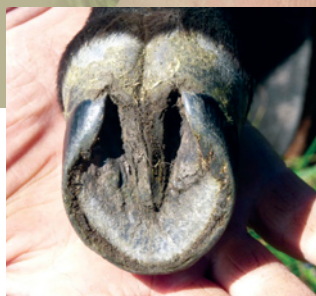


Baby Feet...

When should you trim your foal?

by Andrew Bowe B.App.Sc
www.barehoofcare.com

Foremost amongst the many factors that dictate the success of a foal as a mature athlete are decisions and management concerning hooves and limbs during the first four months of life.



This is the time when hoof care most helps to produce a foundation for its future athletic career while influencing the growth and angulation of the limb above the hoof.

In an ideal situation, the environment provides enough abrasion to keep a foal's hooves in perpetual balance, whereby wear equals growth.

Foal's hooves grow fast!

Foals, however, have rapidly growing feet (15mm per month compared to 9mm per month for a mature horse, on average), so reality dictates that growth is greater than wear in nearly all domestic situations. Foals will need to have their hooves trimmed.

The first trim

This first trim should be done at about one month old, not necessarily because the hooves have overgrown that quickly, but because it is extremely important with all foals that they are viewed and assessed by an experienced eye early in life. The window of opportunity for making meaningful changes to poor conformation does not stay open for long.

Some horse owners may think that no hoof care is needed until the foal is a year old or even worse, not until it is started under saddle. Waiting a year or even two is never acceptable when considering the welfare of the animal. Hooves get long, wear or break off unevenly or even worse, don't wear or break off at all, thus escalating leg strain and deviation potential.

Form or function?

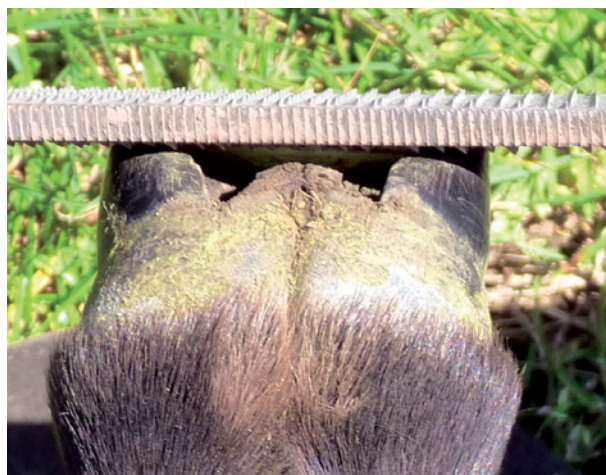
The aim of trimming foal hooves is simply to shorten overgrown wall, which in effect widens the ground surface of the hoof and brings the heels back under the centre of gravity of the limb, thus initiating the development of the caudal foot (the all important back half of the hoof that encompasses the frog and digital cushion).

Foal trimming should be only about balance and function, but definitely not about cosmetics. The only tools required should be a hoof pick, a small loop knife (only if necessary), a fine cut rasp and a light touch!

Trimming the foal hoof usually only involves rasping the wall. The sole should be left untouched as it is very thin and the frog should only be attended to with a knife if there is any sign or potential risk for thrush infection (which is probably better treated topically than with a knife on a growing hoof). The bars are also treated cautiously and only trimmed if they are too prominent.

The wall needs to be trimmed short enough to keep the frog on the ground (but not with any excess pressure) and the outer wall needs to be well rounded off to avoid splitting (see photos on right).

Trimming should become a regular part of a young horse's life, about 4-6 weekly. It needs to be often enough to keep the frog on the ground and the toe length under control.



Foal trimming should be only about balance and function, and definitely not about cosmetics.



Some horse owners may think that no hoof care is needed until the foal is a year old or even worse, not until it is started under saddle.

Waiting a year or even two is never acceptable when considering the welfare of the animal.

“

The window of opportunity for making meaningful changes to poor conformation does not stay open for long. It is extremely important that all foals' hooves are viewed and assessed by an experienced eye early in life.

”

Regular trimming also facilitates repeated assessment by the experienced eye of the farrier to monitor how ‘correctly’ a foal is growing.

The foal foot

After about four months, the ‘foal foot’ becomes quite noticeable. This is the remnant hoof capsule that existed at birth and grows at an increasingly oblique angle to the newer growth from the coronary band as it weakens and eventually breaks off.

Horse owners often get concerned about the ‘foal foot’ and want it to be all taken away and ‘tidied up’. Regular trimming will keep the break off to a minimum, but the author believes it an erroneous practice to dress off too much of the remaining foal foot, because doing so has the effect of setting up a developing foot with a broken forward pastern; a short toe and high heels. If there is any concurrent tightness in the flexor apparatus due to rapidly lengthening bones, such trimming can quickly exacerbate a poor situation and may contribute to club foot development.

The author believes that with regard to removal of the ‘foal foot’, it is better to err on the side of caution and leave it alone.

Handling foals for trimming

There are two important aims when handling a foal for trimming:



1. Be gentle on weak bones

The long bones in a foal's legs have growth plates that are extremely delicate. It is imperative that no undue pressure is placed on the bones when introducing the concept of restraint to a foal. Make sure the legs are handled very gently.

The safest way to trim a foal for the first time is for one person to hold the foal ‘forward and aft’, under the neck and under the tail. Be sure to have the mare held quietly by a third person in a position where the mare can see and if necessary smell and nuzzle its foal.

Trimmers should always hold a hoof in one hand and rasp with the other, but never hold a foal's leg between their knees in the farrier stance.

2. Educate the foal

The first few trims are vital for establishing future behaviour, so each trimming session needs to be a positive learning experience.

Stress needs to be kept to a minimum.

A light but firm hand is needed with plenty of well timed pressure and release to establish a clear understanding of limb restraint.



Owners often get concerned about the 'foal foot' and want it 'tidied-up' but dressing too much off could contribute to club foot development.



There is no better way to get a foal 'on side' for its first trim than spending a bit of quality time scratching its various 'itchy spots'.

When this is done correctly, a foal will not learn to brace and lean against the trimmer, but will keep its limbs lightweight whenever they are picked up for future trimming sessions.

Patience is required when trimming foals and there needs to be an acceptance by the trimmer that it takes as long as it takes.

When all is said and done, there is no better way to get a foal 'on side' for its first trim than spending a bit of quality time scratching its various 'itchy spots'. This will enable a trimmer to very quickly establish a feel good relationship which can be continued by the foal holder whilst the trimmer is working on the hooves. Keep the foal happy!