

# A tale of two horses

by Andrew Bowe, BAppSc, Master Farrier  
 Photos courtesy of Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre - [www.barehoofcare.com](http://www.barehoofcare.com)

As another year gallops towards the rear vision horizon, one of the annual paradoxes of the human experience arises. Even though the days are getting steadily longer, time passes exponentially faster and there seems no time for anything. The silly season is upon us.

It's not until the quiet days after the Christmas rush has subsided like a flood (well, there is a lot of debris left behind), that we get time for the twin indulgences of retrospection (looking back and reviewing the year just departed) and also a bit of looking forward and previewing the 'new' year ahead. We effectively do an end of year stocktake and draw a line under the old year, ready to start afresh with new goals.

For those of us fortunate enough to share our lives with horses, this is most likely when we have the time to leisurely consume and consider the goal setting articles in our favourite 'horsey' magazine (this one of course!); all those interesting articles about how to improve your horse's 'performance' in pursuit of that elusive strip of blue velvet. Examples that come to mind would be: how to float load in under four hours or how to encourage your horse to step over that little leaf on the ground that wasn't there yesterday, or maybe how to discourage your horse from jumping out of a dressage arena during the test.

Anything but the tiresome subject of horses' hooves. Leave that one to the farriers. After all, horses' hooves don't require any more thought than remembering to book the farrier every six weeks. Or do they?

Unfortunately, reality suggests otherwise. Even though equine hoofcare is far from being a 'sexy' subject (after all, hooves are dirty, miasmatic, heavy inconveniences), there are long-term consequences if they are not managed correctly. Be honest now, how many 'performance' horses finish up their athletic careers because of lameness or loss of athletic ability that can be attributed to the hooves?

The truth of the matter is that if you own a horse, you own its hooves. Smelly and all. So, when looking to the new year ahead, any forward planning really should include hoof management, with a view to long-term soundness.

But I digress. Back to retrospection, which started early this year for the author because two horses (totally unconnected) that passed through my life about ten years ago, recently reacquainted themselves with me, providing much food for thought.

These were two horses that swapped tracks ten years ago. One horse was lame, but eventually returned to soundness. The other was sound but eventually went lame.

What changed their lives so profoundly? It was simply a change in their hoofcare regimes. More specifically, changing between a life of shoes and that of being barefoot.

## The tale of Silene

I met the first horse 'Silene' towards the end of my days working as a 'traditional' farrier, still shoeing every day, but it was when I was starting to concentrate on problematic horses that I believed I could 'help' with corrective shoeing.

Silene had been lame for quite some time already before I had met him and he had been retired from his official occupation as a dressage mount.

He was displaying a navicular 'syndrome' type lameness, but although he had been extensively examined and radiographed and referred and examined again, the exact cause of the lameness remained undiagnosed. Suggested management was bar shoes and a neurectomy with the prognosis of no more than two years until full retirement. In other words, palliative care.

He had seriously deformed hooves that were run forward at the toes with underrun, sheared heels. His frogs were so contracted

that the heels were curling towards each other and palpation of the heel bulbs produced a sharp reaction.

Enter Professor Robert Bowker from Michigan State University who published information about how to overcome navicular lameness through barefoot rehabilitation rather than corrective shoeing; returning the hooves back to physiologically correct form and function, apparently with great success. How could a farrier who was frustrated by the lack of long-term success with corrective shoeing for navicular cases possibly ignore this?

Silene was a prime candidate to try barefoot rehab, because he wasn't getting better with corrective shoeing and, besides, he was finished as a riding mount anyway. Back then we considered navicular 'syndrome' to be a permanent and regressive affliction. He had nothing to lose.

The change to barefoot, however, wasn't going to be easy because Silene had been wearing shoes constantly for a long time and could barely walk on any hard surface without them. So it was a tentative farrier under the watchful eye of a nervous owner who took his shoes off and looked on as he walked feebly on his toes back to his paddock.



“

Despite the fact that he was well-shod and had probably always been well-shod, the tell-tale hoof deformity was obvious from twenty paces.

**THE BAREFOOT BLACKSMITH**

**Hoof Stands**  
visit the web site to view the full range - from \$190

**Hi Lo Hoof Stand**  
Don't be your horse's leaning post. This one caters for the smallest pony to the biggest clydie. Good for your, back joint for your horse. Height range from 23cm to 55 cm.

**Black Healer**  
Don't give up on seedy toe. Black Healer can be very effective in the most stubborn cases.  
350g pack - \$25

**This new book will change the way you think about laminitis**  
The ground breaking text is not just for owners of laminitic horses, it is a vital read for all horse owners. Learn how to prevent laminitis and what to do if your horse does succumb to this insidious disease.  
\$60 - per copy, order online

**The Barefoot Blacksmith Christmas IDEAS**

**Loop Knives**  
Safer & easier to use. No need for two open aided knives, one knife now does the job. Available separately \$45 - \$50 each or as a complete set \$180.

**High Quality Rasps at very competitive prices**  
Bassoli, Bellota, Save Edge  
Available individually from \$35 each or in boxes of 6 from \$150  
\$5 each

**Save heaps on our kit prices**  
great range of colours and combinations  
Basic starter kit, neutral and coat only inc - \$195

Order online: [www.barehoofcare.com](http://www.barehoofcare.com)  
 Phone: 03 5773 4306  
 Or email: [info@barehoofcare.com](mailto:info@barehoofcare.com)

**Online Store**  
[www.barehoofcare.com](http://www.barehoofcare.com)

Astonishingly, his movement improved steadily over the following weeks and that undiagnosed, mystery, career ending lameness just disappeared.

At the same time, with regular 'barefoot' trimming, little changes in his hooves turned into massive changes and the deformities all but disappeared. The frogs opened back up and the heel bulbs lost all sensitivity.

That was a long time ago now. He had been ridden ever since, but his owner told me recently that he has been retired (due to an unrelated paddock accident) at the age of 28. Kudos to Professor Bowker.

Why did Silene leave my life? His owner attended one of our very first hoof trimming workshops and she began to maintain his hooves with a quick touch-up trim every couple of weeks. His hooves have stayed in functional balance with short toes and well-grounded frogs since then. Kudos to his owner as well.

### The tale of... Harry

The second horse (let's call him Harry) I met sometime later when I was still working every day with chronically lame horses, but not with corrective shoeing. I was employing the principles of barefoot rehab to an ever-increasing number of horses.

“ This story is really about the choice between long-term and short term. Humans have always struggled with such choices. We tend to live in the moment, finding it hard to look much past next weekend.

Harry was a young performance horse – quite sound - that hadn't been shod many times and his owner, having seen numerous horses retired with chronic lameness, wanted to avoid such an outcome.

The difference, however, is that Harry's owner didn't need to keep him barefoot due to current lameness, but wanted to keep him barefoot to avoid future problems. There are many degrees of difference between want and need.

The trouble with Harry was that he was heavy but his hooves were flat with thin soles and as he came into competition work, being barefoot was beginning to affect his performance. He simply lost his stride. Soon after, he went back to wearing shoes.

Whilst this was quite disappointing (at that early stage of my journey into the world of barefoot horses, I hadn't yet encountered many horses needing to go back to shoes, and the knowledge that the villain behind such weak hooves is low grade laminitis was still off the radar), all those years ago I was still of the opinion that maybe some horses just needed to be shod.

I already knew back then that keeping a horse barefoot is by far the best long-term option, but the reality is you can't sell tomorrow if you can't produce results today.

And so, Harry, left my life as well.



Astonishingly, Silene's movement improved steadily over the following weeks and that undiagnosed, mystery, career ending lameness just disappeared.

But recently I saw Harry again and found that he had been retired prematurely due to chronic lameness. The same old story. No specific diagnosis, but bar shoes and the spectre of neurectomy. Once again, it was palliative care.

Despite the fact that he was well-shod and had probably always been well-shod, the telltale hoof deformity was obvious from twenty paces. His hooves were still flat and thin soled, but now also had run forward toes, under run heels and contracted frogs. It appears that hoof deformity always travels right alongside chronic lameness.

So, as you lay back in the mango shade by the pool in the pleasant afterglow of the festive season, with your batteries recharging and your thoughts fixing on the 'new' year ahead, setting goals for you and your horse, there are choices to make.

This story is really about the choice between long-term and short term. In this case, deciding on a course of action that yields rewards now, but at the cost of big problems in years to come, or one that requires compromises now but will produce far greater benefits well into the future. Not an easy choice.

Humans have always struggled with such choices. We tend to live in the moment, finding it hard to look much past next weekend.

So that's the good thing about a little bit of retrospection. When looking back, time gone by is always impossibly, infinitesimally small (where did this year go again?!) Looking back helps us to see further into the future. Beyond this moment.

Why did I get to see Harry again after all those years? I went there to start working on his replacement; a young horse whose owner – looking to the future - needs to keep out of shoes.

Fortunately, we have come far with our understanding of how to grow healthy and tough hooves. We understand that weak hooves are not normal, but are a simple manifestation of low grade laminitis and we can control such a pathology with pasture management and mineral balance and grow hooves with thick soles, so a horse does not lose its stride when its hooves are put under pressure. If a horse's hooves need protecting when going out on gravel roads, hoof boots have evolved enormously, whilst for competition we can use tips that protect the toe but allow the all important frog to remain on the ground; the best of both worlds. It can be done. It is being done.

Will this young horse be able to stay out of shoes and remain competitive?

Time will tell.

Have a safe Summer.

It's a game changer

**FIBRESENTIAL**<sup>®</sup>

Nutritionally enhanced chaff nuggets

Consistent nutritional values

Balanced Calcium to Phosphorus ratio for healthy hooves

revolutionary chaff replacer

**NEW**

**HYGAIN**

hygain.com.au



Silene left my life because his owner attended one of our very first hoof trimming workshops and she began to maintain his hooves with a quick touch-up trim every couple of weeks.