

Evolution of the Bare Hoof

by Ann Larson, Natural Barefoot Farrier [balancedhorse@hotmail.com]

Recently, the barefoot movement has gained momentum. There have been many key players who have contributed to the improved understanding of horses' hooves. Farriers and veterinarians alike have studied and experimented to develop a new model of a healthy hoof.

Most of the theories on natural hoofcare have come directly from natural horses—mustangs. Nearly everyone who wanted to learn more about the structure and function of healthy feet has started by studying mustangs.

Though there have been many contributions of information, many ideas and theories have been brought up and possibly discarded—ideas that have helped improve modern hoof care dramatically. The following are just a few of the many people who have played their own part.

Lyle (Bergy) Bergele - a farrier since late 1970's, focused his study of hooves on the straightness of hairlines. In 1992 he published *HoofTalk: The Hairline Tells It All*, and in 1998, *HoofTalk: The Natural Trim*. He has also published videos about his views of natural hoof trimming.

Dr. Robert Bowker is a veterinarian professor at Michigan State University. Although he never had a great deal of interest in horses, his wife's interest pulled him into the industry. He has done and continues to do extensive research into the inner workings of hooves. He has proposed the importance of heel-first landing and, along with Pete Ramey, has tested many theories into the functioning of horses' hooves. He has published many papers in veterinarian journals and has done lectures in conjunction with Pete Ramey (below).

Gene Ovnicsek is a master farrier that has developed a technique that he calls "Natural Balance," where the front and back proportions of the foot are measured from the widest part across the sole. The balance of these proportions allows for proper breakover and hoof expansion. He has been featured in, and written articles for, many popular horse publications. While Mr. Ovnicsek is a farrier and emphasizes the value of leaving horses barefooted, he also does shoe. Interestingly, he works with Dr. Bowker in equine hoof research in continuation of our understanding of the hoof.

Jamie Jackson started studying mustangs in 1982. He has written several books including *Horse Owner's Guide to Natural Hoof Care* (1999). He conducts clinics and lectures and started a natural hoof care course to certify trimmers. In addition to the training course, Jackson formed the American Association of Natural Hoof Care Practitioners (AANHCP). In 2005 Jackson wrote *Pasture Paradise*, which describes ways to keep horses moving even in small areas.

Pete Ramey has many years of experience with horses but only started farrier work in 1994. He published his first book in 2000 -*Making Natural Hoof Care Work for You*, and has been conducting clinics for horse owners. He is working closely with Dr. Robert Bowker to further research into the function of horse hooves.

Hilturd Strasser, DVM, is a veterinarian from Germany who studied the anatomy and physiology of horses' hooves. She has written several books including *Lifetime of Soundness* (1998) and *Shoing: A Necessary Evil?* (2000) which are basic overviews of the barefoot principles. She started a hoof care training course in Germany. In 2000 Jamie Jackson sponsored Strasser for clinics in the US. She then started a training course in the US and has now expanded to several countries all over the world. Dr. Strasser has been widely criticized as being too invasive. Optimal rehabilitation

requires clinical settings, which includes rubber matting that is non-abrasive and non-concussive, allowing Dr. Strasser to maximize hoof function, thus speeding rehabilitation. Many miss that the seemingly drastic trim is only suitable for clinical settings.

Chris Pollitt is professor in the Physiology Department at The University of Queensland. He has been running ongoing studies on the causes of lameness and has specialized in continuing research into causes and treatments of laminitis. His department just recently published a study that supports the idea that feeds that cause high level of insulin, such as high sugar diets, can, over time, cause laminitis.

Many of the people mentioned offer clinics and extended training. There is no nationally-recognized certification program with specific requirements, and certification through any courses is strictly done through a privately-run organization.

While direct information has advanced the barefoot movement the most, developments in hoof care protection, such as hoof boots, have indirectly been able to give horse owners what they require to maintain their horses' healthy hooves. The market has burgeoned in the last 10 years, starting from one or two companies that created custom boots specific to your horse, to over a dozen companies that can mass produce boots in a range of sizes to fit the largest draft to the smallest mini. These boots have given owners the ability to keep their horses barefoot and still allow them the luxury of protection in the harshest terrain.

Many of the ideas proposed by the different farriers and vets may seem contradictory; this has just allowed the evolution of the information which has been leading to a general consensus of information that can become a solid foundation.

Thanks to the Internet, information has been made widely available. This gives not only veterinarians and farriers various research to review, but also owners who want to educate themselves. This open form of information has allowed people to try different techniques and decide for themselves what works best for their horses. Through shared experience and consensus of information, the new healthy hoof model is taking a very similar general appearance no matter who is doing the trim. This is good news not only for horses, but also for owners trying to find help for their horses.

Ann Marie Larson has owned horses for over 20 years. She received certification from Equissage in 1997 to practice equine massage.

Due to her own horse foundering, and encountering difficulty in finding farriers that were willing or able to help, she took a clinic with Dr. Strasser in 2000. Impressed by the progress her mare made, she began the certification course in fall of 2001 and graduated in May 2002. Larson started trimming professionally during the course and continues to trim clients' horses as well as teach owners how to do the trim themselves. In 2007 she took two clinics with Pete Ramey and one with Dr. Robert Bowker and has now combined that information to improve the rehabilitation process.

Larson currently travels throughout Illinois, Iowa and Eastern Nebraska, as well as competing with her horses in hunter/jumper and dressage, and trail riding with horses she has rehabilitated.

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