

# I'm thinking of going Barefoot

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During the last 3-4 years, there has been a huge upsurge in interest in taking horses barefoot. Traditionally it was thought that most working horses could not cope without shoes, but more and more people have tried the shoeless route with great success.

There is no doubt that the health benefits of going barefoot are huge, not just in terms of healthier hooves, but the knock-on effects of improved musculature, better overall health and often greatly improved performance. However, as with all things, going barefoot is not easy and if you want to consider it for your horse, you have to do it properly, or your horse will be the one who suffers. Here are 10 simple rules that should ensure your transition to shoeless is as painless as possible - for you as well as your horse.



## Rule 1 : Enlist the right Professional

First of all, make sure you use the services of a properly trained, experienced trimmer. I personally would only recommend an Equine Podiatrist. I am highly biased here (because I am one), but the service is specialised, responsible and thorough, yet is totally non-invasive. In Britain, EPs are members of a regulatory body that is designed to protect EPs and their clients and ensure a high standard of professionalism is maintained. It's not just about using someone who knows how to do a barefoot trim - it's about using someone who knows how to evaluate the hooves, work out what structures are lacking and put together a detailed, tailored programme of rehabilitation that will result in steady improvement. It really isn't about the trim. It doesn't matter how beautifully trimmed the hooves are if you haven't been left with detailed instructions on what to do to ensure your horse's hooves improve.

## Rule 2 : Forewarned is forearmed

Before you remove your horse's shoes, get an assessment. Ask your potential hoofcare practitioner to come out and evaluate the hooves. This will enable you to understand how healthy or unhealthy your horse's hooves are and what it will take to get those hooves up to the standard you need. It will include an appraisal of whether you have the right environment, how much things are likely to cost, the sort of things you will be expected to do and the amount of time it is likely to take. Once you have this information, you will be in a better position to decide whether taking your horse shoeless is a realistic option for you.

## Rule 3 : Ensure you can afford it

Ultimately, having a barefoot horse should save you money, but in the early stages, the entire process could easily end up costing a lot. It is likely that a trim will be needed every four weeks at first. If the hooves are particularly unhealthy, you may need to purchase hoof boots, pads and a topical treatments which can be expensive.

## Rule 4 : Be prepared to change

Managing the unshod horse often requires a change in management. It may mean adjusting feed, changing his routine or buying a different type of bedding - some people have even had to change yards to ensure they could provide a better environment for the barefoot horse.



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## **Rule 5 : Take the time it takes**

Many people believe that going barefoot means you just take the shoes off, put on a pair of hoof boots and carry on. With many horses this is the case, but often the horse will need a period of rest from riding where hand walking only is necessary - even if the horse appeared sound in shoes. As the horse comes back into work, you will have to adjust his workload to accommodate his improving hooves or you will risk him going lame, which will set back your rehabilitation. If you are planning on going shoeless, but are booked in for a sponsored ride next month, do your horse a favour. Either keep him shod until you can give him the time he needs, or cancel the sponsored ride.

## **Rule 6 : Be realistic**

If you want a high performance shoeless horse, you have to be realistic. Nearly every horse can enjoy a full and healthy life as a shoeless general riding horse. However, if you are planning on doing eventing, endurance, etc, you will need a horse with genetically good enough hooves and you will need to be committed to a strict hoof conditioning programme. You are asking your horse to perform over and above what his hooves were genetically designed to do. Many horses, with good hoofcare and nutrition and proper conditioning can rise to the challenge beautifully but there are some that can't, so be realistic.

## **Rule 7 : Make sure you can provide a hoof friendly environment**

Horses wear shoes for a reason. Because the environment we traditionally place them in weakens the hooves and inhibits growth. Some horses have naturally strong feet that can cope with just about anything you can throw at them, but most don't. If your horse lives out in a waterlogged field and you have no easy access to the correct surfaces for hoof conditioning, you will either have to change his environment, keep your horse in shoes, or accept that your horse may always have to rely on hoof boots.

## **Rule 8 : You've paid for specialist advice - not following it is money wasted**

After each consultation you should be left with a form detailing what you need to do between now and next visit. These instructions will be specific to your horse and are designed to correct the particular hoof problems your horse has. If your trimmer tells you not to ride for a month and hand walk in pads daily, don't ignore that advice then complain because your horse's rehabilitation is taking too long. The daily conditioning programme for your horse can take as little as 10-20 minutes, but daily means daily, not once in a blue moon.

## **Rule 9 : Accept responsibility**

Once those shoes come off, responsibility for your horse's hooves will rest firmly on your shoulders. Your trimmer can advise, but they can't be there every day to condition those hooves. As time goes by and the hooves improve, you will find that you can more or less forget about the hooves and get on and ride, but in the early stages, your horse will be relying on your commitment to ensure he stays sound.

## **Rule 10 : Be selective about taking friendly advice**

In the horse world, everybody is an expert. Your yard owner and horsey friends will all have a different opinion about what correct hoofcare is. However, these people are not qualified hoofcare professionals who look after hundreds of hooves for a living. If your friend says you should be painting a particular potion on the hooves, or feeding a certain supplement, they will be doing so with the best of intentions, but it may not be right for your horse. Talk over these suggestions with your trimmer before you part with your hard earned cash on something that could end up in the bin

I hope this straight talking advice hasn't put you off completely, but it is important that you understand what is involved to ensure you make the right decision. Your horse's hooves should benefit enormously from shoe removal, but only if you do the job properly. If your horse ends up constantly footsore because you have neither the time, the knowledge nor the facilities to get the hooves healthy enough, do yourself and your horse a favour and keep the shoes on.