

Vale 'Puddles'

The horse that transformed the hoofcare industry... forever

By Andrew Bowe, BAppSc, Master Farrier

Puddles died as a result of a paddock accident, aged 25 years.

So, what's newsworthy about the untimely passing of an old horse quaintly named Puddles, you might ask?

Well, just like some people who pass indelibly through our lives and our time, sometimes even a horse leaves a legacy that is lasting and profound beyond all proportion.

Puddles was the first act in what has become a generational change in the Australian equine hoofcare industry. He has helped to expand the concept and practice of keeping horses barefoot, way beyond the fringes of lightly ridden 'paddock ponies' to the mainstream with working performance horses, more than any other horse that I have known or known of. Is this a bit of an over-statement?

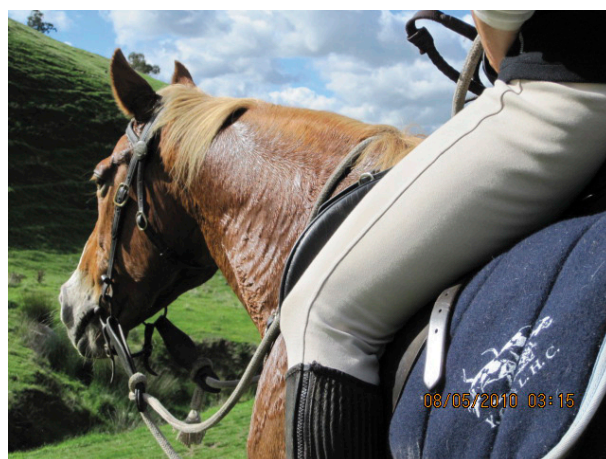
Read on and you decide.

Modern equine hoofcare is fettered by a perplexing paradox. For a horse to stay fully sound for its whole life, it is increasingly apparent it needs to remain barefoot but, if a horse is working, it needs shoes for optimum performance and, unfortunately, middle ground between these two opposing realities has been elusive.

Puddles helped us find some middle ground

I first became acquainted with Puddles quite some years ago when, as part of a fringe movement in the Australian hoofcare industry, I'd just begun exploring the concept of taking performance horses out of shoes to hopefully prevent the chronic lameness that seemed to routinely and prematurely finish their ridden careers.

However, back then, I was still very much a sceptical farrier, seriously doubting that ridden horses could ever be given rigorous or constant work as a barefoot mount. Maybe it would be an option for horses in light work, but surely not for those hardworking horses that populate the equine performance world. Their hooves would always need protection. It was early days in the evolution of hoof boots, which were clunky and still way short of getting a mainstream gig, so shoes were considered the only choice, even though they had been known for many years as a 'necessary evil' (long before that term was hijacked by militant proponents of barefoot ideals).



RIGHT: Puddles, the horse that left a legacy that is lasting and profound beyond all proportion.
LEFT: Going home. Photo by Carolyn Yencken, www.greatphotos.com.au



I had already been involved in the barefoot rehabilitation of a large number of horses with chronic lameness, but there had not been any major expectations of these patients if they survived their pathological ordeals. The aim of paddock soundness was lofty enough and, if they came back into light ridden work, well that was considered a bonus indeed.

I had also been involved with the transition of sound, but only lightly worked horses out of shoes, so they could remain barefoot. But again, there was no real challenge because they were typically horses that were so lightly worked that, whenever I had revisited them for reshoeing, the 'old' shoes that I removed had absolutely no wear and often looked like they had just been taken out of their packet yesterday. They obviously were not getting ridden much, if at all, but they were shod because that was the mantra of the hoofcare industry back in the 1990s - if it is ridden, shoe it; if it isn't ridden, shoe it anyway, just in case it does get ridden!

If there were any performance horses being transitioned to a life out of shoes, they invariably belonged to owners who had fully embraced the concept of keeping their horses barefoot for long-term health benefits, even if it meant they were limited in what could be achieved under saddle. Such owners had made the fundamental change of looking to the horizon of years to come, instead of only as far as that elusive blue ribbon next weekend. For them, it was a case of barefoot first and foremost, performance second and maybe.

All in all, it was safe and comfortable territory for a farrier to work as a 'barefoot' trimmer. What's more, there was plenty of low-hanging fruit to keep the emerging legion of barefoot trimmers employed and all the ridden performance horses were still wearing shoes, which kept busy the ranks of farriers that were thinning with natural attrition. Either tribe could walk down their own side of the hoofcare road and no one had to meet in the middle.

TOP: Andrea Hamer riding Puddles. Photo by Carolyn Yencken, www.greatphotos.com.au.
MIDDLE: Horses didn't come any harder working than Puddles. Photo courtesy of Andrea Hamer.
BOTTOM: He never stopped at a jump again, never. Photo courtesy of Andrea Hamer.

Then along came Puddles...

Problem was, horses didn't come any harder working than Puddles. His main job in life was to fox hunt with the renowned Yarra Glen and Lilydale Hunt Club, but not just as your average run with the mob hunter. He was ridden by Andrea Hamer who rode as a 'whip' (to anyone not familiar with the world of stirrup cups and tally-ho, the whip's job is to help the huntsman control the hounds, which necessitates covering more ground miles during a hunt than any other member of the fox hunting party). And, it wasn't just an issue of high mileage either. Puddles' work was done over whatever terrain the fox would choose to run; jumping whatever fences were in the way, with no time to detour, stop and open gates.

Hunting in Australia is based on the traditional English way of using a pack of about 30 hounds that are trained to pick up a fresh fox scent and then run it to ground in its lair where it is euthanised (yes, it is a 'blood' sport that not everyone may approve of, but that debate is beyond the scope of this article). The huntsman and the whip control the hounds, whilst the rest of the field follows up and simply observes from a 'refined' distance.

The whip's horse normally covers 20 to 30 (and maybe even up to 60) kilometres throughout a hunt, over whatever terrain a fox decides to scamper in order to elicit an escape. It is every yard an endurance event, so whip riders try and do most of their riding at a trot to conserve their mounts, although there are often bursts of fast work to keep up with the hounds, so a whip's horse needs to be exceptionally fit and totally sound. It is not unknown for a whip's horse to knock up before a fox has been run to ground if it is not conditioned to the job. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for hunting horses in general and whips' horses in particular to break down prematurely.

Not surprisingly, hunting horses were traditionally all shod, all round, whenever they were in work. So, why then was Andrea so keen to try and go barefoot in such a demanding equestrian discipline? There was no precedent for it and no one else was trying it, at least not in Australia. There must have been a good reason.

Even though Puddles was bred to hunt (a Percheron-Anglo cross, descended from the legendary horses Rain Lover and Flooding, hence his name and his propensity to jump), his hunting days were already over. He was broken at the grand old age of ten. (Broken down that is, not broken in!)

Knowing this, Andrea actually bought Puddles as a ten-year-old in the year 2000, intending to use him as a quiet mount for her daughter. He had been worked hard as a hunter since he was first started under saddle and actually failed the pre-purchase vet check; lame in the near fore fetlock. He wasn't at all willing to jump and couldn't canter a circle in the dressage arena but, as Andrea wasn't expecting him to be working hard or to go hunting, she took the chance with him, despite veterinary advice to the contrary.

He was shod and had always been shod, but Andrea was exploring the idea of getting him out of shoes. She had already 'barefooted' another horse that had a deteriorating club foot and showed dramatic improvement in soundness, hoof form and hoof quality after the shoes came off (although not a hunting

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horse, it's also quite a story, but one for another day). She was also enduring the usual scenario of lost shoes and hooves falling apart in the Yarra Valley Winter, despite having regular and high-quality farrier work. It doesn't matter how good a farrier is if the environment is adverse to growing healthy hooves.

After early success with that clubfooted horse and the arrival of another Winter, she thought it would be at least worth a try with Puddles. After all, he wasn't going to be doing much work. He wasn't going hunting...

Never say never

We can't be sure if it was simply the removal of shoes and the return of his hooves to physiologically correct functioning, or getting put out in a mob in a big paddock, or getting schooled in classical dressage to improve his balance, or if it was all of the above, but Puddles returned to soundness. Gone was his uneven, ungainly movement and regained was his balance under saddle, and his desire and ability to jump. Soon after he was 'drafted' back to the hunting field.

But, what to do with his hooves? We had arrived back at that same old paradox. He clearly needed to remain barefoot to stay sound, but now it was time to go back to work. In such a demanding discipline surely a horse would not be able to cope without shoes? After all, Andrea's other two hunters were shod with heavy eventing shoes, which would wear out at the toe after a six week cycle (later, I would learn that this was due to how they were landing with a stabbing toe-first action that would disappear with the shoes gone).

When Puddles embarked upon his second hunting career, I still clearly remember driving away from the stables thinking that I would be returning in a week to put shoes back on, convinced that hardworking horses, such as these hunters, would not be seeing much of the barefoot blacksmith in the future.

A compromise tip

A compromise was needed; something between barefoot and shod, if that was possible. Protection without impeding function. Shoes worked and also failed because they protected the whole hoof, but did the whole hoof need protecting? What about partial hoof protection just under the toe where it was needed the most? And leave the frog weightbearing and functioning as per normal? What about the grass tips that were still used at some racing stables to keep gallopers effectively and legitimately barefoot? Although the hooves of hunting horses would endure far more sustained pressures than gallopers, tips seemed a possibility; at least there would be no harm in trying them. If they didn't work, it would be back to shoes for Puddles and probably a very short second career as a hunter.



There are those who love to quibble over semantics and suggest that a hoof with a tip is not barefoot. Does it really matter? If the frog is well grounded, that's bare enough.

TOP: The Yarra Glen and Lilydale Hunt. Photo by Carolyn Yencken, www.greatphotos.com.au. ABOVE: Puddles' story sounds too good to be true, but he never pulled up with a stone bruise. Photo by Carolyn Yencken, www.greatphotos.com.au.

Of all the equestrian pursuits, hunting would have to be the most conservative and staid in tradition. Not big on change. There was much consternation amongst all of the other hunt club riders about Andrea having a barefoot mount. Surely, her horse would break down, would have devastating tendon injuries, would fall over and would no doubt get stone bruises without the protection of shoes. No, this barefoot 'nonsense' simply could not and would not work for hunting horses, and Puddles would soon be either reshod or retired to hacking.

So, how did he go?

In summary (and remembering that Puddles began with a dodgy fetlock and no desire to jump), once the shoes had made way for tips, he never stopped at another jump. Ever.

Needless to say, Andrea's other hunters followed suit and had their shoes removed, and they too began wearing tips on their front hooves.

The great irony is that Puddles (apart from Andrea's other barefoot hunters) was the only horse that never seemed to have any hoof problems, despite being a 'whip' horse that did more work than any other mount in the hunting pack. Andrea's job was to assist the huntsman to track and keep control of the hounds, going wherever the hounds went. They were there until the finish; until all of the hounds were retrieved at the end of the hunt, and the pace would be anything from a walk to a flat gallop. Whilst the main body of hunters would genteelly jump the strategically-placed wooden panels that had the top wire safely pulled down below the top rail, Puddles had to jump whatever wire fence appeared in front of him. All of this over miles of tough rocky ridges without shoes.

Puddles' story begins sounding too good to be true, but the whole time he was hunting down on the rocky volcanic plains out west of Melbourne or up on the rocky ridges of the north-east, he never pulled up with a stone bruise. Nor did any of Andrea's other barefoot hunters. On the other hand, the shod horses often did. Maybe the gross concussion from continuous pounding over hard ground with steel shoes traumatises the thin layer of fleshy corium between sole and bone? Or maybe shod hooves don't have finely tuned proprioception and hit rocks too hard, as if a horse doesn't know they are there? The rocks are there alright.

How did Puddles' hooves stand up to such hard, abrasive work?

One major problem with shoeing was the deterioration of hooves during the hunting season. Even with quality hot shoeing, the hunters' shod hooves would be a total mess by season's end. The bare hooves, in contrast, were like polished timber at the end of the season, and even changed colour from a pasty white to a golden marble.

From the outset, the bare hooves seemed to grow faster, thicker and stronger. Far from wearing out, they were always in need of a good trim every time the farrier visited. Obviously, they were healthier and stronger, but there also seemed to be a difference in how Puddles moved barefoot when compared to shod. Shod hooves invariably land with a harsh and mechanical toe-first action, whereas bare hooves revert to the default position of heel-first landing, which creates a more fluid action, possibly mitigating abrasion.

The trim on the front hooves was always quite basic; balanced relative to the sole plane, with a bit of extra heel height to counter the 4mm thick tips, and the frog and sole were totally left alone. There is so much debate about the finer points of hoof trimming, when really the best hooves are attached to those horses that move the most, regardless of who trims them. Movement shapes hooves. It was Andrea's dedication to miles in the saddle that grew such good hooves on Puddles.

Anyone who regularly shoes horses would know that hind shoes wear out more than front shoes, because hind hooves have a harder working action and often do not cope with barefoot work. Amazingly, however, his back hooves never faltered from day one and they actually didn't need any protection. They didn't even need wholesale trimming, just a tidy up around the edges. The harder he worked, the steeper, more compact, tougher and more self-maintaining his hind hooves became.


What about Puddles' damaged fetlock joint? Put simply, he would go all day and never falter. The re-grounding of his frogs most likely provided enough structural support to take pressure off his degraded joints when under full load.

The fetlock in question remained fine for quite a few hunting seasons, until midway through one year he began pulling up a bit short after some very long gallops in the open rolling country west of Geelong. Surprisingly, short gallops up and down steep hills didn't affect him, so he was then 'retired' to the high country hunts around Yarck and Ruffy, and he never had another problem with his fetlock. Even on the incredibly steep hills.


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Were there any downsides to hunting barefoot?

Surely slippage would have been an issue? Well, 12 years of galloping around the ranges and jumping wire fences with never one accident on the hunt field is probably the best way to answer that.

Horses would fall over hunting whether they had shoes on or not and Andrea saw others fall over 'all the time'. She was convinced her horses were better balanced when they were barefoot than when they were shod. If anyone would know, a hunt club whip rider would know.

Andrea certainly didn't have to ride more conservatively. The main pack of riders never had to wait for her to catch up to them with her barefoot horses. On the contrary, more often than not they would see her way up on the top of a ridge and wonder how she got up there. There was never a time when she could not jump a panel the main group would jump. She would be first over and gone, often jumping 'ludicrous stuff' the main group of riders wouldn't go near.

No, there weren't any downsides, although success didn't just happen. According to Andrea, barefoot performance horses are not push-button machines that can be stored in the paddock like motor bikes, ready to do whatever, whenever. Forward planning was needed to ensure the hooves were sufficiently conditioned before each season began.

Sometimes, the hooves weren't quite up to task at the start of the season (again, this shows how it is work under saddle that really makes a tough hoof). They would be right for jumping duties, but scattered gravel on a really hard surface would test them. If they weren't hard enough at the start of the season, she would ride down the verge, not down the gravel road, but they soon toughened up.

Andrea believes most people want to put shoes on because they want to be able to ride their horses over any surface, any time. Now! Yes, they can do it when they have shoes on, but they do it at the expense of their joints. They won't breakdown today or tomorrow, but they inevitably will in the years ahead that will arrive all too soon. She is convinced if horses are allowed to remain barefoot, they become healthy and stay that way. Her sound old horses are testament to this.

What then of Puddles' legacy?

This was the first time I had used tips on a horse outside the confines of race tracks. It was a foray into the unknown and necessitated the development of wider tips than used on the race track to cover more sole for protection against tough terrain. In the years since, the use of tips has become quite widespread on many 'performance' horses across a diverse range of equestrian disciplines, including jumping, eventing, dressage, showing and, of course, plenty of trail, stock and pony club horses. Tips have even had a bit of a renaissance in the racing industry.

Puddles has shown clear as day that tips aren't going to break horses (there has been much ignorant chatter in the bowels of internet forums to suggest otherwise). Yes, there are some situations when tips can't be used; there are limitations to all forms of hoof protection, but at least hooves with tips are staying functional. The story is becoming clearer with each passing year as these horses are going from strength to strength.



Then, there are those who love to quibble over semantics and suggest that a hoof with a tip is not barefoot. Does it really matter? In the author's opinion if the frog is well grounded, that is bare enough.

For bare hoofcare to have credence, it needs to produce results, not just with lightly ridden paddock ponies, but with performance horses that are working for a living. Reality suggests some protection is going to be needed, at least partially, to accommodate the pressure of rider and saddle. Maybe there is a need for less idealism and more pragmatism and, of course, that terrible word 'compromise'.

How did life turn out for the barefoot hunting horses in the fullness of time?

When I first met Andrea, she was starting three young horses to take the place of her aging three, including Puddles. But, they simply weren't required because her three old barefoot hunters just kept going year after year. She retired from hunting before they did.

The author is in the 25th year of his 'apprenticeship' and began working as a farrier the same year that Puddles was born. Such irony does not pass unnoticed. Puddles was still being ridden and looked 'a million dollars' when he died from his paddock accident. If he was still a cripple wearing his corrective shoes, maybe he wouldn't have been running around crazy like some young horse a fraction of his age.