

Hoof Care Corner December 2014 Snowshoes for your horse?

Welcome to the first installment of Hoof Care Corner, a series of short articles written to educate horse enthusiasts about a variety of hoof care topics, ranging in scope from “the benefits of barefoot” to “when wedge pads matter”. This first article addresses the weather that’s coming whether we want it or not- winter! Let’s discuss a few of the most common questions asked of farriers about winter hoof care.

Does my horse need winter hoof care?

Horse hooves definitely grow more slowly in winter- every horse is different. A good rule of thumb is to add 2-3 weeks to your summer trim schedule. Most of my clients are on a 6-8 wk summer, 8-10 wk winter schedule. Older horses usually grow hoof more slowly, and sometimes will see very little winter growth. A little extra hoof is a good thing in winter- most farriers trim lightly in late fall to retain as much protection for the foot as possible against the frozen ground. If you plan to cease farrier care for winter, consider a trim for your horse just before the ground unfreezes in spring. If you wait until mud-season, the sole callus will soften and shed out first, leaving an overly long hoof wall unsupported. Cracks in the hoof wall will form, and bacteria from the mud will move in and make themselves at home, resulting in a nasty hoof. Scheduling a trim just before thaw mitigates the risk of cracked hoof wall, and sets your horse up well to get through mud-season with their hooves in-tact and ready for spring riding.

What are winter shoes?

Winter shoes look just like your summer shoes, but with a couple add-ons. Studs on the bottom provide traction. The least amount of traction needed to keep your horse safe is the right amount of traction. Shoeing hind feet with traction weaponizes them, so always give thought to hind shoes on horses turned out together. Winter shoes should also sport a snow pad to keep snow from freezing to the metal shoe and forming a snow-ball. Ever tried crossing your icy drive in high heels? That’s what your horse feels like with snow balls, and you only need to try prying them out with a screw-driver once before you call your farrier. Snow-pads vary from a full pad with a bubble in the center to push out the snow to a rim pad that works as a barrier between the snow and metal to prevent it from sticking. Your farrier will advise you on the right set-up for your horse.



Photo 1 Caption: Typical winter shoe with traction and snowball pad.

Does my horse need winter shoes?

Winter is a great time to rest your horse from shoes- let the nail holes grow out and grow some sole callus, much the way our own feet felt as kids when we ran around barefoot all summer. In many ways the winter weather up-north is far better for the equine foot than summer- snow provides superb caudal support for the foot and protects the sole from rocky, abrasive ground. No bugs in winter means no stomping, a habit that damages the hoof wall of many pasture horses, and best of all- winter means no mud!! So if you shoe primarily for protection from rocks and wear, consider going bare in winter!

Protection from rocks is not the only reason we shoe, though, and winter shoes are critical for some horses. Therapeutic shoeing is almost always year-round shoeing, irrespective of how often you ride. After all, horses spend about 99% of their time NOT being ridden. Lameness often results from mis-alignment in the bony column, for example navicular disease, founder or club-feet. Shoeing packages that restore correct bone angle are necessary 24-7, year-round. If your horse is consistently lame without shoes, your farrier will likely recommend shoeing year-round.

Finally, the most obvious reason for winter shoes- traction! Bare hooves actually have pretty great traction- proprioceptors in the heel and frog allow horses to feel when they are slipping and make adjustments, and flexion in the bare foot provides grab on uneven surfaces. For winter turnout and riding situations that are pretty flat, and sport more snow than ice, bare feet do great. Some situations and some horses, though, may need more traction than nature provides.

Who needs traction?

Well, old horses and a category of rider I affectionately call “the crazies”. My horse is in the first category, and my mom is in the second. I use winter shoes for my 24 year old gelding to give him a little extra grab on ice because his muscles get tired and stiff in the cold and don’t always work when they should. And my riding mare is shod because I am regularly subjected to mother-daughter trail-riding adventures in February. Snowmobile trails have a lovely sheen of fresh snow that almost covers the layer of sheer ice below. You only need ride them once barefoot before studded shoes become highly appealing.

In truth, any horse that slips often needs traction. If your pasture is very icy, or if your horse is developing sores consistent with falling on ice, consider winter shoes. If your horse pulls in the winter (sleds, etc), or if your riding trails/roads are icy, consider either winter shoes or a studded riding boot like Easy-Boot or Renegades.

When should my farrier pull shoes for winter?



Photo 2 Caption: Winter fun after trimming- these boys pull their sled barefoot all winter long

I saved the most important question for last, so you will all remember it next year. Please oh please don't pull shoes just as the ground freezes! Understandably, this is when the farrier often gets called. It's November 1st and you've paid good money for your shoes- you want to ride as long as possible before winter sets in. So you wait until that first big freeze. It comes and your horse is slipping all over the new ice on his steel shoes, so you call in a panic for the farrier to come pull them off. The ground is frozen rock hard, but the cushiony soft snow won't fall till January. So your horse spends the Christmas season tip-toeing around his paddock, sore-footed and abscess prone.

Is there a better way? Of course! Option 1: Pull shoes at least two weeks before the ground freezes hard- late October in Maine. Barefoot, the hoof will harden and strengthen in time for the ground to freeze. Consider purchasing hoof-boots to keep riding through this off-season.

Option 2: keep your shoes but add light traction (2 heel studs) on your October or November reset, so your horse can safely remain shod through the icy, snow-free late fall. Once snow is on the ground, your farrier can pull her shoes and she'll trot out happily into the soft white footing Mother Nature provides free-of-charge all winter long.

Happy trails, and stay tuned for the next installment of Hoof Care Corner!