

the trouble with pony hooves

Ponies should have the best hooves going round!

Ponies need to move and want to move. Laneways are a great idea to restrict access to grass whilst allowing their innate desire to keep moving.

by Andrew Bowe, B.App.Sc. Master farrier.
www.barehoofcare.com

Ponies are the compact SUVs of the horse world, with a great power to weight ratio to match. They are cheap to fuel and run on a sniff of tufty grass.

However, the life that most ponies live in Australia is the exact opposite of their heritage, and this results in a raft of hoof problems.

Indeed, ponies actually run best on a regular supply of mixed species of poor quality, low sugar, high fibre, 'tufty' grasses. After all, ponies are a product of hundreds of years of tough living in tough places. They migrated originally from the "Starving Steppe" country of central Asia when first domesticated to places such as the Shetland Islands and various other cold, wet, windy, rocky, hard and overall inhospitable places where they were pressed into hard labor in such jobs as pit ponies in coal mines.

However, the life that most ponies live in Australia is the exact opposite of their heritage. Nowadays they are confined in small spaces and graze improved pasture species (designed for high producing cattle rather than horses) that they are metabolically unsuited to.

On the whole, modern ponies are under worked and overfed. Instead of going to work every day in the coal mines with their ragged little child labor companions, their hardest day out is usually once a month at pony club where they even get driven to and fro in a float.

Such a lifestyle results in a raft of problems for ponies' hooves, ranging from ongoing management issues such as soft, flat, thin soled hooves to serious pathological issues such as laminitis.

Ponies' hooves are generally not the best hooves going round!

Hoof protection options

When ponies are worked on rough terrain, they usually need solar protection. Nowadays there is a range of hoof protection options available.

Boots: In recent years, strap on hoof boots have been developed and are possibly the best way to protect pony hooves because they can be put on when needed and taken off in the paddock. The best of both worlds. Hoof boots can also be used with soft concussion absorbing pads.

There is something about putting a layer of rubber between a pony and the hard Australian ground that just makes sense.

Tips: In situations when boots may not be suitable (such as speed events or dressage competitions), simple to use tips may provide adequate protection where it is needed at the toe. The advantage of using tips rather than full shoes is that the frog is still able to fully function, absorbing concussion and maximizing blood flow.

Shoes: Boots or tips seem to cover most bases for pony hooves, but your pony may instead be wearing shoes. If so, ponies should be shod with lightweight shoes. Aluminium shoes are ideal because not only are they light, but they also wear away at the toe. This negates the effect of the toe growing longer as the shoe cycle progresses, thus lessening the pressure on the laminar attachment.

If you are shoeing your pony, it is important to shoe only when needed and not all year round. Hooves should be spelled from shoes in the off season.

Pony hooves tend to grow very quickly so they need to be regularly trimmed, whether barefoot or shod.

There are quite often laminitic processes working away insidiously within their hooves, so long toes are quite damaging because excessive stress is placed on a weakened laminar attachment. Short toes are a requirement.

The fat pony dilemma

Hoof protection is only a Band-Aid for problematic hooves that are a result of inappropriate lifestyles. How about growing better hooves?

Better, stronger, healthier hooves come from increasing movement and controlling the diet.

Most ponies are metabolically unsuited to the types of grasses that predominate in sown or improved pastures in the settled areas of Australia, so they need to have their pasture access restricted (sometimes even eliminated all together). This sees them get locked up in small areas which may well restrict their access to the wrong feed, but it also takes away most of their movement.

The problem with this scenario is that horses – all horses big and small – are genetically programmed to be prairie animals. They need constant movement for ongoing physical and mental health. They need to move and they want to move.

What about re-organizing their living quarters to work with their innate desire to keep moving, but at the same time restrict their pasturage and make the best of a bad situation?

Such an outcome can be achieved by setting up a loop paddock, which has the potential to produce hooves far better than any trimming or shoeing parameters.

This example below shows how an area of land the same size as a dressage arena can be reorganized to form a long and continuous laneway that encourages movement.

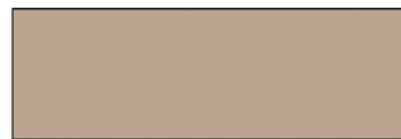
Anecdotaly, the increase in total movement when comparing a regular paddock with a loop paddock of the same surface area is huge. Ponies seem to keep moving all day when in a loop paddock, and most importantly, they seem to be moving with purpose.

Here at Mayfield, we have found that 'group therapy' works best for ponies in loops. When they are kept in groups, it seems that herd politics comes into play and they move even more, often with one leader and another 'driver'.

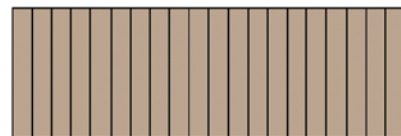


Love handles all round!

A dressage arena is 20m x 60m



divide that into 3m strips you get 20 strips



When the 3m wide strips are joined together end on, the total length of the track is now 400m!



The dimensions of this loop are
100m x 80m

Modern fencing materials make it very simple and inexpensive to set up a loop paddock. All that is needed is a power fence unit, tread-in posts and some 'hot tape' (it usually doesn't take very long to educate ponies that white tape bites!).

If you have an existing paddock an acre or two in size, all you need to do is put up the inside fence.

If you use tread-ins, it is very easy to alter the size and shape of the loop, according to the quality and quantity of pasture and the needs of the pony.

Be sure to keep up a supply of suitable grass hay.

Please do not lock ponies up and not feed them. They need to have a constant throughput of high fibre feed. Starving them is ignorant and ultimately cruel.



Nowadays there are several options available for horses that need solar protection, boots are great and tips allow the frog to fully function. If using shoes, choose aluminium - the are light and wear away at the toe just like the hoof does naturally, and rest the feet during the off season.

