

## **Ellis River Riders- January 2015 Newsletter**

### **Hoof Health: What YOU Can Do to Maximize Hoof Health**

We've all been there- left behind for what turns out to be the greatest trail-ride of the season. Reason? Lame horse, of course. So you have to settle for living vicariously through Facebook photos of your riding buddies, thinking wistfully about having a horse with healthier feet. Is there anything YOU can do to improve the hoof health of your four-legged family members? Sure thing- read on!

In this article, we discuss several ways that you as a horse owner can make positive changes to your horse's hoof health. Why are the hooves so important? Over 90% of reported lameness issues in horses are related to the foot. No hoof, no horse. And while you pay good money for a hoof care provider to manage your horse's hoof care program, no one spends more time with your horse than you. So let's examine a few ways that you can help.

First, establish a routine of professional care for your horse and stick to it. Every 6-8 weeks is typical. Why so often? Actually, compared to the wild horse, this schedule is hopelessly long. The horse hoof evolved to meet the needs of wild horses traveling up to 30 miles per day over rough terrain, resulting in a daily natural trimming process. It may surprise you to learn that your horse grows a new hoof wall every 6 months to a year! Though a regular schedule of trimming, farriers can trim excess hoof safely and make positive changes to the hoof wall growing down from the coronet band.

Properly instructed, owners can even help out by learning safe, non-invasive daily trimming techniques often referred to as hoof grooming. All you need is a hoof stand and a rasp. Hoof grooming after each ride can go a long ways to preventing hoof cracks, stimulating growth, and managing hoof wall flares for your horse. Hoof grooming is no substitute for professional hoof care, but rather a way to augment regular farrier care for hooves that are already generally healthy.

Second, provide a safe and healthy environment for your hoof care appointments. Allow me to paint two pictures. One: A young filly stands outside on ground that is pitted and sloped making it hard to evaluate hoof balance or conformation. It's summer and the bugs are out. Every 10 seconds she yanks her foot away and stomps it down into the mud, caking the hoof I've just cleaned and my tools in grime. She does not stand quietly so I must use one hand to hold her hoof and try to work my tools one-handed. Two: A gelding stands quietly inside an open-air run-in shed. Beneath him is a rubber mat. When I pick up the foot and clean it, it stays clean and I can sight the balance, then tuck it between my legs and trim with efficient precision using both hands. Which horse gets better hoof care?

The answer is obvious but let's review what makes a great hoof care corner. The area is protected from weather, bugs, and other distractions. The ground is level and dry and provides an un-obstructed view of the horse's hooves. The horse is accustomed to having his legs and hooves handled. Your farrier can help teach your horse to stand quietly for his hoof care. Ultimately, though, horses respond best to small requests made often, rather than to large demands made infrequently. This means the long-term lesson of standing quietly is up to you, through daily learning. It's hardly fair to ask a filly to stand quietly for 30 minutes while a

complete stranger handles her feet if she has not yet even learned to pick up her feet for you to clean them out.

And speaking of environment, the one you provide for your horse is absolutely critical to long-term hoof health. We all live in Maine, and mud-season is just part of the joy of New England life. If your mud-season is 12 months long, though, it might be time to consider changes to your horse's environment. What is ideal? The ideal footing is dry, and similar to the footing where you ride. Stone dust spread in high-traffic areas of your paddock is fabulous for developing a sole callus in the bare foot. Finally, the ideal environment encourages movement as much as possible. Movement stimulates blood flow in the foot, which in turn encourages growth. Limiting stall time and positioning water and feed stations in a way that forces horses to move around are both ways that you can promote motion for your horse.

Nothing, though, beats riding itself as a way to get those legs into locomotion. So my last bit of advice on hoof health for the horse owner is Ride, Ride, Ride!! Nothing gets the blood flowing like a lope across an open field, and the more you ride, the better chance your horse has of growing healthy hooves. So whether you go round about a ring practicing for a versatility show, or head out on the trail with friends, remember that you owe that ride to your horse. You'll both be healthier because of it. Happy Trails, everyone!

Liselle Batt is a full-time, AAPF accredited farrier providing barefoot trimming and balanced shoeing to horses throughout western and central Maine. She graduated from farrier school in Washington State, and serves as secretary for the Maine Farriers Association. FMI about Liselle's practice or about hoof health, visit her website at [www.westernmainehorseshoeing.com](http://www.westernmainehorseshoeing.com).