

Hoof Care for Thoroughbreds

Responsible owners or managers put time and focus into every aspect of maintaining the horses in their care. An essential element of having healthy, happy horses is proper hoof care. From foal to performance horse to breeding stock, proper hoof care can mean the difference between a sound horse and a lame one, and it can give a Thoroughbred the solid foundation to become a winner.

Foals

Farriers agree that for optimum development Thoroughbred foals should be evaluated at about two weeks old and again every couple of weeks as they grow.

The first trim takes place anytime from two weeks to 60 days old, depending on whether the foal needs any corrective trimming or work.

Dr. Stephen O'Grady, of Marshall, Va., was a professional farrier for 10 years prior to becoming a veterinarian. He has published numerous articles in both veterinary and farrier literature and lectured extensively both in the U.S. and overseas. To develop a program for caring for the feet and limbs, O'Grady recommends the team approach involving a vet, farrier, and committed horse owner working together.

"By doing this, you are putting the foals on a schedule and using the input of all

three professionals," he said.

O'Grady explains that the first trimming includes the hoof wall, leaving all hoof material that the foal stands on, in an effort to make the foot level. He recommends rounding the feet instead of rasping them flat so that there is a ridge of hoof wall around the perimeter and the sole is left untouched. If the frog is recessed, he says, the farrier may trim the wall until the frog is on the same plane. This is the way the young horse is trimmed until he's weaned or shod.

A foal's feet should be checked on a monthly basis, whether or not the foal is trimmed at that time, to look for any abnormalities such as a club foot or toeing



Starting early, regular hoof care offers the horse a sound foundation and can prevent problems before they start

in or out. Trimming practices for foals are basic but essential as the farrier is striving to create a solid foundation for the young horse.

Steve Norman, of Midway, Ky., has been a farrier since 1970. Born and raised in Nebraska, he now works on a wide range of horses both on the track and at farms, from foals to yearlings going to the sales to horses coming off the track.

"I trim the feet to get a medial-lateral balance and get a basic solid foot under them on a foot that's in decent shape," said Norman. "All horses will have some distortion because their legs are so long and their hooves are so tiny. As horseshoers, we have to rebalance the foot on a month-to-month basis to have the most solid foundation for that individual."

The first few months are critical for correct hoof care because the horse is growing at such a rapid rate. "At three months old the growth plates stop growing, so there's a wider opportunity from two weeks to almost the third month that you can correct varus (toe-in) and valgus (toe-out) deformity," Norman said.

According to Norman, toeing out is the most common problem in young Thoroughbreds. Toeing out creates extra pressure on the inside quarter of the foot, which results in a distortion starting at a fairly early age. He suggests that because the feet are going to be pointed at the toes, the key to the first trim is to square the toes so that the breakover pattern is in the



Because a foal grows at such a rapid rate, hoof care is critical

center of the foot on all four feet.

As a corrective measure, he explains that the farrier may put some type of a lateral extension (on the outside of the foot) with Equilox to support the growth plates in that ankle and encourage things to grow evenly. The horse will be re-evaluated after a couple of weeks to see if the extension is working, and, if not, the veterinarian may suggest surgical measures.

"The popular method is with a screw in the ankle to tighten things up," explained Norman. "That's an aggressive alteration of the ankle joint. First, you try trimming, then the extension, then surgery,

because at three months if you haven't done the surgery by the time they're three months old, their knees become affected as they get older. The knees are still open and growing when they're 2-year-olds."

Sometimes letting nature take its course is the best approach. "Sometimes we're too anxious to put an extension rather than let his body develop into his own feet," said O'Grady. "More often than not, all that's required is to square the toe so (the hoof) breaks over straight. One of the misconceptions is you can do a lot of trimming; the problem is a foal has very little foot, so you don't have the mass to do much to change it."

In the pursuit of a faster animal, breeders tend to produce light-boned horses with small feet. These horses tend to be more susceptible to injury than the heavier, tougher horses of

decades past, especially when they are racing at a high rate of speed. Concussion from training creates soreness in the foot, so the horse alters the gait, which affects the entire physiology.

O'Grady said, "It's proven that as we breed Thoroughbreds, we breed for speed and length of bone, something is bound to take a toll—usually it's the foot."

Weanlings and Yearlings

By the time horses become weanlings and then yearlings, hoof care is basically maintenance of whatever plan was laid out from the beginning. By this time



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horses are more active. Maintenance is essential because hoof distortion becomes more common as young horses grow bigger and heavier.

Norman feels that it is preferable to keep young horses barefoot as long as possible because generally a bare foot is a stronger, healthier foot. However, he says some young horses may need shoes by the time they're yearlings because of distortion from conformation.

According to Norman, a farrier needs

to see the horses on a regular schedule. "I'd say every 30 days is a reasonable time to see the farrier; some horses need to be checked every three weeks; some every five weeks. That's where the horseshoer and manager have to get along. It's up to the manager to look at the horse every day and notice a flare, a chip, or a crack," he said.

O'Grady points out that leading up to the yearling sales, overly protective management can do as much harm as good. "What happens is (consignors) are so scared of these horses getting hurt that (the yearlings) don't get the same amount of exercise they'd normally get, so their feet are inclined not to develop the way they should. Development is dependant on stimulation."

He explains that the typical start of a Thoroughbred's career can be detrimental to its feet. "When they're sold, they go to a trainer to be broken and sent to the training facility where they spend probably 22 hours a day in the stall and are started to be trained on immature feet. When they come home, the back of their foot has not been allowed to develop and they have poor conformation."

Movement, which stimulates circulation, is essential to healthy hoof growth. Norman points out that wild horses, which are moving 24 hours a day and, therefore, trimming themselves, tend to have good feet; however, as race horses are in a stall for all but an hour a day, there are many avenues to breaking that hoof down—such as a groom not picking the hooves every day—which can really complicate things for the farriers.

Shoeing for Performance

After Thoroughbreds are sold at the sales, they usually go into training to prepare for racing careers. It generally takes a few months to start a Thoroughbred under saddle. With the rigors of training, their feet and legs carry more weight, sustain increased concussion, and endure more wear and tear from the surface of the track.

Norman points out that not every horse can endure training barefoot. "A healthy foot will stay healthy as long as we don't bind it up with metal, though there are some feet that fall apart once they get to the training process, and those horses need to be shod," he said. "Once you put shoes on horses, they're probably going to stay in shoes, especially with speed work and learning to break out of the gate."

Norman emphasizes the importance of maintaining a three-to-five-week hoof care program. "If you consistently go too long between farrier visits, it catches up with (a horse)," he said. "You might have to shoe him his whole life because you

didn't maintain him well early in life."

O'Grady explains his guidelines for shoeing the horse in training or racing. "In my opinion the whole thing revolves around the trim," he said. "Trimming applies to *all* horses, and it comes down to three things: hoof/pastern axis, the widest part of the foot, and the frog so that the heel and frog are in the same plane. If the heel is too low, the frog takes abuse; if the heel is too high, the frog doesn't get any use."

Trouble Shooting

O'Grady says that he deals with several common conformation issues of the foot: a long toe and under-run heel; club foot; and sheared heels (if you look from behind, the length of heels is different inside to outside). He says sheared heels are especially common in racehorses.

"The three problems are dealt with using trim, placement of the shoe, and raising or lowering the heels in order to give the foot a better conformation," he explained. "You need to have a model for what you consider the ideal foot and then use that model as your guide to improve the foot with problems."

As far as injuries to the hoof are concerned, the most common problems O'Grady encounters are foot bruising, which he says comes from not enough protection; separations in the feet; quarter cracks; heel and toe cracks.

"I'm not one to get into a lot of glue-on shoes or gimmicks," he said. "I rely on good farriery. That means doing what is appropriate to a given foot with the skills you have. You evaluate the foot, you trim the foot appropriately, and you apply your skills to that foot rather than taking some advertised product out of the box to fix everything except get the horse in foal!"

Ian McKinlay, a farrier from South Amboy, N.J., with more than 30 years of experience, specializes in problem feet in Thoroughbreds, especially quarter cracks. He is a developer of Tenderhoof Solutions and the Yasha Shoe, which he put on Big Brown before the colt won the Kentucky Derby.

McKinlay says a common lameness in racehorses is wall separation from a solar abscess, which is an abscess underneath the sole. "The hooves aren't made to take that kind of pounding," he said. "If you have a really thin wall, 80% of the web of the shoe is on the sole, and it keeps aggravating it and takes a whole section out and blows out the hairline."

As a remedy McKinlay uses a shoe with a piece of rubber under the heel so that nothing hard touches the sole.

He also finds that he can correct the horse's hoof and pastern angles with correct shoeing. "In three shoeings you can

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take a horse with a low heel and a long toe and correct it, totally eliminate it," he said. "Because the heels are collapsed, they buckle in; they never flare out. The heels roll in and under, you set a shoe on it, and get a ton of pressure right on there."

McKinlay continued, "Probably the biggest problem I see is (farriers) don't want the horse to lose a shoe, so they tuck the shoes under the hoof so the horse won't grab them. If the horse pulls a shoe, the trainer thinks, 'This guy can't shoe a horse; (the horse) keeps pulling them off,' but the guy is doing the right thing if he puts the shoe on properly. It can be a vicious circle, but if you shoe them correctly and get them sound, the horses often stop hitting themselves altogether."

The Right Shoe for the Job

Shoes offer traction, support, and protection, and there are different types of shoes, depending on what the horse is doing. For racing, Thoroughbreds generally wear aluminum racing plates, and occasionally they will wear lightweight steel shoes for the sales. Steel shoes can be reset once, but aluminum racing plates wear quickly and usually have to be replaced every 30 days or so. McKinlay prefers glue-on shoes, especially as the majority of his business is geared to treating horses with problems.

McKinlay uses Butyl tape—the same stuff used for attaching windshields to cars—to adhere the glue-on shoes to the hoof, which keeps the glue off horses' soles and provides a secure fit. "Once they're on there, they're on—but you can nip them off," he said.

For extra traction, toe grabs are sometimes added to aluminum racing plates. Other means of adding traction are to bend the heel of the shoe slightly down or to add caulks to the heels. On many synthetic tracks no toe grabs are allowed at all, and the same applies on turf. Many tracks do not allow traction devices on the front shoes but will allow a turndown of less than a quarter inch on the hind shoes. Traction devices are controversial, and regulations vary among different tracks.

After the Track

After their racing careers have ended, some fillies become broodmares while colts may stand at stud. Some horses have such thin walls and soles that shoes will always be necessary. Their careers may even have ended early because they could not handle the concussion and the daily grind of training and racing. For horses that can handle going barefoot, it takes a little work to get them out of shoes again.

Norman explains that with a mare off the track, he'll leave the shoes on as long as he can to get the maximum amount

of new growth, or he'll use glue-ons to let the foot grow out without adding new nail holes so that he can eventually trim the nail holes off. He says that it depends on the integrity of the foot, but it can take

two or three shoeings to get horses out of shoes and barefoot again.

Environment is a key factor in the quality of horses' hooves, and probably the most detrimental element to horses' feet

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is water. "You know how soft your nails get just from taking a shower," said McKinlay. "If a horse gets a sore foot, someone puts it in a tub of water; it dries the foot out and it's all downhill from there."

Take Home Message

Regular, quality hoof care is an essential part of raising a successful racehorse. A lot is riding on those hooves, and correct shoeing and trimming can save time, money, and frustration for owners and managers with an active training or breeding business. Starting with the horse as a young foal, regular maintenance can give a solid foundation and prevent problems before they start. Throughout the racing career, correct shoeing helps the Thoroughbred athlete perform to its fullest potential. Even in retirement, hoof care is a crucial component of top-quality horse management. ◀

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