



Maintenance Trimming

for horse owners

By Andrew Bowe, Master Farrier
Images courtesy of Mayfield Barefoot Care Centre

Maintenance trimming

For the past decade - give or take a few seasons - I have been travelling around Australia teaching horse owners how to manage their horse's hooves. Far from being the easy life, travelling and teaching on weekends, whilst still keeping a full-time job (working as an equine hoof therapist/trimmer/farrier; whatever my day job is now called) is quite taxing. There are times when I find myself asking why do I keep doing it (dodging furry nightlife and aliens on a midnight run somewhere in the backblocks is bound to bring on such introspection).

Fortunately, the answer presents itself whenever I get to visit with horse owners who have been maintaining their horses' hooves since participating in a trimming workshop sometime earlier (I'd be seeing them at an advanced trimming workshop or maybe checking their horses on my travels through their far flung regions). It never ceases to amaze me how good their horses' hooves are; so often the healthiest hooves to be seen in their district. What makes this even more astounding is that these very same horses often started with less than ideal and sometimes quite problematic hooves.

The secret behind these amazingly healthy hooves is not who trims them nor how good the professional trimmer is. Often there is not even a professional involved. Nor is it just about having the correct diet, adequate movement and the right environment (although these lifestyle factors certainly help). The one factor above all else that seems to produce the best possible hooves is maintenance by the horse's owner; a quick touch up with a rasp every two weeks.

This may sound a bit over-stated, but logical reasoning for such a claim can be found by rewinding 5,000 years to the natural scheme of things before horses were domesticated. Back then, horses were prairie animals that covered great distances daily in search of grazing, water and freedom from predation. Life was tough. Constant movement over harsh ground meant their hooves were continually getting worn down and, to accommodate this, horses evolved to have rapidly growing hooves so they never wore down too much. Importantly, growth equalled wear and their hooves existed in a state of dynamic equilibrium. The hoof wall never grew too long beyond the sole, so the frog and sole remained weightbearing and the hooves fully functional. There were no overgrown walls acting as mechanical lever forces, which compromised circulation or broke away and exposed inner tissues to pathogenic invasion. Hooves in their natural state were short, robust and tight units.

Fast forward to our modern domestic horses which are invariably confined to small paddocks and are no longer existing as prairie animals (despite carrying the same genetic blueprint). They are rarely worked often enough to create the amount of wear endured by the wild hoof. In fact, wear of the hooves is now exceeded by growth, and when they grow long they become dysfunctional and mechanically weakened.

Traditional hoofcare has dealt with overgrowth by re-trimming hooves every 6-8-10 weeks (or when the trimmer could get there). Sometimes, they are ignored until the overgrowth breaks off. But even if a horse owner has the foresight and resources to ensure their horses are never more than four weeks between trims, equine hooves simply cannot attain optimum health in this regime. They are meant to remain short.

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How can this storyline be improved? What if a horse owner can mimic the constant trimming regime of the wild hoof by maintaining a horse's hooves in between visits from their professional trimmer? In simple terms, pick up a hoof and, with a rasp, keep the walls rolled and rounded every fortnight.

What is stopping you from trying?

If maintenance trimming is as good as the author suggests, then why doesn't everyone do it? Even though a large number of horse owners have taken it up and their horses' hooves are better than ever, there is still a widespread misconception that it is too difficult a task, both physically and technically.

Yes, it is physically hard, bending over and holding a heavy hoof steady whilst pushing a rasp across it, but maintenance trimming done often enough is only ever a small, brief job. It's really not much harder than cleaning hooves out and can be quickly done when untacking after a ride. Anyone who is sound enough to get in the saddle should be able to handle a rasp long enough for maintenance trimming.

Maintenance trimming has been made even easier by the evolution of hoof stands that have a cradle which supports the upturned hoof and takes the weight of the horse out of the equation. Modern rasps are incredibly sharp.

Horse owners also have the option of riding first and trimming second. If you ride before trimming, your whole body will be warmed up and loosened, and ready to bend under your horse for trimming. In addition to this, if you ride on an abrasive surface before trimming - we call this the council trim - half the job is done for you.

But wait, there's more. If you have a horse that is a bit too opinionated whenever its hooves are picked up and is pushing the limits of your fledgling leg handling abilities, a good old fashioned sweaty saddle cloth never fails to sort out bad behaviour!

As for the notion that maintaining equine hooves requires a doctorate in equine sculpture, it is unfortunate that some over-oxygenated souls in the horse industry put fear of the shoeing gods into horse owners who want to try it. Any such anxiety a horse owner has of damaging their horse's hooves is surely illogical. If you get well-schooled at a maintenance trimming workshop, you will learn to recognise the anatomical landmarks that allow you to read a hoof to objectively balance



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it and recognise the boundaries not to cross. No, you needn't be worried about hurting your horse. To the contrary, you will only be helping it.

We are not talking about the craft of shoeing which does take many years to master (the author can relate to this). Maintenance trimming is infinitely more simple than shoeing. It can be taught easily and objectively, especially if it is just maintenance in between professional trims. You don't need to be Yoda in a blue singlet to maintain a hoof.

Choosing a hoof trimming course that is right for you

If this author is worth his salt, you are now sold on the idea of learning how to maintain your own horses' hooves. So, where do you look to see what courses are available? The internet of course.

In recent years, there has been a virtual explosion in the number of 'teachers' offering owner trimmer workshops; evidenced by the cacophony of affiliated websites. It's a good thing that everything on the internet is absolutely true and never over-stated. Yeah right.

When you are sitting around a campfire, it always seems best to listen to the horseman who isn't talking. Whilst the internet is a fantastic resource of information, marketing rules the roost, so each website boldly claims to be different and significantly better than everyone else. You may start wondering how on earth you have managed to get by your whole life without such brilliance to help you! If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

It should be obvious that the author does have a vested interest in this subject. The pressure is on him to remain objective and not turn this article into an advertorial.

So, which course to choose?

A point well worth noting is that there is no hoofcare industry regulation in Australia. There is no requirement to be qualified in order to operate as a hoof therapist (trimmer or farrier), nor is there any qualification required to call one's self an equine hoofcare teacher. It's all a bit colonial really. As a result, not all trimming courses are created equally, nor should they be rated equally. It is important to do your due diligence before handing over your hard earned.

What makes a good hoof trimming course?

The very first consideration is safety. Down under a horse is not the safest place to park human ribs (the author can relate to this too). After all, horses are large and reactive flight animals. Safety is vital not only for the duration of a trimming course, but also thereafter whenever you are trimming a horse. All trimming courses need to reflect this, and should include a comprehensive discussion and demonstration about optimising workplace safety.

Also included in a good trimming course would be a discussion and demonstration of relevant ergonomics to make the job as physically easy as possible. Career farriers are experts at ergonomics to reduce the likelihood of long-term body damage.

Ergonomics should not compromise safety. If a teacher shows you how to trim when sitting on a milk crate, run the other way. Sitting on a milk crate shows a lack of core strength and is a dead giveaway that the 'sittee' is not work hardened by the job they are teaching. Besides, how would you explain to the insurance company if you got hurt by such foolishness?

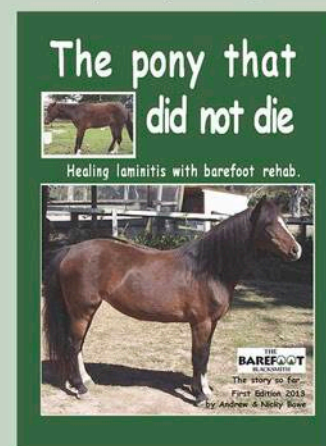
A good course must include hands on trimming of your horse by yourself under supervision. To just be shown how to do something doesn't go close to doing something yourself under full supervision. Some of the cheaper courses don't allow you to trim a horse. It is likely they are not insured to do so. This should be clarified before enrolling in a course and, if you are not able to trim your horse under full supervision at a workshop, don't enrol.

Be sure the people conducting a trimming workshop are fully insured. If something does go wrong during the course, you need to be covered. What if your horse kicked another horse or a person or a brand new vehicle, or broke off and ran onto a road? It is not worth not being protected. Ask about insurance before committing money for a workshop. If you have any doubts, ask to see a certificate of insurance.

Teaching hoof trimming to beginners is quite the balancing act, providing enough science, tool skills and leg handling skills in one day to produce competency without mental overload. For this reason, good courses are taught at a superficial level so the trimming task is simple and quick, and takes into consideration the lack of a beginner's body conditioning. Nothing deters beginners like having to endure hour long sessions of high precision hoof sculpture.



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Whilst basic hoof management is easy to teach and easy to learn, there are always problematic hooves or equestrian discipline and breed specific issues. A teacher must have enough experience as a hoof therapist to recognise and know how to manage any hoof issues that may arise at a trimming workshop, and impart this knowledge simply and effectively to their students.

Unfortunately in this unregulated industry, there are some operators claiming to be teachers when they have only been trimming hooves themselves for the proverbial five minutes. They haven't been trimming long enough or indeed haven't got under enough horses to recognise all of the pathologies and deformities that affect domestic hooves, nor can they possibly know how to properly handle or even recognise the subtleties of equine behaviour. And now they are teaching?

Ask how long a potential teacher has been working full-time as a hoof therapist. Part-time does not count for anyone who is holding their hand up as a teacher. You really need a teacher who is a career hoof therapist, not just 'funemployed'. Ask also if they are still working in the industry and if they work on performance horses or just paddock ponies. Good teachers remain 'on the tools' and working across all disciplines of the equine industry. How else are they going to know if what they are teaching actually works in the real world (beyond the aforementioned internet)?

This is more important than ever before with a constant stream of new hoof science and new hoof protection options that need to be adapted to real world situations.

It is probably best to go with teachers who have a decent qualification in the field of equine hoof therapy, but read between the lines because some qualifications seem to get overstated. There are only two government recognised qualifications in Australia that are stand-alone hoof specific

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modalities: the Diploma of Equine Podiotherapy and the Certificate III (farriery). Be aware that some 'teachers' may quote qualifications they don't have. If a student does not complete a course, they have not qualified.

Of course, just having a hoof relevant qualification does not guarantee someone is going to be an effective teacher. Conversely, a potential workshop presenter may be a bit light on for hoofcare qualifications, but may be qualified as a teacher and be a good one at that. Ask around. The results of a teacher's work should speak for themselves - clients with soft horses that are happy to go forward.

If you were to attend a trimming workshop and found that hoof rasping is not going to be something you will go on with, at least you will have learnt what normal hooves look like and how they function. This means you can have effective input into who is doing what with your horses' hooves. At the very least, you will gain a whole new appreciation of the professional hoof therapist's job.

Such a simple and seemingly benign act as maintenance trimming can have huge and lasting benefits on a horse's life. It truly is a case when the payoff is beyond all proportion compared to the effort invested.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Andrew Bowe is a career master farrier who specialises in the barefoot rehabilitation of horses that are either suffering from chronic lameness or are simply not performing as well as they should be. He works in conjunction with veterinarians and equine body therapists.

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