



When a horse needs shoes

Part 4 - Some advice

by Andrew Bowe, BAppSc, Master Farrier
Photos courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre - www.barehoofcare.com

Previous articles in this series have discussed how shoeing affects the physiological functioning of equine hooves. Despite the obvious convenience, shoeing is something that shouldn't be taken too lightly. Whilst it is easy to get a horse 'going' in the short term, right now, keeping a horse fully sound through its latter teens and beyond is a great challenge.

There is more to the story than just 'whacking' a set of shoes on and riding off down the gravel road into the sunset. There is more to shoeing than simply balancing the hooves.

The points discussed in this article are some of the more significant things that can be done to minimise the likelihood of chronic lameness in years to come.

Be regular

There is probably one thing above all else when it comes to shoeing for long-term soundness. Be regular. It's often been said that a poor shoeing job re-done regularly is better than the best shoeing job that is not re-done regularly enough.

The moment a shoe is nailed on, a hoof is protected from wearing so it begins growing longer. After four to five weeks it reaches a mechanical limit after which time it grows too long for correct bio-mechanical functioning.

When a horse's body moves forward and pivots over excessively long toes, there is too much compression in the front of all the hinge joints from the coffin joint up and excessive tearing forces acting on the soft tissues behind the joints.

For horses that have hooves with a running forward deformity (run out toes, underrun heels), there are numerous shoes available off the shelf that have a short breakover already built into them for bio-mechanical assistance. (See photo 1 on next page)

Another way to manage toe length is by using soft aluminium shoes because they are soft enough to wear at the toe concurrent to the toe growing longer.

Ideally, a horse should go no longer than five weeks between shoeings.

Don't listen too closely to anyone who says an okay shoeing job is one that lasts at least four months, but a really good job would last a bit longer.

Even if you stretch the shoeing out by just a couple of weeks to save money, you are doing your horse a great disservice. If economic limitation means that you can't get the farrier that often, a good solution is for you to pull the shoes and trim the hooves yourself after five weeks and let your horse go barefoot for a couple of weeks until the farrier comes to reshoe it. Able bodied horse owners should, at the very least, know how to remove shoes.

About now you are probably thinking that the author is being frivolous with this suggestion, but there is actually quite a benefit to be realised by pulling shoes and trimming hooves even if it's only a couple of days before your farrier returns for reshoeing.

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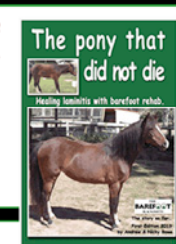
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“ Keeping horses shod 365 days of the year is a big fault of modern hoofcare.

You may have noticed how shod hooves often appear to get progressively taller the more times they are shod. You are not imagining it, the hoof walls are actually pushing upwards as the unsupported boney column reaches for the ground. In effect, a shod hoof capsule rides upwards like a bell boot.

To avoid this problem of hooves becoming jammed upwards at the coronet band, remove the shoes a couple of days before the farrier is due (if it is practical to do so) and ‘unload’ the outer wall by rasping it at a 45 degree angle to give any jammed up hoof wall the chance to let down before being reshod.

Give hooves a break from shoes

When considering the use of shoes for your horse, it is wise to look to the past. In days when horses were working for a living, they were only shod when they had to be.

The author vaguely remembers starting his career in an industry that always pulled shoes in the southern winter and horses could get a seasonal break so their hooves could ‘heal’. Not just two or three weeks, but a full season. Interestingly, the annual barefoot break was focused on getting the old nail hole damaged wall to grow out; no consideration was given to the benefit of putting a horse back down onto its frogs.

Back then there were no winter competitions held in cosy indoor arenas. Horses were turned out. It seemed that the only souls hardy enough to endure winter riding were the hunters, and their horses were always shod for maximum grip, but they were turned out and spelled without shoes after the hunting season finished in early Spring.

Keeping horses shod 365 days of the year is a big fault of modern hoofcare.

Hooves that never get a break out of wearing shoes get so unhealthy and become so reliant upon shoes, that the shoes ultimately become a crutch, the cycle of constant shoeing is perpetuated and owners of such horses become too scared to take them off at all, lest they ‘fall apart’. It’s a big call, but the author can’t remember ever meeting a horse that didn’t benefit greatly from having a seasonal break out of shoes.

It should also be said that giving a horse a break out of shoes over the winter months does not simply mean turning a horse out with its shoes still on and then just letting them fall off sometime later in the paddock. Shoes should be removed and hooves trimmed before they are turned free!



Shoe light

If you are using steel shoes, it is best to use the lightest ones practical. Every ounce added to a hoof increases fatigue and wear on the joints.

It has long been thought that adding weight increases action. Maybe it does, but physical action can only be increased through increased physical effort, thus increasing fatigue and resulting in hooves shod with heavy shoes hitting the ground harder.

If metal shoes are required, aluminium is a good option, otherwise plastic shoes can be used.

The photo above shows the weight comparison between plastic (110g), aluminium (180g) and steel (450g) shoes of a similar size.

Don’t squeeze shoes onto hooves

One of the real inconveniences of using shoes is the inevitable lost shoe (usually on a Friday afternoon before a comp and yeah, good luck finding a farrier then!). As annoying as a lost shoe can be, a good shoeing job is paradoxically one that will allow any shoe to come off cleanly and easily if it gets caught in something, such as a gate or fence.

It’s not a pretty sight seeing half a hoof stuck to a shoe; big nails the size of bridge spikes, four or five each side of the hoof with massive clenches; just missing the rest of the horse above it.

A shoe doesn’t need to be squeezed on. Clenches actually derive strength through their angle. The sharper the angle, the stronger the clench.

The practice of short shoeing to avoid shoe loss is a common mistake. Whilst it may be necessary and not too great a problem in short-term situations such as a mustering job in rough country, long-term short shoeing needs to be avoided. It will inevitably cause heel pain which initiates toe first landing and puts a horse on the track to navicular problems.

Shoe for hoof expansion

There is no bone in the back of the hoof, only soft tissue that flexes laterally when loading. This means the placement of nails in a hoof is a compromise. The further back they are placed into where the hoof flexes more, the sturdier is the connection between shoe and hoof. However, at the same time, the further back the nails are, the more they interfere with hoof function. A workable solution is to only place nails forward of the widest part of the hoof.

Avoid cosmetic shoeing

Avoid shoeing that alters conformation faults in order to make a horse more desirable for judging but inadvertently torques joints of the lower leg. The conformation of mature horses is permanent and needs to be respected. It is what it is.

Any dressing up of conformational defects should be limited to ‘window dressing’, such as lateral shifting of toe clips on a pigeon toed horse to create an optical illusion of straight legs without changing the underlying medial to lateral balance.

Don’t start shoeing too young

Do not start shoeing a horse until it is mature.

The development of the structures in the caudal hoof (frog, digital cushion, lateral cartilages and venous plexus) continues until about five years of age, but can only proceed when a hoof is weightbearing through the frog. Putting a shoe on an immature hoof effectively shuts down further development.

If you have a young horse that ‘needs’ shoes to be worked, only put them on for short periods.

Tips are undoubtedly a better option for young horses because they protect the toe but allow the frog to remain weight bearing (be sure that tips are set up correctly with a short breakover and correct anterior to posterior balance and are refitted regularly).

The next edition will be all about plastic shoes which are going through a growth phase and are topical.