects of your life....

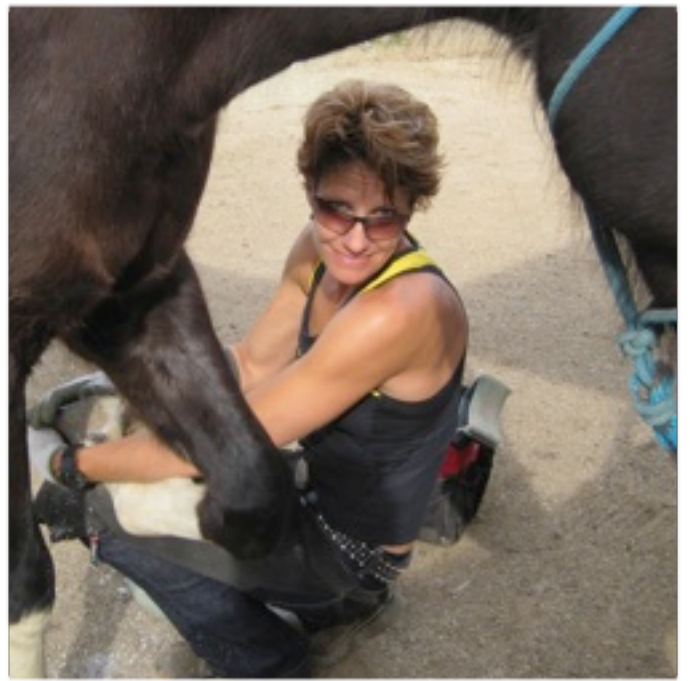
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About Maria Siebrand

& The Thoughtful Horseman...

With a background in the life science and pharma industries, and a determination to make life better for our domestic horses, Maria brings a science-based approach to horsekeeping, equine nutrition, and the field of barefoot hoof care. She offers barefoot hoof care services, nutrition consultations and diet formulation, and horsemanship coaching, as well as a line of supplements formulated to fit the typical Southern California equine diet.

Maria is available for clinics, lectures, and mentorships on barefoot hoof care and progressive horsekeeping practices.



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