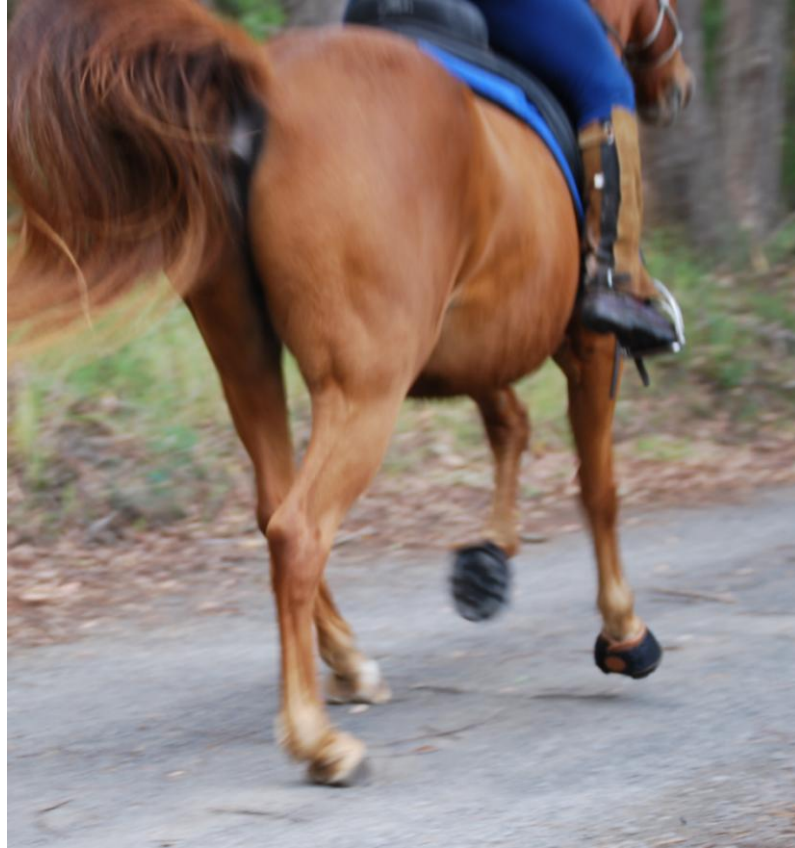


Why Not Do it in Boots?

Article printed in Horses & People Magazine by Chrisann Ware EMT.



As an Equine Myofunctional Therapist and Hoof Boot consultant, I receive emails every day from those who have horses with hoof issues looking for easy ways to transition their horses out of shoes.

The internet is a powerful investigative tool now and many horse owners have read the latest research now freely available. In the light of this many are unhappy with the lack of solutions and miss-information often offered by traditional methods and seeking permanent healing for horses with hoof issues.

Eventually their net research brings them to published research work from people like **Professor Robert Bowker** head of the Michigan State University's Equine Hoof Laboratory Research Team and they begin to ask themselves if they need to change their current hoof care practices and to "do it in boots"!

Professor Robert Bowker, world leader in equine hoof research says "It's a testament to the engineering and evolution of the equine hoof that it can cope with being peripherally loaded for as long as it does, but eventually it will become seriously unhealthy".

In his research work he studies histologically the tissues of the hoof and their inter-relationships. He explains that at microscopic level he sees no evidence that the tissues of the hoof wall or laminae ever evolved to be the main weight bearing structure for this heavy animal.

This makes sense when you think that no other hooved animal, not one, walks on the hoof walls alone. All other hooved animals use other structures as well to support their weight. Why would the horse be any different when it evolved under the same influences.

Professor Bowker says although the equine can be made to support its entire weight on the peripheral hoof wall, as happens with shod horses, there are consequences to hoof function and health from this. These are evidenced by the huge number of horses that are unusably lame by the time they are in their teens.

In a nut shell Professor Bowker's work has shown how peripheral loading (from shoes or poor trimming set ups) weakens the hoof integrity, and compromises the tissues and blood flow within the hoof. This impacts on haemodynamics within the hoof which is a system not unlike hydraulics, where blood dissipates energy. In the hoof, haemodynamics stops concussion within the hoof, so it does not pass up the leg to damage bone and tissue above.

Eventually reacting to these abnormal stresses, the shod hoof capsule slowly distorts and deforms as is evidenced by the number of horses with collapsed heels, quarter cracks, flares etc. Constant inflammation due to the crushing of the internal caudal heel tissues from this distortion, sets off a cascade of complex inflammatory reactions.

A little bit of inflammation is a good thing as it initiates healing, but long term it is very destructive and instead of healing it begins to compromise the pedal bone and navicular bone as well as the soft tissues surrounding them. It predisposes horses to regional bone loss, navicular syndrome, side bone and ring bone.

If you have ever compared pedal bones from long term shod equines you will see that no two are the same. They have all remoulded and reformed themselves due to the impact of abnormal stresses. This inflammatory process weakens the hoof bones. Leaving them in a state similar to humans who have osteoporosis.

Professor Bowker is keen to see more horses offered natural rehabilitation for serious hoof problems and to avoid the current and usually unsuccessful methods traditionally offered such as invasive surgery and years of corrective shoeing. He says these have failed so many of our horses already we must look outside the box for ways to encourage permanent healing.

He says by the time most horses are brought to him they have worked their way through a trail of vets and years of failed corrective shoeing. He explains the longer you wait, the longer it will take to reverse these changes.

To promote better education for those wishing to work as professionals in this field Professor Bowker has joined the lecturing team at the **Australian College of Equine Podiotherapy**. He comes to Australia once a year to deliver seminars and train to those wishing to be professional Equine Podiotherapists. In his classes are students from all walks of life. Usually they have had first-hand experience with hoof problems in their own horses and seen changes so profound with natural hoof care they have lead to them making a career change, seeking to be professional hoof care therapists.

Also attending his classes are veterinarians wishing to extend their knowledge of the equine hoof & the latest rehabilitation therapies.

The basis of this type of natural rehabilitation is removing the peripheral loading and applying good physiologically sound trimming principles which allow the hoof to re-establish internal health and to bear weight correctly again. Weight is then shared on the all structures that evolution designed to be the primary weight bearers, i.e. the heels, frog and sole as well as the walls. Given time and support with boots and pads for comfort when riding, the unhealthy changes can usually be reversed, even in horses with navicular syndrome!

Apart from the equine health issues many riders are now seeking to "do it in boots" merely to ensure that their horses have lifelong soundness. I often get emails saying "my horse needs shoes because he has bad feet" what can I do?

I try to explain that "your horse has bad feet because he is shod" but unless you have seen inside a hoof and viewed in the flesh, the multitude of wonderful components there, and had their functions explained to you, the idea often touted "that the shoe holds the foot together" seems to make perfect sense.

Once you understand what role these components play in equine biomechanics you wonder why you ever thought normal steel shoes could possibly help, let alone corrective shoes be a solution to hoof problems.

I recommend that anyone who would like to know about hoof anatomy attend a barefoot trimming workshop where you will have access to viewing and handling cadaver hooves.



Sounds yucky!!! Actually it is the most interesting workshop that you will probably ever attend as a horse owner. For too long we have thought of the hoof as a hard unyielding structure at the end of the leg when it is actually nothing like that and should be treated as the living dynamic ever changing thing it is.

If you would like to attend a barefoot workshop taught by a professional who has truly seen hoof care from both sides of the anvil, then Andrew Bowe, Master Farrier & Equine Podiotherapist offers these. For dates & locations see The Barefoot Blacksmith website www.barehoofcare.com.au

For competition riders the other reason for considering barefoot & booting is to promote long term soundness. For sporting horses attaining a high level in any equine sport is hard. Harder still is maintaining your place at the top! Just building sound relationships with our horses can take many years.

In the past riders often found that just as shod horses were reaching peak performance around the ages of seven to twelve, they seemed to be plagued with debilitating hoof problems and vague lameness that put them out of contention. Many performance riders are no longer prepared to take a chance on wasting all those years of pre training so are adopting a barefoot/booted lifestyle for their top horses.

At the other end of the spectrum are the pleasure riders and the parents of children who ride at pony club level. They are also turning to barefoot and boots for their horses.

Why? Because it is very hard to find a horse that is bomb proof. They are more precious than gold. Especially if you are the nervous parent of a child rider or an adult rider who just doesn't like any surprises out on the trail, when you do locate such a treasure you don't want to lose them due to hoof problems. Often these horses are quiet and sensible because they are an older horse with more life experience but sadly age in horses usually goes hand in hand with a lot of previous wear and tear on the hooves and joints from years of shoeing.

Older horses usually suffer a great deal of hoof deformation. Life on sore hooves causes a lot of secondary stiffness and musculo-skeletal issues as they tend to adopt braced postures and stilted gaits to protect their sore caudal hoof area.

To minimise any further damage and to reduce the stresses in older horses, hoof boots and pads are ideal. My clients tell me that they found their old horses had a new lease of life once they were out of shoes and even their attitude to life and work improved. What they always report too is that they don't seem to have the amount of arthritis problems that they had when they were shod.

The WA Mounted Police (like their counterparts worldwide) because of the high levels of training they undertake, went looking for ways to protect and enhance their horse's chances of having longer working careers. They have found that their horses are more sure footed, more confident on all surfaces, and suffer less lameness and musculo-skeletal problems in boots than when they were shod. Their booted horses were even featured recently on the prime time TV program The Force, doing crowd control. Most of the other mounted police units in Australia are now following suit.



Snr Sgt. Glenn Potter of the WA Mounted Police shown on patrol in the Easycare Mac Boot.

If you are considering hoof boots for the first time and find it all a bit daunting you probably have a few questions.



Here are the most frequently asked ones re the **Easycare Boot Range**.

What are the benefits of boots?

The advantage of hoof boots is obvious on two levels. You can give your horse the benefits of a barefoot lifestyle and still have instant hoof protection when you need it.

Are boot sizes the same as shoe sizes?

No. Hoof Boots have individual sizing for each particular boot style. The boot sizing makes an allowance for hoof growth between trims so it's important you measure directly after a trim. It is also important to consider what type of riding you will be doing as there are styles suited for various disciplines and hoof shapes.

Is my horse's shoe size the same as boot sizes?

No. Boots sizing does not equate to shoe sizes. You must choose a boot style and measure according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Are boots hard to put on?

No/yes!! Because you are dealing with big heavy animals that exert a lot of force on their boots when they are in motion, the boots must be a really snug fit. Therefore you must use a little force to fit them. Of course like most things with our horses it's all about technique and you will soon learn how to slide the hoof into the boot easily. Most boots can be fitted in a couple of minutes and become just another item of tack. Some styles are easier than others to apply.



How do you know if they fit?

Firstly use the manufacturer's sizing charts and measure accurately. For the Glove boots there is a "fit kit" that can be used to pre-try the boots. For the other styles that don't require such a perfect fit the measurements are usually accurate enough to achieve great fit. There are also tips and tricks that can be used to help with hard to fit horses.

To assess good fit: When the boot is on the hoof, hold the horse's fetlock with one hand and the boot with the other, and try to move the boot around on the hoof. It should not budge or twist. If you can move the boot it is not the correct size and may cause rubbing or boot damage. If it rubs and twists on the horse when in motion it does not fit correctly.

I have been told my horse must have shoes to hold his bad feet together why would boots help?

Yes they will for all the reasons detailed in the research above. Your horse has bad feet because he has hoof deformation and is shod!

Are veterinarians recommending these boots?

Yes. Many veterinarians dealing with the rehabilitation of equine hoof problems are recommending riders consider moving away from steel shoes. For horses with laminitis, or hoof traumas and wounds there are even specific "therapy" boots available to help.



Are there boots specially designed for hoof protection when horses need therapy for trauma, abscesses or protection after surgery.

Yes there are boots specifically made for veterinary use when your horse needs added comfort or protection. The Rx Therapy Boots are made to breath and shaped so that you can put them on over bandaging if necessary. Thick pads can be added for extra comfort for horses who are suffering laminitis or sole soreness. They are not riding boots but are great for those times when you want to offer an injured horse some quiet turn out time in the sun.

Do horses need to wear their boots all the time?

No. Boots are designed to be used only when you need them for riding and are meant to be removed when the horse is in the pasture. Your horse can then have the best of both worlds. Normal wear and tear from the pasture is a good thing and promotes hoof health when combined with regular trimming.

Can I still ride in all the places I could when shod ?

Yes. Well fitted boots should allow you to ride in all your favourite places and compete just as you did before. You may find you can also ride in some new places too. Places that would have been too slippery for shod hooves. You will be able to go through streams, mud, rocks, tar roads, and with the right boot for the purpose, be able to work at speed in sand or dirt arenas drafting cattle too.



How long will my boots last?

Of course that depends on the amount of miles you do and on what surface you do it on. For the average once a week rider boots may last many years. The Easycare Company who are the largest manufacturers of hoof boots have stated that usually boots average around 1,000 miles on sandy trails but of course less on abrasive terrain. Each horse is of course different but Australian riders seem to average the same as U.S. riders.

Are boots more expensive than shoeing?

No. Compared to regular shoeing costs they are relative inexpensive! Most riders will get over twelve months use from them sometimes many years of use from a pair of boots depending on how often you ride and the surfaces you ride on. Most owners are paying over \$100 plus every six weeks for shoeing. By changing to barefoot trimming, after a couple of months the boots have more than paid for themselves.

If I buy boots should I just pull off the shoes and measure the hooves straight away?

If your horse had been shod for some years it is usual for the hooves to change shape slightly once the shoes are removed. If your horse is tender it is best not to do too much "tidying" up of the hoof when the shoes are removed. Just release him into the pasture for a while as there are a lot of changes happening in his hooves. Give them time to settle down. It is best if you can wait one trim cycle (approx 4 weeks) before purchasing your boots. Often the hoof shape will improve vastly after the second trim.

What's the difference between a farrier trim and a barefoot trim?

There should be no difference, as long as the farrier does not approach his trimming as if the horse were going to be shod afterwards. If anyone files off the sole in areas where the horse has depleted tissues due to hoof deformation they will make the horse sore for a while no matter what trim style they use.

A good barefoot trim takes into account the living architecture of the sole and the state of the tissues in the hoof at the time of the trim. Do not remove sole from areas where it is needed for protection. Good trims remove the lever forces that are acting on the hoof to deform it and create hoof cracks and flares. A good trim, is a good trim, no matter who holds the hoof knife & file! If you are finding your horse is sore trim after trim then look to the person who is holding the knife.....even if it's you! Sore horses and abscessing are not part of the transitioning process if it's done properly.

Which boot is really the easiest to use?

The worlds' easiest hoof boot is the Trail Boot.

It fastens with some serious layers of Velcro that overlap, but there are no cables or buckles to do up.

If you are an older rider who has hand problems and finds buckles and cables a hassle these are super easy. If your child can saddle their own horse then this is a great boot for them to apply too. Of course as with all aspects of horse care adult supervision should always be undertaken.



Where can I get boots and what style should I use?

If you would like to use an Australian based company and buy online there is www.easycaredownunder.com.au

Easycare Down Under based in NSW Australia, offers an online shop with all the latest boot styles from Easycare Inc. and can dispatch goods by express post to you usually the next working day. They also deal with warranty issues right here in Australia which gives you piece of mind.

Where can I talk to a “real” person about my horse’s needs?

If you are feeling overwhelmed by choice or concerned about your horse’s sizing for boots or hoof problems in general [Easycare Down Under](#) staff are always available by phone 02 4455-2440 They offer a consultation service with their Equine Podiotherapist Mike Ware 02 4455-2440 if you have questions about the use of boots for horses with hoof problems.

I would like a professional trimmer to look at my horse’s hooves and fit my boots is this possible?

Professional trimmers & some farriers who do barefoot trimming can usually fit and sell you hoof boots. If possible this is a great way to obtain your boots and to have a personal consultation about your horse’s future hoof care.