I am often asked about leaving horses barefoot. I must say from the onset that I
favour horses being maintained without shoes when possible. Whether or not it
is feasible for a horse to go without shoes will depend on the owner's situation
and expectations, as well as many variables that influence the feet. I also feel that horses
can be shod in a physiologic manner such that the structures of the foot might change but very
minimal damage to the hoof will occur.

Shoes are used for protection when wear of
the hoof exceeds growth, for traction (which
is often needed in the performance horse for
athletic activities), and for therapeutic reasons
in order to treat disease or to address limb
conformation. One or a combination of the
above reasons might dictate the necessity for
shoes. Much of the horse industry is involved
in the athletic performance of horses and the
question arises: "Can this horse compete and
perform at its best without shoes?"

As all horses are not created equal, neither
are their feet. So when we decide whether a
horse can be kept barefoot (and many can't),
many variables have to be considered: the
breed of the horse, the hoof conformation, the
manner in which the horse is kept, the surface
on which it is worked, and, most important, for
what purpose the horse is going to be used.

It also makes a big difference if the horse
has worn shoes previously and for how long,
as well as the previous farrier care the animal
has received. All of these variables must be
considered to determine whether a horse will
be a candidate to go without shoes. Many
horses can do well without shoes as long as
they are not asked to perform.
Horses are much easier to maintain in a barefoot manner if they have never had shoes. The majority of horses’ feet remain healthy until the time they are broken in and begin training. During this time a lot of changes to the feet take place.

Once training begins in the horse’s second year, the hoof capsule and its related structures are still immature, the animal is confined more, and it now has a rider placed on its back, which leads to additional weight bearing on the feet. These factors usually lead to excessive wear on the feet and shoes are placed on the feet for protection.

It has been discovered that the horse has receptors in the bottom of its foot and it is speculated that these receptors function in a stimulatory capacity. So the first thing that happens when shoes are applied is that these receptors lose contact with the ground.

Next we look at the application of shoes by the farrier. How much protection is removed from the bottom of the foot in the form of hoof wall, sole depth and the bars? How is the shoe fitted and attached to the foot, i.e. where are the nails placed, how many, and what size.

As training progresses, the horse generally receives more baths, which increase the moisture in the feet over time and make them softer. So we see right off that the combination of the above factors can/will change the structures of the foot forever. Prove this to yourself by taking a digital photo of a horse’s foot at the start of training and then take additional photos six months to a year later and compare the difference. Traditionally, we place shoes on these youngsters too early and often it is not necessary as long as a few modifications are made in our training programme.

If you decide to remove the shoes and attempt to use your horse barefoot, we recommend a 30-90 day transition period during which the horse is taken out of work. This allows the structures of the horse’s feet to toughen and adapt to being without shoes. At this point we also change the method of hoof care from trimming the foot to “shaping” the foot.

Nothing is removed from the bottom of the foot. Using a rasp, the heels are moved back to the base of the frog (when possible) and the hoof wall is not lowered but rasped on an angle so a rounded edge is created. Flares or excess toe are removed from the outer hoof wall (shaping). We finish by slightly beveling the toe to promote sole growth and to toughen the sole callus.

There are advocates of the barefoot movement that claim through their research that applying shoes to the horse is detrimental and therefore all horses need to be barefoot. This research claims that nails placed in a horse’s foot are toxic, that the bars in the heels should be removed as they impinge on the circulation and that all horses should be trimmed in a specified manner. Yet I have never been privy to this research.

If we think of the hoof capsule as a cone, one quickly sees the necessity of preserving the bars as they provide stability and allow the hoof capsule to expand, which in turn allows the normal physiology of the foot to take place. Finally, if we consider the various breeds of horses, individual foot conformation, structures of the foot and phalangeal alignment, it would appear highly unreasonable to trim all horses in the same manner.

(Article courtesy of www.thehorse.com) SAH