

No Hoof, No Horse—What to Look for in a Good Trim
By Bonnie Martin

Have you ever tried to walk with a mismatched pair of shoes on your feet or with one shoe on and one shoe off? How about with shoes of the wrong size or with them on the wrong feet? None of those things would be very comfortable, and no one would want to travel that way for very long, especially if the shoes were really mismatched or one foot was a lot higher than the other.

Yet, we do things like that to our horses frequently without even realizing because of the way they are trimmed or shod. It's not always intentional but there are probably more domestic horses with deformed feet than there are good feet, and people just don't recognize it. Different breed "styles" compounds the problem. Even some top riders have horses whose hooves go from bad to worse over time, and they don't recognize where the problems came from. There are so many deformed hooves out there that I contend that many of us don't know what a normal hoof looks like.

Domestic horses are usually kept stalled or in relatively small areas and don't get the benefit of the natural abrasion from the terrain, and thus hoof problems begin. Conscientious horse owners have their horses' feet trimmed and then possibly shod regularly at four to six week intervals, but sometimes the trimming creates a very different kind of foot than the same horse would have had moving around over a large area daily and wearing the foot off naturally.

Studies done on wild horses' feet over the last few years show us what the hoof looks like and how it wears naturally, but taking those same horses and putting them in a domestic situation often causes major changes. Horses in the wild travel over all sorts of ground and cover approximately 20 miles a day wearing their feet off naturally. Most domestic horses don't have that luxury in their living conditions although there are ways to create situations that are very beneficial to the horse for hoof wear, diet control, and overall health. More information on living conditions can be found in some of the references at the end of this article.

Being able to recognize a correct foot and good trim is very important, especially if a shoe is going to be put on the hoof and the horse is going to be walking around with its foot locked in that position for the next several weeks. Left barefoot, at least nature would try to correct a poor trim by chipping or wearing off the hoof where it was left unbalanced.

We are often so used to seeing poor, actually deformed feet that it is hard to know what a normal healthy hoof should look like. There are some things to look for on your horse that this article will cover and some places to get more information about healthy hooves that will be listed at the end.

Before beginning your evaluation, gather a straight edge of some type about 6" long and a short measuring tape to help with your analysis and pencil and paper upon which to write your findings.

To begin with, have your horse stand on a level surface and take a good look at your horse's feet from all angles and really study and compare them. Look at the front feet

first and compare them, and then do the same with the back feet. The back feet will have some differences from the front, so compare them separately from the front feet.

1. Do the two hooves you are comparing look alike? If not, what is different about them? Looking from the front, check to see if each foot is symmetrical, or is one side of the hoof longer than the other? Measure from the hairline down to the bottom of the hoof at the front and record the measurement in inches.

2. Looking at the back of the feet, are the heels the same height? You may have to get down low to really see. Measure from the hairline (where the hair and the hoof actually meet) to the bottom of the hoof at the heel bulbs on both sides of each hoof and record your findings.

3. Look at the hooves from the sides, (both outside and inside). Is the line where the hair and hoof meet (the hairline) angling from the front of the hoof down towards the heel or is the hairline parallel to the ground? Is the hairline a straight line, or is it wavy or have a "hill" or bump along the hairline? Record all your findings for each hoof.

4. Look at the hooves again from the front and notice if the hoof wall has any concavity or flare to it as it goes from the hairline to the ground. Lay a straight edge along the hoof from the hairline at the coronet to the bottom of the hoof and see if it lays flat. If not, record where the gap (flare) is-- outside of the hoof, inside, or at the front.

5. Look at each hoof again from the side and study where the heel touches the ground in relationship to the rest of the hoof. Is it fairly straight down under the hairline at the heel bulb or is it angled in and sitting under the hoof? Again, check to see if there is any concavity at the front of the hoof wall by laying a straight edge from top to bottom of the hoof at the toe.

6. Next, pick up your horse's hoof and look at the bottom. What is the general shape of the hoof? Round or oval? Is the bottom of the hoof flat or concave? Is the hoof wall an even thickness all around the hoof or is some of it thin and some thick?

7. Looking at the frog where it comes to a point at the V, how much hoof do you see from that point on to the toe? Measure that and then measure from the point of the V to the rear of the foot and record your measurements for each hoof.

8. Looking at the heel from the bottom, is there a tight crease between the heel bulbs going towards the bottom of the hoof, or is there enough space between the heel bulbs that you can put the tip of your pinkie finger there?

9. Have someone walk your horse towards and then away from you several times. Look to see how each foot is landing. Is it landing toe first, heel first, or flat? Is each foot landing on the outside, inside, or evenly?

10. Is there an odor or black goo around the frog? Are there any cracks going up and down the hoof wall or separation of the wall?

The answers to these questions should give you a pretty good idea of how your horse's hooves are doing. Hopefully, you did not get drastically different notes for each foot. A well balanced, healthy foot should generally:

1. have a toe length between 3-3 ½ inches long. Front feet should look alike and back feet should look alike.
2. have heels that are the same height and a length that is ½ of the toe length (1 ½ - 1 ¾ inches long)
3. Looking from the side there should be straight hairlines with no waves, bumps, or hills and the hair line should angle down from the front of the hoof towards the heel (NOT parallel to the ground).
4. No flares on the walls anywhere (a straight edge should lay flat from top to bottom all around the hoof).
5. Looking at the hoof from the side, the bottom of the heel should not be set in very far under the hoof. It should be back offering support. There should be no concavity (flare) at the front of the hoof. It should be flat from top to about ½ inch from the bottom.
6. The shape of the front hooves should be fairly round, the rear should be more like a triangle with the front cut off. All feet should have some concavity along the bottom instead of looking flat. The hoof wall should be an equal thickness all around the bottom of the hoof.
7. From the point of the frog to the front of the foot should be about 1/3 the distance from the point of the frog to the rear of the hoof.
8. The heel bulbs should be spread apart enough that you can get your pinkie finger in the space between them, no crease.
9. A hoof should ideally land evenly, heel first or possibly flat (at a walk). A hoof should not ever land toe first (this indicates heel pain).
10. Thrush often is noticed by the odor and black goo. Cracks usually indicate there was pressure from an unbalanced foot that the hoof gave way to. Separation is often accompanied by fungus.

Fairly common problems that are seen in a lot of domestic horses these days are long toes, low underrun heels, and flat soles. These three things often go together.

Another different problem that is fairly common is high heels and hairlines that, looking from the side, are parallel to the ground.

If your horse is showing signs of any of the abnormalities listed in the chart, it would be a good idea to educate yourself more on what makes for a healthy trim. There are several places to find helpful information, some of which are listed below.

Be aware that farriers who have been doing things their way for a long time often aren't open to discussion. Don't expect all of them to welcome your questions or criticism if it involves changing the way they have been taught to trim and shoe. If you are lucky enough to have an open-minded farrier who is willing to keep learning, treasure him or her and bounce ideas off each other. And keep on getting your horse trimmed on a regular basis—sooner rather than later.

If the trim is good your horse's way of going, hoof health, and attitude will be right. Horses don't like having their feet hurt any more than we do, but they don't have many ways of telling us about feet problems and unfortunately, many horses go from being

sound, to needing corrective work, to being retired much earlier than necessary if we had just known how to keep their feet healthy. Most horses don't really need shoes, but they ALL need and deserve a balanced, correctly trimmed foot and it is up to us to recognize whether they are getting that or not. There is a lot to study about nutrition and horse management that can make hoof care easier for us, but that's another story.

Just like with anything, there are many different opinions and ways to explain what makes a healthy hoof and how to keep it that way. Following are some sites I have gleaned information from to help form my own opinions:

- Cheryl Henderson <http://www.abchoofcare.com>
- Cindy Sullivan <http://www.tribeequus.com/>
- Gene Ovnicek <http://www.hopeforsoundness.com/>
- Jaime Jackson [http://www.primechoice.com/jaime -jackson](http://www.primechoice.com/jaime-jackson)
- KC LaPierre <http://www.equinepodiatry.net/>
- Keith Seeley <http://www.keithseeley.com>
- Linda Cowles <http://www.healthyhoof.com/>
- Marjorie Smith <http://www.barefoothorse.com/>
- Martha Olivo <http://www.marthaolivo.com/>
- Paige Poss <http://www.ironfreehoof.com/>
- Pete Ramey <http://www.hoofrehab.com/>
- Kim Cassidy www.clickandtrim.com

If you want an opinion about horses, ask a person. If you want a fact about horses, ask a horse. Lots of lameness issues such as navicular and laminitis have been "cured" by paying attention to the hoof trim, and the horses who have recovered from those problems are the proof of that fact.