

# What's it like owning a barefoot horse?

In recent years, more and more horse owners are choosing to keep their horses barefoot. This has sparked outrage in some quarters, and in others people are merely asking the question "why?"

As a horse owner who chooses to keep her horses barefoot, I thought you may find it useful to know what it's really like owning a barefoot horse.

I didn't try barefoot because I wanted to be different. I would have been quite happy having my farrier shoe my horse every five weeks if it had kept him sound.

The photographs below are of my elderly Thoroughbred, Casper's feet. The first picture was taken on the day his shoes came off and the one on the right ten months later. Even those who know nothing about feet should be able to pick out the odd improvement or two.



Casper had awful feet – the kind of feet you would normally say “needed shoes”, but it seems to be a sad irony that the weaker and more unhealthy the hoof is, the more damaged it becomes through shoeing. If shoes were keeping him sound, he wouldn't have become barefoot in the first place and I probably would never have become an EP.

My other horse, Magda, also had foot problems. Hers were caused by hoof wall infections, abscesses and inappropriate treatment methods.



*These pictures were taken four months apart*



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Nowadays, I don't worry about the feet. They are healthy, shiny hooves that just get a rasp run around them every four to six weeks when they start to look untidy. I pick them out occasionally if I suspect a stone or if I just want to check them, but otherwise I leave well alone. They tend to look after themselves.

Casper never acquired strong enough feet to be a truly barefoot horse. He still needed protection whenever he went out on the roads. In the old days, hoof boots were awful contraptions but nowadays there is a wide variety of boots to choose from and it is usually possible to find one that will suit.

Casper liked his Boa boots best. They suited his hoof shape and were easy to get on and off. He looked a bit puzzled when they first went on but as soon as he worked out how comfortable they were, he would help me to put them on.

For riding, boots only really need to be worn if the horse has sensitive feet or if they have a biomechanical imbalance which causes uneven wear. I rarely see hooves wearing down too low from too much roadwork – the more footsteps a horse takes, the faster the hooves grow. Boots are rarely necessary for work on grass or soft surfaces unless the horse is in the process of rehabilitating.



*Casper needed boots as his soles were too thin to cope with stones*

Magda, on the other hand, rarely wears boots. She is very sound and sure footed over even the stoniest of surfaces. She does possess a pair of Cavallo Simple boots which suit her hoof shape, but on the rare occasions I do put them on I think it's more for my benefit than hers!

The trick with boots is that you have to get the right make and style of boot that suits your horse's hoof shape and action. There is nothing more frustrating than riding out on a horse when you are constantly worrying if they are going to fly off, or twist, or rub. You may not get the right make first time, but perseverance pays off. I don't give my horse's boots a second thought after I've put them on because I know they fit. More importantly my horse only needs to wear them when I'm riding, unlike shoes which have to stay on all the time.

I ride a shod horse at least once a week and the main difference I find is that the shod horse has much less traction on concrete and tarmac – they slide around all over the place. I wouldn't dream of trotting up a shod horse on smooth concrete but am quite happy to do so if the horse is barefoot. Shod horses also feel less comfortable when walking downhill. I'm not sure if it's because they are worried about slipping, or if the hoof is sliding forward on the shoe, causing the nails to put pressure on the laminae. Either way, they definitely slow their pace and rock back on their heels while barefoot horses steam off down hills without a care in the world.

The other thing I notice is how much less concussion there is while riding on roads – now that I'm used to riding barefoot horses, the constant jarring from shod hooves sets me on edge.



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Some people say that a barefoot horse has less traction on grass. I personally have never felt unsafe cantering or even galloping barefoot on grass. Maybe I'm just lucky and the barefoot horses I ride are particularly sure footed. Who knows?

Another thing I noticed too was that when we had all the snow, our herd of 6 barefoot horses adored careering around at full pelt because the snow didn't ball up inside their hooves. The shod horses on the other side of the fence had to be much more careful.



The most difficult thing about barefoot is getting the hooves healthy enough to enjoy the benefits. Shoes hide many lamenesses, so often a horse that appears sound as a pound while shod is quite footy when first removed from shoes. It was thought that they needed to "harden up" but it's often a lot more complex than that. Yes, the hooves need to develop thicker soles and longer, stronger walls and denser, more leathery frogs, but the more we learn about barefoot hoof health the more apparent it has become that dietary imbalances have a direct effect on the sensitivity of the hooves. However, once these imbalances are corrected, even horses with weak hooves become sounder and more confident on their feet.

Because imbalances in the diet affect the whole body, it is quite normal to see the general health of the horse improve at the same time as the hooves – niggling problems like mud fever, weepy eyes or sweet itch often become a thing of the past.

Occasionally a barefoot horse may suddenly become slightly less confident on their feet – shortening their stride and walking gingerly over stones. In the old days, the answer would be to put shoes on, but now we ask why and, instead of covering up the problem, we look for the cause and in so doing are learning heaps about hoof health and how closely it is tied to the overall health of the rest of the horse.

For years I had my horse shod regularly by a registered farrier. I never thought to question it until I was forced to. Barefoot isn't about some radical hippy movement. It's an informed choice I made because I believe it is right for both me and my horse.

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