Whether you enjoy horses as they roam around the yard, depend on them for getting your work done, or engage in competitive sports, keeping up with the latest in health advancements will help you enjoy them for more productive years.

#### INTRODUCTION

#### From the Ground Up

Grab hold of most any equine publication and you can witness the excitement building around research of the equine hoof. We have marveled at its simplistic design and intricate functions for decades, yet this latest, fresh information renews our respect and enthusiasm for keeping those hooves healthy. Such facts surrounding hoof health and disease give us an accurate perspective on what it takes to raise and maintain healthy horses; the hooves are a window to the horse's state of health. We are steadily improving in our horsemanship and making decisions which keep our valuable partners from harm, allowing us to enjoy them for more years than we thought possible. Although many equine authorities and enthusiasts have written and spoken about proper horse and hoof care, much of their advice has been dismissed until more recently. Discussions of sound hoof management practices are once again coming to the forefront in the equine sports industry because lameness issues are so common and devastating to so many top performance horses in the world. Careful study, observation and research is allowing us to have horses that run faster, travel farther, jump higher, ride safer and live longer. Sharing this valuable information with you is an honor and a privilege and is part of an ongoing dedication to help horses stay or become healthier.

### LOOK AT THE HORSES

... and Mules and Donkeys, too

Horses are healthier, stay more comfortable and work most efficiently when their bodies are in good athletic condition. When a question comes up about what kind of hoof management will be most beneficial, all we need to do is refer to what we know about their long history and why they have come to be shaped the way they are. We strive for this deeper understanding because we want horses to feel good, perform at their very best and work around us as

**66** Healthy horses can work over any terrain if conditioned on that type of terrain. **99** 

safely as possible. Many equine professionals have been taking a closer look at those domestic horses that never need their hooves trimmed. These "self-trimming" horses move about in their habitats, traveling anywhere from a few to 20 or more miles per day. The shape these hooves attain is a result of genetics, nutrition and movement. Being a horse means you've got a set of hooves and a body that are ready to run from birth—your survival depends on it. Being a horse means you thrive on a grass-based diet, high in fiber—munching grasses and browsing 15 to 20 hours a day is your normal buffet. And being a horse means that you're never a loner and you have a hard time standing still—proper development, healthy living and happiness are attained through movement and interaction in a herd with others of your kind.



## **Consider These Questions:**

1. If self-trimming horses attain a certain hoof shape through continual movement, can we mimic that shape using trimming tools?

2. Will this shape improve the health of horses that are unable to self-trim?

3. If self-trimming horses easily travel over rough terrain day after day, could our horses work comfortably and safely over both smooth and rough terrain by attaining similar hoof form and function?



This is exciting stuff to consider! The results are in, and I'm here to tell you that we definitely CAN achieve superior hoof health and soundness by modeling our hoof care management around the study of these self-trimming horses. Many horsemen and women have already embraced some of this basic information and are racing horses faster, taking endurance horses further and training performance horses at higher levels than ever before. Let's take a closer look at how we can ensure that our equine partners can achieve and maintain healthy hoof form and function for a happy existence.

#### WHY WE TALK ABOUT THE HOOF

...and How to Protect It

There is one main reason why we need to talk about trimming hooves: lack of movement. In captivity, most of our equine stock are unable to adequately wear down their hooves. Overgrown hooves can be painful and cause damage, so we intervene to keep them healthy. I think about using common hoof trimming tools to "mimic mileage" and sculpt hooves to approximate the shape of self-trimming hooves in order to complement their anatomy and physiology. We do well to treat each hoof on each horse as its own unique entity by respecting certain landmarks that exist on every hoof. We also appreciate that sculpting a horse's hooves with tools shapes them without the horse having to move, and recognize a big difference between self-trimming and sculpted hooves -- the presence of more calluses. We must leave a little extra hoof material on our horses to keep them comfortable on their less-callused hooves, while sculpting them to perform optimally for work. It turns out that trimming hooves

for barefoot performance is wildly different than trimming hooves to fit steel shoes. Should horses' hooves happen to wear down too much with work, it is most appropriate to use one of the many different hoof boot designs to protect their hooves rather than nailing on steel shoes which will damage their hooves, legs and bodies. Though iron, a thousand years ago, was utilized as the material of choice to prevent hooves from wearing down, we now realize that hooves are harmed when fixed in space due to the rigidity of metal, and fixed in time due to the normal growth of hoof no longer being worn away.



We also talk a lot about hooves due to the greatly increased incidence of lameness as horses reach adulthood. The onset of a variety of lameness problems coincides with reaching adult size and being shod. Instead of "needing shoes," horses are best served with form-fitting boots that honestly protect hooves from excessive wear, concussion and bruising. They also allow a horse to heal more quickly and completely from common hoof diseases such as laminitis and founder, navicular syndrome, quarter cracks and contracted heels—problems which are very often caused or worsened by shoeing. A hoof nestled comfortably inside a boot made of tough, elastic materials is free to expand and contract, pump blood normally and torque side to side with each step, whereas a shod hoof is unable to flex appropriately, receives damaging concussion from the cold steel, has



Hoof boots are made of flexible materials which protect and complement the elastic nature of the hoof.

altered circulation and loses feeling and traction. When a hoof is disallowed normal mechanical movements due to shoeing, forces of concussion and torque are passed off to joints and other structures higher in the limbs and body, which are neither designed nor able to adequately dissipate such forces-shrinking of the hooves themselves and damage to the horse's body is the predictable result. Horses enjoying a return to better health after years of shoeing are able to be comfortable and remain usable for work by quickly slipping on some hoof boots. Horses that are unshod, trimmed correctly and wear boots only when needed rarely develop severe hoof lamenesses at any point in their lives. Hoof growth in horses utilizing boots is remarkably healthier and stronger than growth that occurs while shod. Boots can also be taken off and on at will like our own shoes, allowing us to protect, monitor and treat damaged areas. "Corrective shoeing" may allow a horse to grow new hooves, but they are of such poor quality that the horse is unable to move about comfortably without the shoes, and certainly unable to perform any amount of work should one be lost. Steel shoes are very efficient at desensitizing the hooves, giving us the illusion of soundness. Horses quickly



become dependent and develop further problems in a cycle of damage that never seems to end. By the time a horse has regrown their hooves (utilizing boots when necessary), they are able to walk and work on their own feet, becoming honestly sound and in no need for the boots except for travel on rough terrain. We now know that rigid shoes are a treacherous liability for horses, severely altering their ability to perform and stifling the functions of the hoof to such a large degree that disease, disability and premature demise become predictable and inevitable. Utilizing boots for hoof to work for the horse, keeping them vital and healthy, allowing us to work with and enjoy them for many more years.

#### **GETTING TO KNOW THE HOOF**

Let the Earth Squish Between Your "Toe"

Think about holding a hoof in your hands. Think about the trust a horse has for you to allow you to study and manipulate their hooves... their own hands in yours. If you make a change in the shape of a horse's hoof and that change works better for them, they'll be willing to show you all their feet. If you make changes that cause pain or disability, they will become more reluctant to allow you easy access. Being a good trimmer is a tough and honest business because horses don't lie. Mistakes in trimming become obvious in horses that work on their own feet Whenever you trim, envision what the hoof would look like if it had the opportunity to shape itself, and keep in mind how easy it is to take away hoof material versus putting it back. Many horses have odd looking hooves that we can sculpt over time to become healthier and work harder. We can bring these hooves to a better form without removing too much hoof at one time, thereby keeping them more comfortable

during their rehabilitation. In this way, both we and our horses have some fun and get some work done while the hooves are getting better and better with all that movement.

Trimming hooves for health and performance is an ability born from science and art, achieved through persistent study, observation and experience. Understanding the science of hoof form and function while appreciating the simplistic beauty and energy flow in the hoof allows us to keep them healthy in our own back yards. Many opportunities exist to study equine podiatry and proven methods of hoof care that do no harm to the horse—methods which are very different from what conventional veterinary and farrier schools teach. Believe me when I tell you that studying the hoof will open up new challenges and great rewards for you, and that horses can perform amazing athletics on their own feet. We as humans have known horses for one ten-thousandth the amount of time that they



The hoof is a modified skin structure very similar to our and other animals' nails. The five major functions of the hoof include:

- 1. Protection of sensitive inner structures.
- 2. Allowance for comfortable movement in all terrains.
- 3. Assistance to the heart and lungs for efficient circulation.
- 4. Sensation of the terrain to optimize movement and prevent injury.
- 5. Exfoliation of superficial hoof material to maintain normal shape and stimulate the production of new hoof appropriate for the terrain. Exfoliation is the loss of small layers of excess skin through abrasion. We can use this function to help us decide what material on the horse's hooves should be removed during a trim.



figures 1 and 2: A couple of selftrimmed hooves shaped and callused by movement over very rough terrain– these horses are able to perform in the rocks day after day with the weight of tack and rider.



have roamed the earth, so all of the answers lie with them should we choose to ask the questions.

Before trimming a horse's hooves, take a moment to study their movement, so you'll be able to judge whether they move differently after your work. Note the length of stride and appreciate that the hind hooves should easily reach as far forward as the front hooves as the horse walks freely along. Length of stride should be noted and whether the right or left side is shorter or longer. How about whether the hooves hit the ground flat, toe first or heel first?

A normal, comfortable pattern for a horse is a slightly heel-first landing. Abnormal toe-first landings can more easily be seen while walking on a dirt path, as a horse will kick up a little dirt landing toe-to-heel. Turning sharply to the right or left should not be sluggish or painful, and moving from a walk to a trot or trot to a canter should be smooth and without protest such as head-tossing or tail-swishing. Take note of any head bobbing or asymmetrical hip movement at a walk or trot. Noting head, neck and general body stiffness is more difficult but can be appreciated with





figure 3

experience after watching many different horses. At rest, note whether the horse prefers to stand in a certain position. For example, having one foot or leg forward or rested all the time may be reason to suspect a problem, and the rear legs positioned underneath the belly may indicate painful front feet.

figure 4

Taking tools in hand and sculpting horses' hooves needs to be done with caution, but it is a great way to bond with horses and is simply part of healthy grooming procedures that keep horses in good condition. We know how to groom our own hair and horses' hair coats with brushes, and we can do the same with their feet using knives and a rasp. If you are new to natural hoof care, work with someone to learn tool handling, the parts of the hoof and how to handle the horse's hooves comfortably. There is some great reading material available about natural trimming techniques, as well as lectures and workshops which will have you paying close attention to the way horses move and how the hooves look. Encourage your farrier to research these techniques and have them help you understand the hoof. Farriers are in the perfect position to learn

figures 3 and 4: A couple of tooltrimmed hooves readu for work in the arena or on the trails. Occasional use of boots on rough and rocky terrain may be necessary.

figures 5 through 8: Examples of overgrown hoovesmore frequent trimming is needed



figure 5



figure 8

figure 6

figure 7



more about natural trimming techniques, as they have had some of the training, know the tools, love the horses, have the clientele, and are respected in the community as equine professionals. This work brings great satisfaction, is less strenuous and safer than shoeing, improves the health of the horses and actually extends one's business, as many owners prefer not to do their own trimming. Even if you don't take hoof knives and a rasp in hand, I want to share with you the basics behind a good hoof trim on a relatively normal hoof so you can recognize whether horses under your care are as healthy as they should be.

figure 10 Front foot before any tool trimming. off the bottom of the hoof. **READING AND TRIMMING THE HOOF** Studying Hoof Sculpture Incidentally, having to use nippers to remove excess wall is a sign that we need to trim a horse

more frequently, or ride and work more! It is much kinder to make smaller changes than big ones, and horses will not be sensitive after trimming if we work carefully on their hooves every three to four rather

overgrown.

Loose, crumbly or chalky material accumulates on the bottom of hooves that need trimming, and there

than every six to eight weeks. This is where it really helps to be familiar with using a rasp between visits from your trimmer to keep hoof walls from getting too

figure 11 Using the dull side of a hoof knife to scrape crumbly sole and flaky bar material just like sole.

Bar material coming off easily in layers

figure 12 Example of loose, crumbly material easily scraped off sole with hoof knife.

figure 13 Example of smoother "live sole"

is a change in the look and feel of this material to show where you can assist the horse with some exfoliation. Horses that move around even a little bit every day often have very little loose sole material to scrape off. After removing some of this material with a hoof pick or the dull side of a hoof knife, a natural domeshape will appear which corresponds very well to the internal structures of the hoof. It is safe to remove the majority of this flaky material, and appropriate to leave a small amount of it along with the more solid

unneeded sensitivity. Beyond this more dense sole is the blood rich corium, or dermis, which we certainly do not want to expose. Trimming in to live sole allows the hoof to be bruised more easily and does not allow any sole material behind for the horse to wear on their own. Such over-trimming is "too close for comfort" and will keep a horse from willingly moving around, leading to other health problems.

figure 13:

Example of smoother "live sole" between bar and heel that no longer flakes away. Trimming to this depth often causes

"live sole" material fully intact (figures 9 through 12). "Live sole" is still considered epidermis, but is more dense sole structure that the horse is depending on for good protection, appropriate strength and proper sensation. It has a waxier, smoother appearance and a higher moisture content (figure 13). By respecting this dead-to-live sole junction, the guesswork is taken out of whether or not to remove certain hoof material-just respect this landmark and move on. A good "hoof reader" accurately distinguishes between areas on the







figures 14 and 15: Rear hoof-use a hoof knife to remove loose frog tissue to keep bacteria and fungus from hiding. Blackened or bad-smelling areas should be exposed to the air and can be disinfected with a twenty minute soak in apple cider vinegar.



figure 14

hoof with loose material ready to exfoliate versus areas with callused material which needs to stay put. Leaving adequate material for protection allows for normal sensation without pain, good shock absorption and unbeatable traction. Keep in mind that we don't want to fully exfoliate the sole and want to leave some material for the horse to exfoliate on their own as they move and work. This is critical for signaling new, tough growth from within—we don't want to remove the means by which the horse grows new, strong hoof. If we remove all of the flaky material from a horse's

figure 15

hooves, they will often become needlessly sensitive and can end up with a blister rather than a good callus later on. Sometimes overgrown hooves can be hard to "read", and experience will have to take over in whether or not extra hoof material can be safely removed.

Taking a look at the frog region, use a hoof knife to clean up any tattered edges that might harbor excess dirt and moisture, allowing bacteria and fungus to hide, and leave the bulk of the frog intact (figures 14, 15). The frog is the softest external part of the



figures 16 and 17: The majority of the flaky material has been removed, revealing the domeshaped sole. Bars have been brought close to this level of the sole, and extra wall length can now easily be seen.



figure 16

hoof due to high moisture content. It acts as a hinge between the sides of the hoof and a pressure transmitter to internal structures. A horse rarely complains about the bulk of the frog taking pressure from the ground, and it's actually a very important function which helps stimulate areas up inside the hoof such as the digital cushion and lateral cartilages. After a little movement or a nice ride, the frog will end up adjusting itself right where it should be, so don't worry about trimming it perfectly. figure 17

Addressing the areas of the heel and bar, take note that the bars should stay close to or very slightly above the level of the sole alongside the frog, meeting the heels at ground level at the rear of the hoof (figures 15 through 17). Many unsound horses can be made suddenly sound by simply removing excess bar growth that is receiving ground pressure. Small nippers or a hoof knife will work just fine. High bar pressure is uncomfortable due to the soft tissues that reside above them inside the hoof. Whereas the forward



figure 18

figure 19

toe area of the hoof has the coffin bone inside to provide strength, the rear areas of the hoof lack bone structure and utilize the bars to add strength and support. It is more comfortable and promotes proper function when a horse bears primary weight on the heels, rear of the frog, edge of the sole and hoof walls rather than the bars. It takes a lot of movement for a horse to properly shape their own bars, so keeping them trimmed to around sole level is a real favor we can offer when they are unable to put on the necessary mileage to self-trim. Once you've identified the approximate depth on the entire sole from heel to heel where this loose, easilyexfoliated sole gets close to the "live sole," you can take a look at the hoof walls from heel to heel and use a rasp to reduce the wall length to within about 1/8th inch (3 to 4mm) of this identified depth (figures 18, 19).

figures 18 and 19: Walls from heel to heel have been reduced with the rasp to be about 1/8th of an inch (3 to 4 mm) longer than the sole.

figures 20 and 21: Vertical heel height averages 1 to 1 1/4 inches (2.5 to 3 cm) in a 1,000 pound (450kg) horse. Toe and heel angles should be similar and the coronet band (hairline) should slope back from toe to heel at 25 to 30 degrees.



Note that many domestic horses grow heels that end up being long compared to the toes. This may be due to lack of movement, improper trimming, conformational faults or heel soreness, so if it seems like there's always more heel than toe that needs to be trimmed away, try to determine what is causing the imbalanced growth. The toe area is the region you don't want to make the mistake of trimming too deeply. The toe areas are very often already worn down, so be careful and pay attention to that flaky



Average vertical heel height in an adult horse is usually between 1 to 1 1/4 inches (2.5 to 3.0 cm), but don't get too hung up on certain measurements or angles. Every hoof and every horse is different, and good trimming techniques respect the landmarks unique to them. Trimming for certain angles has its roots in archaic tradition, is forceful, and very often harmful rather than helpful to the horse (figures 20, 21).



figure 22

figure 23

Using live sole landmarks and being a good hoof reader will allow you to trim all four hooves to surprisingly close symmetry without worrying about certain measurements. Horses will maintain higher performance and will be very appreciative of having each hoof trimmed in a way that complements their body structure, rather than to a certain angle and measurement that is not respectful of their individuality. When dealing with an abnormal hoof or one that doesn't seem to grow normally, working with a professional trimmer

and someone adept at massage and chiropractic care will increase your success at improving hoof form and function.

Back to addressing the hoof wall, appreciate that an overgrown wall will leverage and pull away from the sole and is much like pulling your fingernail away from the pad of your finger. Keeping the walls "tidy" and close to the protection of the sole to share in weight bearing duties is appropriate and healthy (figures 22 and 23). Many horses normally make a little thicker

figures 22 and 23:

Following the white line

(junction between sole and

wall) and drawing another

even thickness line from

heel to heel reveals excess

wall sticking out forward

at the toe. Hold the rasp

at a 45 degree angle and

remove this excess wall to

achieve an even thickness of beveled wall from heel

to heel

figures 24 and 25: Outer hoof wall is now beveled and wall thickness is even around entire edge of hoof.



figure 24

wall at the toe, but I like to strive to keep an overall even thickness of hoof wall from heel to heel.

Studies of self-trimming horses reveal very rounded hoof edges. Mimicking this type of wear by using the rasp to bevel and round wall edges from heel to heel is also appropriate and increases performance (figures 23 through 25). Sharp edges that catch and chip or tear away cause sensitivity and reduce a horse's willingness to perform at increased levels. The outermost part of the hoof wall is intended for protection, not weight bearing, and so beveling the wall as



figure 25

shown with the rasp in figure 23 keeps the outer hoof wall off the ground and allows the inner hoof wall to bear weight appropriately.

You will occasionally see horses that wear a squared, flattened spot at their toes from going forward all the time rather than in all directions. Keep these areas rounded instead of allowing the squared toe to remain, as a rounded shape complements the coffin bone shape inside and increases comfort and performance (compare figure 9 with figure 25 again).



figure 26



figure 29



figures 26 and 27: Moving the rasp in a rounded fashion to create a rolled edge to the toe wall.

figures 28 and 29: Rolled edge of

hoof from heel to

and mimics the

wear seen on selftrimming hooves.

heel is comfortable

24





figure 30

Finish up the entire edge of the hoof wall with a nice rolled shape. Each stroke of the rasp should mimic the wear that miles of movement would impart on the hoof, so using it with flowing, rounded movements rather than straight ones produces a more natural shape. There are no flat areas on a normal hoof (figures 26 through 29).

Be aware of the very natural and important arch that exists in the quarters, or sides, of the hoof that blends with the domed area of the sole (figures 30 and 31). It is normal to occasionally see wall breaking out along the sides or quarters of a hoof to start the self*figures 30 and 31:* A normal hoof exhibits an arch between the heel and toe and a proper trim respects this natural shape.

trimming process. The deepest part of the dome in the sole is near the point of the frog, and varies with each horse depending on many factors.

figure 31

Also be aware of the important differences in the shape of the front and rear hooves. Respect and maintain the naturally wider, rounder shape of front hooves versus the slightly smaller, more pointed shape of rear ones (figures 32 through 35).

With the hoof back on the ground, we can often appreciate how certain areas of wall look like they are flaring away from the straighter growth closer to the coronary band (hairline). Overgrown hooves and figures 32 and 33: Front and rear hooves of a selftrimming yearling quarter horse.





figure 33



figure 34



many diseased hooves will often have a large amount of flare. By bringing the hoof forward and resting it on your leg or a hoof stand, we use the rasp to tidy up and reduce these flared areas, once again increasing comfort and performance. Some trimmers straighten out flared walls on the top side of the hooves before working on bottom areas, usually in horses that are moving enough to keep their soles exfoliated. More frequent use of the rasp will really pay off when trying to keep flared areas from coming back. Don't wait more than a couple of

weeks to check on these areas and make some small changes if necessary. The judicious use of a rasp on the outer wall surfaces also mimics the abrasion that a horse would receive while traveling amongst rocks and brush and is appropriate and helpful in maintaining good hoof form (figures 36 through 39).

figures 34 and 35: Front and rear hooves of the Appaloosa gelding used in this manual.

figures 36 and 37: Before and after simple flare reduction at the last 2cm of wall.



figure 36

*figures 38 and 39:* Controlling this large amount of flaring improves health, comfort and performance.





figure 39

figure 37



figure 40





figure 43

figures 42 and 43: Before and after tool trimming right fore foot–natural shape is respected and maintained on this mustang mare's hooves. Note the sole is left with some layers of material for the horse to exfoliate on her own.

**figures 40 and 41:** Before and after using hoof knives and rasp to "mimic mileage" on this barrel racing thoroughbred's hooves.

Though many different hoof dressings are available, I have found they do not improve the health of the hooves and can actually inhibit the normal transfer of moisture. The vast amount of moisture a hoof needs comes from within by way of the bloodstream, so although occasional exposure of hooves to water is normal and can provide some moisture to the hooves, it is more likely that problems will arise in hooves that are exposed to excessive moisture. Horses must have the opportunity to get to "high ground," no matter where they live. If they are unable to escape wet or muddy conditions to dry out, nearly all of them will suffer from some degree of hoof infection. Though we house our horses in all parts of the world, it is very important and within our means to provide a drying out area that is well-drained and preferably covered with crushed rock to keep hooves dry and healthy.

Now it's time to walk the horse again to see how he or she is traveling. Has the stride improved? How about turning in both directions? How are the hooves landing now with the bars and heels trimmed correctly? Keep in mind that the trimmer can move the horse at ANY point during a trim to see if what was done has made a difference. Don't wait until you've sculpted all four hooves before you take a few seconds to ask the horse how one trimmed hoof feels... that way you'll know if a mistake was made and you won't make it three more times! Horses will tell you loud and clear how well you're doing with the trimming, you just have to listen (and watch) carefully. With natural maintenance trimming, horses will feel better after a trim, not more sensitive or painful. Think about the hoof you are shaping as the horse's shoe and how it needs to be "just right" to be comfortable and serviceable.

Healthy horses with properly shaped, durable hooves can work over any terrain if conditioned on that type of terrain. Since many of our horse habitats are not as rough and tough as the areas we like to ride in, serious riders should keep properly sized boots available. This makes for a win-win situation when a hoof needs protection, as you can continue with your riding or work and the horse's hooves will continue to function normally. All this discussion of what makes for a good trim matters only to unshod horses. As satisfying as it is to work on giving horses a nice trim, it's important to realize that we can only approximate the form that horses achieve from self trimming. On that note, I'm a big believer in riding more, and trimming less!





# LIST OF RESOURCES

Lots of Reading To Do!

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Special thanks to Allen Teskey and Sarah Miley for some of the photographs in this manual.

- Further exciting and valuable information will soon be available in Dr. Teskey's upcoming book, with more pictures and in-depth discussions of specific hoof problems, breed differences, and
- achieving and maintaining a high-performance barefoot horse.



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# Look at Those Hooves!

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