

A white horse with a blue halter is standing in a paddock behind a chain-link fence. The horse is looking down and to the left. The background shows a green field and trees.

Bringing Back

Sexy

by Andrew Bowe, Master Farrier
Images by Nicky Bowe,
Courtesy of Mayfield Barefoot Care Centre

Life happens.

Health crises, financial upheavals, social breakdowns are all part and parcel of human existence. Unfortunately horses sometimes get caught in the storms of life and their basic needs don't get attended to. In other words, they get neglected. The little things like neglected hooves, teeth and worming are bad enough, but how often do we see horses that are starving? What about the opposite when neglected horses do not have their feed restricted and develop pathological conditions such as acute laminitis.

Whilst acute laminitis is traumatic and impossible to overlook, it can be quite insidious in the beginning and creep up unseen. It's not like having a skeletal horse standing in the front paddock which 'Blind Freddy' doesn't need to see because he can feel the bones poking through. It's fair to say that neglect which leads to acute laminitis starts with ignorance of the early warning signs. So often when a laminitic insult arrives 'out of the blue', all the ducks were already in a line and the new insult has simply been the literal straw that has broken the horse's back. Mechanically stressed overlong (neglected) hooves certainly don't help matters.

When acute laminitis rears its ugly head, so many horses arrive at the dark crossroads; it's either a short trip with the green dream or a long trip down the rough road to rehabilitation. They come to Mayfield for the latter option.

There was a reality show on television a while back called 'Bringing Sexy Back' which the kids got hooked on (I dislike TV on a good day, but 'reality' TV seriously gets my rag, so I don't know how the kids slipped under the parental radar and began watching it in the first place). Anyway, it was a show about people reversing the unsightly effects of our unhealthy western lifestyle and reclaiming the long gone glory of their younger years. Not surprisingly, it always involved too much body fat and the rigorous lifestyle changes needed to remove it.

So, what's this got to do with horses' hooves you might be thinking? Well, the 'Mayfield' kids have lived all their short years in a parallel universe; the reality show that is equine rehab. They have been witness to an endless procession of lame horses passing through Mayfield for rehabilitation from life threatening laminitis that is so often the end result of a lifestyle incompatible to the equine species. They have been there at the start, passing medications and nappies and hoof boots to mum or dad who were struggling just to hold up a hoof of a totally lame new arrival. They have seen them at their worst. They have been there at the end when the very same patients have walked soundly out the gate, like different horses. They have seen them return to their best. They have seen so many amazing transformations that whenever a new patient arrives nowadays, they accept the challenge to 'bring sexy back'.



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Life happened to Daisy*. She was inadvertently left too long in a paddock that was far too lush for her and her hooves were allowed to grow way too long. The subtle signs of laminitic distress would have been there for some time (excessive body score, stilted movement, gross hooves), but all went unnoticed until she crash landed in a heap and could not walk at all. In fact, most of the time she just lay down to get off her sore hooves. The trouble was she was lying right in the middle of the aforementioned cross roads.

**Daisy is not her real name. Stories need telling so lessons can be widely shared in order to help prevent future problems with other horses, but at the same time it is also very important to protect the identification and sensitivities of the owners of these case studies. This is why we never use real names and go to great lengths to camouflage their equine identity. In fact, when we wrote our laminitis book, we included a large number of real life rehabilitation case studies (there surely couldn't be a better way to show how to treat laminitis in all of its guises), but they were all strictly anonymous. The only horse identified in the book was the pony that the whole book was based on. Boy, didn't that get me into trouble, despite having 'owned' the horse for quite some years prior to publication. Anonymous it is!*





Hoof abscesses are an expected complication of the recovery process after laminitis when the necrotic corium that was squashed beneath the pedal bone is expelled from the horse's system.





Right about now you may be thinking 'oh no, not another laminitis story'. Hold on, just before you flip the pages to a 'sexier' subject than horses' hooves, it is always sobering to remind readers that laminitis is still the second biggest killer of horses behind colic. Not only that, a lot of horses live their life in constant laminitic pain. The laminitis story can never be told too often, nor should it stop getting told.

Despite all cases of laminitis being unique, there are a couple of consistent themes that continually arise with the rehab cases we are involved with here at Mayfield. Documenting a case study like this one helps to show this.

Firstly, not all laminitic cases can be saved, but don't give up prematurely. Yes, laminitic patients are in great pain, but it should pass, especially when the principles of barefoot rehab are applied. Daisy was in a lot of pain, but she was exercising her democratic right to lay down. Her pain could be managed until a 'guesstimate' of her prognosis could be formulated. Transient pain should not be grounds for euthanasia.

Secondly, prognosis should not be based on the position of the bony column relative to the hoof capsule, whether rotating or sinking. Rather, prognosis should be based on the severity of pedal bone erosion. Rads (x-rays) of Daisy's hooves fortunately showed only minor remodelling to the pedal bone rims which means she should eventually make close to a full recovery.

Thirdly, success is dependent upon teamwork; a team that is headed by the owner and backed up by vet, hoof therapist and body therapist (in no particular order). In Daisy's case, the vet was needed to administer pain relief, but also to take bloods to check for any underlying systemic issues and also to take rads to locate the pedal bones within the grossly deformed hoof capsules so that trimming parameters could be established. The hoof therapist was then able to begin returning the deformed hooves back to normal form and function and, finally, a body therapist was then called in to 'release' tight muscles that were preventing a return to normal movement and stance.

Daisy's recovery was going to be a long process and it was on track. But then came the hoof infection.

Here at Mayfield we see hoof abscesses all the time. It's an expected complication of the recovery process after laminitis when the necrotic corium that was squashed beneath the pedal bone is expelled from the horse's system.



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Abscesses routinely come and go. But not this one. It was the abscess from hell. There was an enormous discharge (possibly the biggest we have seen) that continued for weeks, even after different antibiotics were used and it continued even after bursting at the coronet band. (See photos on previous page).

To counteract this, the hoof was daily soaked in strong salt solution and then wrapped in dry baby nappies. At various times a grated potato poultice was used to draw out further infection.

Ironically, the infection went for so long that when it finally broke and the extra lameness in that hoof subsided, recovery from the original laminitis had progressed so thoroughly that Daisy was actually ready to begin light work.

Her soles were obviously still compromised and thin and she was sensitive on hard ground, but she was stepping out quite nicely in softly padded hoof boots on her front hooves and seemed so keen for ridden work that it was soon time for pony club. Unfortunately, whilst padded boots are an excellent solution and have undoubtedly saved the lives of many laminitic horses, they are not allowed in pony club competition (can anyone please explain to me the real reason why not?!).

Fortunately, there is an ever expanding array of hoof protection solutions suitable for a recovering laminitic that are practical, don't impede hoof function and most importantly are competition legal. Daisy presented an opportunity to try a relatively new brand of soft polyurethane shoe called the Easyshoe™ (www.easycaredownunder.com) which is proving quite successful because it combines the soft plastic with a sliver of steel in each branch that effectively blocks nail heads. (See photos on this page). This enables the clenches to stay tight and not work loose and damage the hoof wall. Unlike previous models of soft plastic shoes, these actually seem to promote healthy hoof walls. The Easyshoe™ also has an effective frog support and is wide webbed so the load is spread over the whole hoof and is soft enough to cushion the blow between hoof and hard ground; ideal for a recovering laminitic. I have used these shoes for over a year now on a diverse range of horses from show hacks to pre-training gallopers. The more I use them, the more I like them.

However, in this case the infection had totally deformed Daisy's nearside front hoof. Not only was there a large cavity where the infection had been extracted, but the localised inflammation had caused one side of the hoof to grow much longer than the other side, throwing the medial / lateral balance completely out. To restore balance, the lateral branch of the shoe would need to be set too wide to secure it with nails.

The modern day solution to such a scenario is to build up the missing side of the hoof with flexible acrylic, and either nail through the acrylic or use the acrylic as glue between shoe and hoof. Nothing new here. Hoof building acrylics have been around for quite some years, but they haven't always been user friendly, and the challenge has always been to get more acrylic on the target hoof and less on the horse's body, the farrier, the stable walls, even the stable cat... you probably get the picture.





For example, some months ago, I got distracted when using a large amount of sticky acrylic to glue a shoe on a tragic hoof and had a large amount smeared on my brand new jeans (now there's a good reason why a farrier should be wearing an apron). Several months later the jeans have all but faded, but the black acrylic is still like it went on yesterday. It's amazing stuff. It's even better on a horse's hoof. (See photos).

Daisy's dodgy hoof provided the opportunity to try another 'new' product called Hoof Rebuild™ (www.equusequip.com.au) which might actually set a new benchmark amongst acrylics. Not only is it exceptionally easy to use (I managed to apply it solely to the target hoof and nothing else), it bonds very effectively to both hoof and plastic.

Daisy is back in action at official pony club in Mansfield as well as 'the back paddock pony club' at Mayfield.






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