

# Preaching to the Choir

Have we stepped out of one box, into another?

by Pete Ramey

Let's just talk about the "hot debates" among natural hoof care professionals.

In spite of almost constant debate on methodology, I think all the professionals involved in the "barefoot movement" share much more in common than they think. We all share very similar ideals for hoof form, horsekeeping and feeding. We drool at the desert feral hooves and strive to take our own horses to that gloriously healthy state. We all seem to constantly fall just short of it. We all want a better life for domestic horses; we agree that fixed metal shoes create enough pathology on their own, that they make the healing of most hoof problems impossible.

Most experienced natural hoof care practitioners can bring relief and healing to the worst of founders in their sleep. Navicular syndrome is usually little more than an interesting challenge. Wall cracks, thin soles, underrun heels and brittle hooves? Too easy to even be worthy of much conversation.

With so much good stuff in common, why do the different "camps" seem to disagree about so much? Good question. I think we should spend more time learning from each other, and politely, openly debating the things we disagree on. All of our horses would benefit.

Personally, I try to learn from everyone who works with horses' hooves for a living. I've studied Jaime, Gene O, Strasser, KC, Bowker, Teskey... The list goes on and on, and I've picked up valuable information from each of them. I've studied the barefoot web sites, attended dozens of clinics and seminars. Aside from the horses themselves, my best education has come from teaching with the AANHCP (American Association of Natural Hoof Care Practitioners). Many of my students and fellow instructors have taught me more than I taught them. I have read research papers, books and magazines by the wheelbarrow load. The list of people I should thank for influencing my work is long enough to fill this magazine.

All the while, I've trimmed horses every day; with a nice mix of world-class performance horses, backwoods trail horses and an unending line-up of the nastiest lameness cases that local veterinarians have thankfully sent me.

Now you're thinking I sound like I consider myself some sort of hoof guru. No, in fact I gave up all thoughts of that in 1999, when I put down the first horse I couldn't fix. Since then, I've been a full time student and a part time teacher; no more and no less. You see, the knowledge we're dealing with is so new (or perhaps newly reborn) and our playing field is so dynamic, no one is even

close to having all the answers yet. I still learn every day. To quote Cindy Sullivan (AANHCP Certified Practitioner), "If a method fails even one horse, it's a tool, not a rule." Well I don't know about Cindy, but I have yet to discover even one rule in all my searching; lots of tools, but no rules. I like to say, "There's no such thing as a **good habit**".

It's time to pool our resources. I thank *The Horse's Hoof* for attempting to do just that. The "barefoot world" needs to study each other's results and explore the knowledge we have all acquired, rather than bickering about "who's right." I'd estimate we are all right about some things, and wrong about others. I attended a BOGHS clinic last year. After listening to Tommy Lee Osha's presentation on his tape-on founder padding systems, I told him, "Now I know my way **and** your way. That makes me smarter!" He immediately exclaimed, "When's your next clinic??!!!" That's what we need, guys! That's the attitude the horses in our care are begging for us to have. Everyone knows something you don't know.

That's what I love about the AANHCP's Training/Certification Program. No student is expected to be a "Jaime clone" or a "Pete clone," or a clone of any of the incredible instructors they will see. They are expected to blend the



**Feral cadaver: Should we trim this frog lower than the heels? Would this reduce excess frog pressure, or just overexpose the frog's corium? Or should we all pray for frogs just like this on all our horses?**



**Have you stepped out of one box and into another one? I think we still have a lot to learn; more questions than answers about what makes a truly healthy foot. Above, flares on a feral cadaver from a Great Basin HMA (Herd Management Area)? Was this hoof in dire trouble? Growing in a new "springtime foot," after having grown a wider "snowshoe" during the harsh winter? Or is it a perfectly correct example we should all follow?**

very best parts from each instructor's experience with a piece of themselves, and be **better** than any of their teachers. That's how you grow; that's how you last forever and build rock-solid credibility. Together we stand; divided we fall. So I'll show you mine, if you show me yours. You can find mine at [www.hoofrehab.com](http://www.hoofrehab.com). If yours is posted, published or recorded, I've probably studied it, but please keep it coming! I never get tired of learning; I'm always looking for fresh insights.

So what are some of the "arguments" we need to try to settle? I'll name a few:

### To boot or not to boot.

Some look at booting as a defeat. I feel the boots should be waiting there when the shoes are pulled. The extra movement provided by uninterrupted riding accelerates everything we are trying to accomplish in growing a healthy foot. I think hoof boots are the 21st century horseshoe, but I don't really mean any of our current boots. I'm talking about future designs as good as the ones we buy for ourselves: high tech, gel cushioned "cleats" for polo horses; sliders for reiners that give aggressive traction at the toe of the boot and are built to make record breaking slides in the back of the boot; the equivalent of Vasque hiking boots for our trail horses; Crampons for ice climbing; ultra-light, disposable cross trainers for endurance races. Our own imaginations are the limit, but if humans deserve ultra-modern, high tech footwear, why don't our horses?

All photos courtesy Pete Ramey

In fairness, not everyone feels the way I do. Some very competent professionals feel that our ideals for competition are in excess of the horse's capabilities. They feel that if we take away the barometer built into the hoof, we expose the horse to cruel and unfair dangers throughout the rest of the body. They feel horses should be only worked within current limitations of their feet; that these limitations protect the horse from human cruelty. The body should be conditioned along with, and within the limitations of, sick hooves.

Who's right? I don't know, let's talk about it. We can start with our basic agreements that there are no steel-soled sneakers competing at the Olympics, and that moving body parts should only be immobilized by doctors, and only then, very temporarily and in extraordinary situations.

**How quickly do we trim heels to "natural parameters"?** Oh, here's a biggie.

The study of healthy, free roaming wild horses has shown us that horses should have very low, but very strong heel buttresses. The hairline at the back of the foot is almost at ground level in most of them. The bulbs/frogs are actually the landing zone in a natural, heel-first impact.

Some practitioners trim to this natural standard on every foot. They do this to immediately set healing forces in motion, and to set up the hooves to mimic the most healthy examples of hooves known to man—the wild ones.

Personally, I think this is a mistake. If heels have been previously allowed to be too high, the lateral cartilages, and thus the live corium, often sinks to a lower position in the hoof capsule. This means that lowering the heels to "natural heights" will require thinning the sole. Two wrongs don't make it right. Desert feral horses have 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch thick, heavily callused soles to protect the inner structures. This thickness is uniform over the bottom of the entire foot. When we violate that space, the horse will be sensitive in the back of the foot and land on its toes. This type of movement is destructive to the entire body, especially the feet. Furthermore, the horse reads this loss of natural sole depth as a wound, and it pops right back, in days.

When you lower the heels as far as you can without violating natural sole thickness, the resulting comfort allows a heel-first landing that drives the lateral cartilages to a higher (read natural) position within the hoof capsule, thus lowering the heels over time without ever causing pain, ligament damage, or risking an abscess from a sole bruise. I actually get heels much lower now, by respecting healthy, callused sole, than I did when I used to cut into it a bit, and I know my horseowners are happier.

This was one of my worst early mistakes; particularly with underrun heels. I would automatically take the heels down low, to bring weightbearing back. The resulting sensitivity would actually



**Great Basin HMA hind foot. In need of a competent trimmer to balance the foot? Or perfectly balanced for the individual's body and lifestyle?**

sometimes take the rear-most weight bearing surface **forward** to the toe, in motion. I was seeing good results, but not nearly as good as I do now, by prioritizing the mechanics in motion over the mechanics of the standing horse. I lower the heels as much as I can, without creating an uncomfortable landing zone on the terrain the horse works in. I feel I actually get much faster results, by taking my time.

But then, I have to respect and ponder the opinion of an experienced professional who looks at a hoof I just trimmed and says; "You know, three more rasp strokes would have gotten rid of the rest of that underrun heel." This isn't a time to draw lines in the sand; it's time for constructive debate.

Which way of thinking is best? I have a very firm opinion on this one; you are certainly entitled to yours, but I think the important vote should be by the horse, and I think the waters are muddied by the fact that there is not a right answer that fits every case.

### **Do we back up flared toes or not?**

For the most part, we all agree that the hoof wall should be perfectly attached to P3 (the coffin bone). We all know that very few traditionally maintained domestic horses have this luxury. Walls that are flared away from their proper attachment are too common and seldom recognized by conventional farriers. Too many professionals meas-

All photos courtesy Pete Ramey

ure toe length along the flared wall, rather than down the plane of new growth parallel to the dorsal aspect of P3. Most natural hoof care practitioners from all camps spot wall flare immediately, and strive to remedy it as quickly as possible. The debate begins when we talk about "how."

Some are in favor of rasping the entire outer wall to mimic the shape of P3: a perfect lateral radiograph in one trim. They do this to set up proper ground mechanics immediately, and eliminate lever forces that will pry away the new wall growth.

Others swear by leaving the flared walls alone completely, and letting them grow out with proper dietary changes and natural movement. Still others think flared walls are perfectly natural in soft environments.

I guess I'm in the middle on this one. I think flares are always pathology. The walls should be perfectly connected to the bone by 1/8 inch thick, perfectly intertwined dermal and epidermal laminae, regardless of the living terrain.

How to grow them out? Diet is certainly most of it, regardless of the trim method you use. I think it is important to relieve flared areas from active ground pressure with the Mustang roll beginning from the ground surface exactly where it would be if there was no flare. Depending on current sole thickness, I try to accomplish this on the first, second or third trim. I do rasp the flares from the lower 1/3 of the outer wall on most set-up trims, but am careful not to thin the walls or lamellar wedge so much that there is a risk of the horse kicking a rock and bruising the dermal laminae. After the setup trim, I rarely do more than lightly dress the outer wall to eliminate superficial fungal cracks. Often I don't even find a need for that.

Who's right? The jury's still out.



**Did this poor mustang need excess sole removed to allow hoof mechanism? Or is this the perfect armor plating necessary for the jagged, volcanic rock this horse lived, loved and played on?**



Photo courtesy Pete Ramey

**Does this HMA herd monarch need someone to lower its heels to a natural height? Or would this cause him to be coyote bait by morning? What do you call this? "The Model" or "The Mutant"???**

### Sore after a trim?

Some believe it is perfectly normal. They say that the contracted hoof is "asleep," and that the horse can't feel the pain the contraction is causing. The pain after a trim is caused by increased hoof function that is necessary to promote healing, but also wakes up the horse to the painful sensation of the pre-existing damage.

I think heel contraction is usually a defense mechanism. I think our domestic horses rarely get enough movement as foals to develop the digital cushions and lateral cartilages into structures that can bear the impact of an adult horse. (Study Dr. Bowker's work!) The resulting toe-first landing to avoid pain allows the foot to contract. This contraction in turn protects the horse from impact to the over-sensitive structures, but also creates a vicious cycle that allows them to fall further from function.

I feel that when a trim overexposes the back of a foot (weakened by pathology), it naturally causes pain. I feel that the best way to decontract these feet and make them sound is to develop the back of the foot. This is best done with foam-padded riding boots, pea gravel loafing areas and by never lowering the heels so much the horse has to land on its toes. Toe-first landings can never develop the back of the foot or decontract it; comfort and natural movement must come first.

When the internal structures are finally developed, the defense mechanism of heel contraction is no longer needed, and the foot "opens up." **Which came first; the pain or the contraction?** If we really knew, there would be no debate about how to fix it. What we all seem to have in common is that fortunately (and unfortunately, from a standpoint of useful study) none of us are around when the hooves are **becoming** contracted, so we can just ponder, study and speculate.

There are plenty of other ways to make horses sore after a trim. Often the trim was perfect, but two weeks too late. Do I ever make horses sore?

Yes, I occasionally do, but I always consider it an honest mistake and try to figure out why, so I can correct that mistake. If I make the horse sore simply by pulling the shoes from pathological feet, there are foam-padded boots waiting to temporarily replace the metal shoe, until a hoof that does its job can be grown. This is not "optional" for my customers; it's part of the deal.

We all seem to agree that hoof mechanism is important for hoof healing, energy dissipation and for a healthy life for the horse. Where we seem to disagree is about what is the most important factor of obtaining proper hoof mechanism. Some say it is perfect hoof form. I say it is correct impact after impact after impact. We should trim unhealthy hooves to allow or push them towards healthier growth and development. We just have to be careful not to push too far; any trim that reduces comfort, also reduces hoof mechanism, by reducing correct movement.

### Toe Length

We all want our horses to have the naturally short toes of the wild horse. Some push for specific toe lengths, and this leads to thinning the soles under P3. We have to realize that most domestic horses live with peripheral loading and a lack of P3 support through healthy frog and sole pressure, plus high-carb diets that constantly weaken the laminae. This commonly leads to pathologically low P3 positions within the hoof capsule. If we trim such a hoof to natural standards, we will thin the sole and cause sensitivity and probably bruising/abscessing.

I prefer to leave "wild horse soles" under P3, regardless of where it resides vertically in the hoof capsule. The thick sole and proper movement drives P3 vertically back to a natural position in the hoof capsule, shortening the toe over time. The "flip-side" of this is that shortening the toe from below by thinning the sole undermines natural support, allowing P3 to descend through the hoof capsule. Shortening the toe from below causes the hoof to become too long!

### Ground Parallel P3

Some say horses should have a ground-parallel P3, while others say it should be elevated by 3-5 degrees in the back.

Again, I personally fall in the middle. From my dissections of wild hooves and healthy domestic hooves, I've seen that P3 is usually slightly elevated in the back. P3 forms the foundation for the front half of the foot. The flexible lateral cartilages form the foundation for the rear half. The foot should be arched from front to back, so P3 should follow the front half of the arch, thus be slightly elevated in the back **in a standing horse**.

However, horses should land heel-first. Also, the flexible arch should compress to a flat state at peak impact, so P3 should receive maximum impact load while ground-parallel. Wasn't that easy?

The early pioneers of natural hoof care stepped out of the box and unlocked a startling number of mysteries for us. The number of "unsalvageable" horses salvaged is astronomical, and "the mainstream" is finally sitting up and taking notice. But now is not the time to sit back and bask in the glow of our infinite wisdom. We've only opened the door to a whole new way to learn. I think we still don't know enough to even ask the right questions yet. There's still more to this iceberg. Let's roll up our sleeves and keep learning together! 🌱



Photo courtesy Cheryl Henderson

**Feral horse with pathological, laid-over bars that need correction; or a new example to learn from; to accept and try to imitate?**

**About the author:** Pete Ramey is a former farrier turned leading barefoot advocate, an instructor with the AANHCP, and author of the book, **Making Natural Hoofcare Work for You**. He developed his methods through hands-on application, and now tours the world presenting his popular natural hoof care clinics, which emphasize a practical approach. He lives with his wife, Ivy, and their children in Lakemont, Georgia. Visit his website at [www.hoofrehab.com](http://www.hoofrehab.com)

### Overflowing Barefoot Stories!

So many barefoot success stories have been submitted to The Horse's Hoof in recent months, we simply can't find room to print them all! But we can post them all on our website, which we are doing as fast as we possibly can. So, please visit our Barefoot Stories web page at:

<http://thehorseshoof.com/success.html>

We will be adding lots more success stories, including all the remaining entries that were submitted for the 2005 Holiday Giveaway. Check back frequently for new additions.

Thank you to everyone who has submitted a story, and please, keep the stories coming! Happy barefoot horses are everywhere, and that's just what we want to hear!