Standardbreds Unfettered

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

Photo by Sophie Barrington
When you take over the ownership of a ‘Standy’ – off the track – part of the package is taking on its hoof management. Own the horse; own the hooves.

Chances are its hooves will be needing help to remediate and remodel from the effects of working at pace in a harness in shoes. Its movement, posture and body shape will be changing as it adapts to life unharnessed, but under saddle - and this will be changing the balance of the ‘plastic’ hooves - most likely unpacking baggage that has been in place from its early days.

All manner of creative hoofcare is used on Standies in order to create the cleanest and most efficient action when trotting or pacing at speed in harness. This may involve hooves being trimmed at angles that are in conflict with internal structures and also the use of trailered and/or partially weighted shoes to alter stride dynamics.

On front hooves, many Standies are purposefully trimmed out of medial/lateral balance to prevent limb interference, particularly ‘knee knocking’. This mostly involves lowering the lateral side (outside) of the hooves and causes the hooves to turn inwards. This remodels the hoof capsule which, if done for long enough or indeed early enough in a horse’s life, will remodel bones and joints, creating a permanent deformity that cannot be changed; only managed.

Whatever the exact medial/lateral balance is, trimming front hooves involves rasping any overgrown wall down to a consistent height around the rim of the functional sole plane. Please note that it is important not to trim beyond the balance indicated by the sole plane when attempting to straighten crooked hoof capsules, because doing so would put excessive strain on the surface cartilage and connective ligaments of the joints.

Hind hooves on Standies nearly always have medial/lateral imbalance due partially to long term ‘corrective’ shoeing, but mostly due to upper body issues. Hocks, stifles and spinal joints all endure excessive and sustained pressure when working at speed in harness. Once the racing days are over, the corrective shoeing may finish, but the upper body damage remains.

It seems the best way to trim for imbalance in hind hooves is to set the hoof up so that it is perpendicular to the midline of the frog. The frog remains closely associated with the internal skeletal alignment, independent of hoof capsule deformity.

Another issue that manifests in the hind hooves is the common deformity referred to as ‘reversed angles’. This is when the hind hooves are not as steep as the front hooves when viewed from the side - the opposite of what is considered normal for horses.

Horses are meant to be ‘rear wheel drive’, which means their hind hooves are meant to be more upright than the front hooves to allow for greater downward displacement of the bony column.

Horses that are not pushing from the hind quarters, due to structural weakness, inevitably pull from their fore quarters and, slowly but surely, the hind hooves lose their steeper angle. Reversed angles are a litmus test of a horse’s biomechanical action.

A horse that is pulling itself along with its fore quarters lands toe first on front hooves which is biomechanically incorrect, and ultimately leads to coffin joint and navicular damage. If you suspect your off tracker has a structural defect such as this, it would be wise to seek advice from a relevant body therapist.
When managing reversed angles, the general aim is to conserve the heel height on the hinds, whilst keeping the toes suitably short, and monitor front hooves for sensitivity in the heel bulb area.

Some degree of slippage when the hind hooves come under loading helps to prevent excessive strain on the upper body. To this end, hind hooves should be trimmed flatter rather than trimmed to maximise grip. Unfortunately, this becomes a contraindication for any Standy that may be getting used as a competitive jumper and needs extra grip. Of course ethical riders would not be jumping horses with hind quarter problems, would they?

On a mature horse, crooked legs cannot be straightened beyond the status quo of its altered conformation. To do so risks damaging joints and connective tissue. It is, however, a fine line to walk because to do nothing also invites degradation of the internal structures of crooked lower legs.

Hoof balance is nearly always reflected by the sole plane which is very easy to see on a working barefoot horse. The trouble with horses coming off track is they are inevitably going to be shod, and the true sole plane is usually well hidden beneath layers of unexfoliated old sole and sometimes incredibly deformed hoof capsules. Even the most experienced eye may not be able to see through all of the subtle deformities to the real hoof beneath.

A simple way around this problem is to trim out any obvious imbalance issues and then work the horse barefoot on an abrasive surface. This will have the effect of wearing the hooves enough to reveal the level and angle of the true sole plane in the balance dictated by how the horse moves under saddle.

Ironically, this is how trainers often set up Standies to determine their most suitable hoof balance when they first go onto the track in harness.

Please note that the micro-conformation expressed by the sole plane is not set in stone, but is a moment in time. Equine hooves are ‘plastic’, and constantly changing according to the forces of movement and stance. If there are changes - hopefully for the better - in how your Standy moves after coming out of harness and starting life under saddle, the innate hoof balance should improve.

An ideal management strategy is to identify the hoof balance best suited to the horse at that moment in time and then keep the hooves constantly in the same balance with maintenance trimming, which is simply a quick touch up with a rasp every two or three weeks. This way, the hooves never grow long enough for imbalance to ever be a major concern.

There are opportunities to learn basic hoof trimming at owner trimmer workshops. Fortunately, the steady temperament and patience of Standies make them ideal subjects for total beginners. They can be set up by a professional and then maintained by the owner.
Hoof protection

The best long term option – physiologically – is always going to be horses kept and ridden barefoot. Ah, the perfect world!

Even though Standies are mostly quite robust, due in no small part to their Morgan heritage, they are a product of an unforgiving industry that starts them too young and overfeeds them in order to maximise output for racing. As a result of this, most off track Standies - no different to their off track Thoroughbred ‘cousins’ - have low grade metabolic laminitis. Whilst this is only sub-clinical - in that they are not lame - their hooves are weakened, especially the front hooves which have abnormally thin soles. With the added weight of a rider and saddle, such hooves need protection when traversing rough ground.

Excessive abrasion is also a problem that may dictate the need for hoof protection, especially if a Standy does not travel straight. Abrasion is concentrated on the side of the hoof that lands first - it’s the deceleration that abrades - and is further magnified if hooves are corkscrewed on landing or take off.

Hoof boots

The best hoof protection does not impede hoof function, especially concussion absorption, which makes rubber hoof boots an ideal first choice. They are used for riding but are removed afterwards, allowing a horse to remain barefoot in the paddock with its frogs well grounded.

An extra reason for trying hoof boots with Standies is their much maligned rough gait. The author is not suggesting that all Standies are rough to ride - they are not - but such a preconception is probably the main reason that precludes Standies from being more popular as a saddle horse. If your new Standy feels like it has square wheels, the problem may be alleviated by inserting thick concussion pads into hoof boots.

As good as boots are, there is a limiting factor to their use with Standies. When there is a twisting action in the hind limbs, the hooves tend to corkscrew on the ground and boots may spin around or come off. To minimise the likelihood of this, be sure to only use robust, correctly fitted boots. Unfortunately, some Standies just don’t do boots.

Polyurethane shoes

Another hoof protection option that is returning to prominence with the advent of better materials as well as our increased understanding of the damaging effects of concussion are flexible plastic (polyurethane) shoes. Despite being flexible, polyurethane is exceptionally hard wearing.

One recently developed polyurethane shoe that is proving to be such a success that it is setting a new benchmark in the hoof protection industry is the Easycare ‘Easyshoe’. These contain a sliver of steel encased in the plastic outer shell which is substantial enough to block the nails and provide a solid base for keeping clenches tight for the duration of the shoeing, but thin enough to remain flexible.
This overcomes a major problem of previous models of plastic shoes, whereby the nail heads in pure plastic would progressively work their way further into the body of the shoe and cause the clenches to come loose prematurely. The author has used quite a few Easyshoes and has found the clenches stay nearly as tight as they would for steel shoes at the end of a shoeing cycle of four to six weeks, even on large horses. An added bonus is that they are very easy to apply.

Easyshoes come with robust side clips that help to negate the effects of twisting hind legs. They also have an effective and flexible frog support and are wide webbed, which spreads the weight bearing across a large surface area of the hoof. They appear to be a promising development in the evolution of hoof protection that does not impede function.

**Tips**

The author keeps quite a few of his clients’ Standies in tips on the front hooves to overcome the thin soles, whilst still allowing the frogs to stay well grounded. Tips are simple, cheap and effective, so long as there is not too much abrasion at the heels.

**Steel shoes**

Some off track Standies will require steel shoes if the alternatives described above are not suitable in their given situations. The best general advice the author can give for shoeing Standies is to be regular and don’t keep them shod all year round.

Just because Standies can have hoof walls tough enough to hold onto a set of shoes for months, shoes should be reset no longer than six weeks and probably every five weeks. Yes, it gets expensive, but it is false long term economy to stretch out shoeing intervals. Long toes wreck horses.

If shoes are going to be needed, they should be used when needed, not all year round. The more time that shod horses can spend out of shoes, the better. One calendar season out of each year is a wise minimum.
A footnote about Ideal Guy

This off tracker was somewhat unique to start with because he had relatively well balanced front hooves which were only slightly turned in and remain so. His hind hooves remain medial high - more so on the near side hind.

It seemed that his biggest issue was reversed angles. Unlike medial/lateral imbalance, this cannot be managed by trimming alone. It can only be solved by the combined efforts of therapist, trimmer and rider.

Despite his hind quarter flaw that will always be there, changes in his way of moving have resulted in significant improvements. He feels stronger behind, and more comfortable when his hooves are picked up and his reversed angles are not as obvious.

His heel bulbs are less sensitive to palpation which indicates a significant improvement in movement and less toe first landing.

To have an ‘off tracker’ change this much in a relatively short time shows the combined benefits of correct and considered groundwork and riding, as well as effective body therapy - and the author probably shouldn’t undersell the benefit of regular, physiologically correct hoof care!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Andrew Bowe is a career master farrier who specializes 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. To find out more, go to: www.barehoofcare.com.