**Thinking About Going Barefoot?**

A Holistic Approach to Being Barefoot and Sound



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**Introduction:**

Maybe you just bought a horse that is currently wearing shoes or maybe you own a horse that has developed issues and you are considering having your horse go barefoot. No matter your current situation this article is full of practical strategies that will help your horse be barefoot and sound. The key is to remember that it will take time and a level of commitment but the rewards are a healthy horse.

When I first met Haley, I was told that she was a 15 year old bay, OTTB that had spent many years as a successful hunter jumper competing in the show ring. Her owner decided to lease her for use in a lesson program and about a year ago she became consistently lame. The owner tried everything and worked closely with a vet and the blacksmith to try help the horse. They kept her on stall rest, they tried different shoeing techniques and a whole arsenal of supplements to no avail.

I can still remember when the phone call came in on a cold winter day. Carol’s shakey voice on the other end of the phone, practically in tears. I listened to Carol tell me about Haley. Carol said that she bought her when she was just a three year old. She had a few starts but the previous owner thought that Haley, just didn’t have it in her.

“Haley, is such a good girl; for a mare.” she laughed and then continued, “She does everything you ask her to do.”

It was clear that she loved Haley and couldn’t bear the thought of putting her down. Carol begged me to come to meet her horse.

She said, “You are my only hope at this point. I feel like we’ve done everything.”

**On The Holistic Road to Recovery:**

When I spoke with Carol over the phone, I explained that I was a barefoot trimmer and do not put shoes on horses. I told her that we needed to take the shoes off of Haley to help her heal. This was contradictory to everything she was ever taught. She was surprised to discover that the way her farriers trimmed the horse and the horse shoe was causing the problem and wasn’t a part of the solution. To help her understand, I explained that every time a horse’s foot lands on the ground, the hoof expands and when the horse lifts the hoof back off the ground, it contracts. The physical act of landing on the heel and frog, (expansion and contraction) helps to pump blood, in the foot, and absorb the concussive forces safely.

Since Haley has been wearing a metal shoe, on the other hand, her hoof is not able to fully expand, and this unfortunately reduced blood flow. This results in a change in how her hoof meets the ground forcing the impact to be absorbed by the hoof wall instead of the back of the foot. Over time, this weakens the internal structures and as they start to diminish, it leads to long term damage of the bones, joints and other soft tissues.

When I first met Haley, all 16.2 hands high of her, there was a worried look in her large eye. She stood, in the barn aisle on crossties. Haley’s front legs were stuck way out in front of her. She was attempting to take the weight off of her front feet, by leaning back on her haunches. I noticed that both of her front feet were shod, and that her heels were very high, and she had a very long toe. When I picked up her front feet it was hard for her to put weight on the other front foot. I also noticed that the sole of her foot was flat and shallow. There was a tiny bulge on the sole of her foot at the end of her long, overly stretched frog. It was clear, even from the radiograph taken by the vet three weeks ago, that the coffin bone had become separated from the hoof wall and started to press down on the sole resulting in laminitis.

**Accept it Will Take Time:**

Carol agreed to have pull the shoes off of Haley. She accepted the fact that in this type of situation, there was no quick fix. We had to work holistically, scrutinizing all of the factors that could contribute to the current situation that she was facing with Haley’s condition. First and foremost, it was going to take time. At this point, Haley’s owner wanted her horse to get better and was willing to do what it took. I think what helped her the most was me explaining what to expect when the shoes come off. Many clients see that their horse becomes very sore and it scares them. I explained that when you remove shoes on a horse it is kind of like taking your boots and socks off and walking across a stone driveway barefoot. Of course this would be painful until, over time, you develop a thicker skin on the bottom of your feet! There will also be an increase in sensitivity due to the increase in blood flow to the hoof from the removal of the shoes. This is a good thing! We need blood flow to redevelop the sensory apparatuses, provide deceleration properties (energy dispersion and absorption), and provide healing nourishment.

Also, remember that when a horse is wearing shoes they usually land toe first and Haley has been wearing shoes for most of its life, we will now be asking the horse to use their feet completely differently (by slowly correcting heel and toe we will set the horse up with the ability to start to use the back of their feet). Since Haley has been wearing shoes for a long time, she has not been utilizing the back of the foot properly and therefore the internal structures may be weakened.

Sometimes horses have multiple issues affecting them at the same time. While Haley was suffering from laminitis, she was also experiencing a bacterial infection on her frog, she thrush on all four feet. It was important that we treated the other issues so that Haley was comfortable and able to start moving around as soon as possible.

**Barefoot Trimming and Boots:**

On the day that I met Haley, and removed her shoes, and I was careful to only sweep her heels, with my rasp, to bring them back and took a little off of her toe. As mentioned earlier in the article, Haley had thrush in all four hooves. The owner and I talked about cleaning the foot out, and spraying apple cider vinegar, tea tree oil, and water solution with a squirt bottle on the infected areas. I gave the mare about seven days to adjust before returning to the farm. Then, every two weeks I stopped out to make small adjustments to correct the under-run heel and continue to shorten the toe. My goal was to slowly correct the hoof and guide the new growth so that it can attach to the coffin bone and help the horse build a healthier foot that could be barefoot and sound.

**What you Feed, How you Feed and How often you Feed:**

Diet plays a large role in the health and rehabilitation of the hoof. In the morning, Haley was given 1 flake of hay and 2 quarts of senior grain, in her stall. Then, she is turned out during the day and spend five hours standing around eating three flakes of hay, in a flat poorly drained paddock with two other horses. It may seem like Haley gets a lot of hay but after careful observation, we discovered that Haley was such a submissive horse and would frequently get pushed off her hay pile. So she wasn’t able to eat her daily ration. Finally, around 3:30pm she was brought back into her stall and given 2 flakes of hay and 3 quarts of grain with a joint supplement.

In spite of all the food that Haley was given, she actually looked underweight. We now know that some of her more aggressive pasture mates may have been contributing to this problem but, we also took a fecal sample to determine if she had worms. Her test came back low so we did not worm her. Then, we returned our attention to her diet. To help Haley, started by sending a sample of the hay to a forage testing lab and then utilized the results to develop a diet that was nutritionally balanced. (Even though Haley is kept at a boarding facility, they bought a very large supply of hay from one location.)

Then, we decided to provide a free choice, first cutting hay, slow feed boxes and nets. This would allow her to eat in small amounts all day long. We also added an all-natural anti-inflammatory supplement to counteract the (laminitis) and simultaneously reduced her grain to limit starches. Ultimately, we gradually switched Haley over to a protein, vitamin, and mineral supplement with probiotics. In the long run, this fiber rich diet, that was low in starches, kept the pH of her gut neutral; making her digestive tract happy. This internal environment promotes a healthy diversity of the right kinds of gut microbes that break down the fiber, proteins, fats and sugars. When the digestive tract in a horse can support this biodiversity, the horse benefits by being able to extract more nutrients from the foods they eat.

When, spring and summer arrived Carol put a grazing muzzle on Haley to reduce the amount of grass she consumed. While grass contains many wonderful nutrients, the mixture of grasses that were in Haley’s pasture contained too many sugars. We were concerned that all that sugar would have a negative effect. If the sugars cause the hind gut to become too acidic the drop in pH could kill many of the microbes that live there. As they die off, they release toxins that cause inflammation and Haley could end up getting laminitis again! All of this work was worth it because now Haley was getting the nutrients she needed to support healthy growth and repair.

**Environment and Exercise:**

One of the most important things we needed to do in addition to regular trimming and a change to her diet was to keep her moving. Exercise improves blood flow, helps reduce inflammation, and encourages the development of the structures of the hoof.

In this case, Haley is kept at a boarding facility. There were 25 horses in this barn and the farm owner had a routine and a team of people to help with various chores throughout the day. We had to work something out with the barn owner that would allow Haley to be kept outside all the time, instead of standing around in her stall. She is now in a hilly pasture that contains a large run in shelter and two other horses that Haley so she has company.

This pasture was chosen because it has different types of terrain that are important for healthy feet. The hills in the pasture allow the horses to really work and use different muscles when they walk around on the grass and hard ground. The farm owner also added pea gravel near the water tubs, the gates, and in any low areas that required improved drainage. When the horses walk on the pea gravel they are stimulated, and naturally worn down, and slowly start to “toughen up”.

To ensure that the horses are constantly moving and could get their “fair share” the farm owner worked with Carol to put hay in slow feed boxes and hay nets that were spread out all around the pasture to keep the horses moving throughout the day. Knowing how many slow feed boxes to use and how much hay to provide requires some trial and error. The farm owner knew the horses that Haley was pastured with. So they decided to add one slow feed box per horse and scattered them around the pasture. They added one 45lb bale to each slow feed box. Then, they hung hooks on the side of the barn, to hang the empty hay nets from to create a wide opening to make it easier to stuff them with two flakes. They wrapped and hooked 8 slow feed nets in various places around the arena. If the horses ran out of hay they knew they needed to add more. They made adjustments to the amount of hay, as needed.

Carol also agreed to walk Haley once a day for increasing amounts of time, and then lunge her at the walk, trot and canter. At first, the owner walked Haley with a pair of hoof boots that were fitted for her. Over time, we were able to walk her on different types of terrain to build up her sole without boots!

**In conclusion:**

A year later, Haley’s feet have come a long way and she is sound enough to be ridden on most surfaces and occasionally uses hoof boots on Haley’s front feet when they choose to ride on rocky terrain.

In addition, Carol continues to exercise Haley by lunging her in the round pen, taking her for walks on the trail, or riding her in the arena sand. Haley is also doing well with 24 hour turnout, a grain free diet that includes slow fed free choice hay. Finally, regular and consistent trimming appointments are set between 4-7 weeks depending on the amount of hoof growth.

While this might seem like the end of the story, it is really just the beginning for Carol and Haley! The success that we had was no coincidence. By providing a natural lifestyle, (constant movement, correct and regular wearing down of the hooves through movement on varied terrain (trimming), correct use of the back of the hoof, low sugar high fiber diet, balanced nutrients, eating small amounts all day, and being outside with a herd\*), will help our horses be happy, healthy, barefoot and sound.