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Get Happy Feet for the Trail

Know what's right
for your horse --
shoes,
barefoot,
boots

By Stacie G. Boswell,
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Kelly and Dave Gifford ride Rohan and Zebadiah on rocky trails near Caballo Lake State Park.

To shoe or not to shoe? That is the question! There is no “one size fits all hooves” answer. There is a textbook on this subject; therefore covering this topic in-depth is beyond the scope of this article.

But here are some things you should know when you are making decisions about your horse's feet:

Horse hoof anatomy

The front of the hoof is called the toe, the sides are called the quarters, and the projections in the back are the heel bulbs. The bottom of the foot is the sole, and the wedge-shaped (V-shaped) area is called the frog.

The hard part of the hoof is the horn or hoof capsule, and it is made of insensitive tissue, much like a fingernail. The hoof wall consists of millions of tiny moisture-retaining tubes called horn tubules. The coronary band at the top of the foot functions similarly to the human cuticle. If the coronary band is damaged, the hoof may grow with a ridge, crack, or scar. Within the hoof capsule is the coffin bone. It is covered by sensitive tissue, called lamina. These laminae have millions of tiny ridges and projections which interdigitate, or interlock, with

the insensitive lamina and hold the foot together.

When to shoe

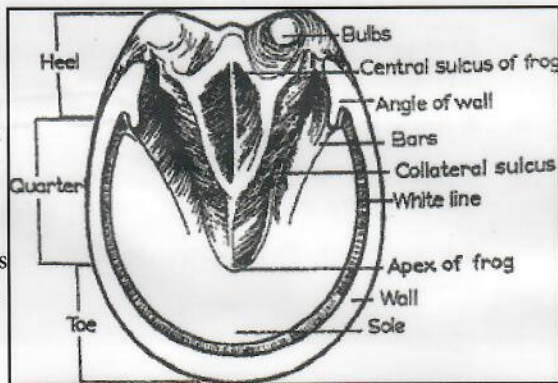
It is necessary to protect a horse's hoof when the hoof horn is being worn off faster than the body produces it, when the horse experiences foot pain, and if the foot has either a temporary or permanent abnormality.

Wear exceeds growth. Some horses just don't grow adequate foot tissue. Factors such as nutrition and overall health and well-being play a role in hoof health. How much growth, the general shape, and the density of the horn tubules of the foot is highly influenced by genetics. The horn tubules are attached to the sensitive lamina (the soft tissue within the foot) within the hoof capsule. Most stock horses and Mustangs grow really good

feet. Some Thoroughbreds have notoriously thin walls and/or sensitive feet. Some horses have the ability to tolerate rocky terrain, but most need some protection for their feet when the trail gets really rough. Factors that influence the wear rate of the hoof wall include frequency and duration of riding and the terrain. If you are riding 3-4 days a week on very rocky terrain, you are highly likely to need to have your horse shod. If you typically ride in the arena and are going out on the trail once or twice a month, you most likely don't need shoes.

Foot pain. It is just not humane to ask the horse to work through pain. Sensitive horses may benefit from a shoe with a pad for further protection of their sole, if shoes alone do not alleviate foot pain on rocky trails. Farrier Naomi Saiz advises that, “Any horse that gets foot-sore while they have shoes on should have pads.” It is not fair to ask your horse to keep going over miles of rocky trails when every step is painful.

A hoof abnormality. This may include temporary damage to the hoof wall, which will grow out in 4-6 months. Quarter cracks need to be stabilized by a shoe, and some can be managed to a point where the crack grows out or disappears



Shoes are the traditional, time-tested solution to foot protection and stability.



However, they are expensive. Also, the traction provided by a metal shoe is not as good as that of a bare hoof. To overcome slippage problems, rim shoes or adding borium (a hard-facing product) to the shoe will increase traction (Figure 8).

OTHER HOOF PROTECTION

Boots

Overcoming some of the disadvantages of shoeing are hoof boots. These provide good traction because of their rubberized design while still protecting the hoof from impact, and in the long run, they are generally less expensive than shoes. They may come with their own set of potential problems such as rubs. These can occur on the heels, coronary band, or pastern, and are quite painful to the horse. Boots can malfunction in the backcountry, or you could lose one. Some folks carry a boot to protect a horse that has lost a shoe in the backcountry.

Duct tape

It can be the magical fix-all! It should be carried on pretty much every trail ride, and can be used to augment worn Velcro on a hoof boot or to stabilize a loose shoe to prevent loss. It also can be used alone to protect a hoof for a short time if your mount throws a shoe.

The bottom line is that if your horse is growing enough good, dense foot for the amount of riding you are doing on your choice of terrain, shoes or protective hoof boots may not be necessary. The horses that can do this while being heavily ridden in rocky terrain are few and far between. What you and your farrier decide should be based on the horse's need.

A special "Thank You" for images and contribution to this article goes to farrier Naomi Saiz.

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IMAGES

1. The portion of a shoe after being worn and touching the horse's foot. The area of shiny metal shows how the dynamic structure of the hoof contacts and wears the shoe in this region.
2. A leather and a plastic pad. These are nailed between the shoe and the foot and are trimmed to the exact shape needed to provide protection for the sole.
3. A horse's hoof with a quarter crack. The foot has been re-balanced, and the crack marked horizontally using a rasp. At this time, this horse's foot is growing out and the crack has been reduced.
4. A pour-in pad being placed in a freshly-shod hoof.
5. A new and a used rim shoe showing how the edges of the rim and the dirt packed within it can add traction.
6. A hoof boot. They provide foot protection and good traction.