

AUSTRALIA TO "LEGALISE" BAREFOOT ENDURANCE COMPETITION

by *Ysabelle Dean*

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In February 2003 the Australian Endurance Riders' Association (AERA) made history when it voted in favour of a rule change to allow unshod horses to be ridden in endurance competition. The rule change had been approved by NSW and Tasmanian branches of the AERA earlier in the year following a submission to the Veterinary Subcommittee, prepared by NSW endurance riders Duncan McLaughlin and Dr Steven Roberts BVSc. In recent years, the so-called "Barefoot Movement" has rapidly gained momentum in Australia, Europe, UK and USA. As yet, Dr Roberts appears to be one of only a very few veterinarians in this country to have gone public, through the submission to the AERA, about the potential health and welfare benefits of breaking with the traditional practice of shoeing horses.



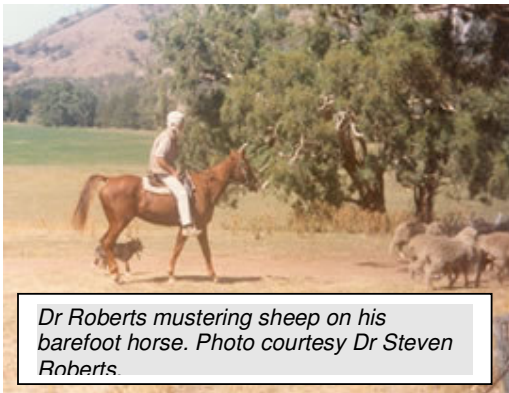
*Dr Roberts riding in the '86 Colo Challenge.
Photo courtesy Dr Steven Roberts*

It didn't take the Barefoot Movement to convince Dr Roberts that ridden horses could manage just as well, perhaps even better, without metal shoes. As a child growing up in the 1950s in the New England Tablelands in far north-west NSW he had a great deal to do with horses, and they were for the most part

barefoot. With trained farriers almost as scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth, shoeing was simply not a convenient or practical option.

Dr Roberts graduated in Sydney in 1969. As a practising veterinarian he became increasingly aware that shoeing horses tends to cause contraction of the feet, leading to unnatural hoof form. A keen horseman, Dr Roberts has also been involved in the endurance competition scene since the early 1980s. He has competed in and completed - some of the toughest courses in the country, including the 1986 Colo Challenge (160 kilometres over three legs in fourteen hours) and the 1992 South Australian Quilty. He trained his anglo-arab horse, Supervisor, barefoot and on some occasions, including the Colo Challenge, competed using Easyboots after convincing the organisers that these constituted a suitable alternative for metal shoes. When Supervisor was shod, it was to meet the requirements of the AERA rules, and the shoes were kept on for no more than six weeks. Whether training or competing, lack of shoes presented no problems for Supervisor, regardless of distance and terrain.

These days Dr Roberts attends endurance events as a vet rather than a competitor, but this has only increased his conviction that barefoot is better. In any one weekend of competition he can look at between 50-100 sets of feet, and he says far too many of them are in poor shape due to inferior shoeing and/or trimming.



Dr Roberts mustering sheep on his barefoot horse. Photo courtesy Dr Steven Roberts.

On some occasions, 20-25% of horses "vet out" due to lameness, which seems to suggest that even adequate shoeing is not providing the protection it is supposed to. According to Dr Roberts, too few horse owners appear to be able to detect hoof and shoeing problems, or understand how crucial correct hoof form and care is to their horses' overall health and comfort.

In September 2002, Dr Roberts attended a hoofcare seminar with German veterinary surgeon and equine lameness expert, Dr Hiltrud Strasser. Dr Strasser's premise, based on over 20 years of research and hundreds of case histories, is that a horse is capable of performing all the tasks that could be reasonably expected of it without requiring any kind of hoof protection - provided that the hoof has not been weakened or deformed by unnatural treatment and/or living conditions. Dr Strasser has linked these factors, including the practice of shoeing, to shortened life span, hoof disease and the various debilitating lamenesses commonplace among shod domestic horses today.

On the endurance scene, some top overseas endurance riders, such as USA veteran Darolyn Butler-Dial, are very successfully competing their horses barefoot in long distance rides over even the most gruelling terrain. Aware of this, Dr Roberts teamed up with Duncan McLaughlin to write the successful AERA submission to change the rules to allow horses to compete barefoot.

The AERA rule previously required that all horses must be adequately shod, although a horse with one or more lost shoes is still allowed to present at the veterinary examination. Horses competing in social rides (less than 40 kilometres) are occasionally allowed to go without shoes, and hoof-boots as an alternative have in the past been trialled. But on the whole, the rule effectively prevented barefoot competition. Australia and New Zealand were the only countries in the world requiring that horses in endurance competition be shod, although at the start of 2003 New Zealand changed its rules to allow barefoot competition.

The Roberts/McLaughlin submission refers to research which links shoeing to compromised hoof mechanism (expansion and contraction of the sole, frog and hoof wall) and severely impaired shock absorption (a shod horse walking on pavement experiences three times the impact of a barefoot horse trotting on pavement). The research also stresses the need for correct barefoot oriented protocols (natural lifestyle, conditioning to terrain) and points out that when the feet have been damaged by shoeing or incorrect trimming, it can take two years to rehabilitate a horse to be completely sound without shoes. (Many barefoot proponents would in fact take the view that if a horse is not sound without shoes then it is not sound period.)

The amended AERA rule (Rule 13.1) reads:- "Horses may be ridden without or without shoes, but in all cases the shoes and hooves must be in a suitable condition for the competition " It goes on to state that "Boots and pads are allowed." AERA protocol requires that the new rule be voted on a second time. If it is as fully expected - passed again, it will come into effect from 1st January 2004.

Dr Roberts also proposes to look at the Australian Rules of Racing to see what can be done to encourage the practice of barefooting racehorses. He says that thoroughbreds suffer chronically from poor shoeing and may well be better off barefoot for the type of work they do.

Dr Roberts is quietly pleased about the change of rule on the endurance scene. Although unshod endurance competition horses are likely to remain a rarity rather than the rule for quite some time, he is optimistic that more and more horse owners will start to educate themselves about the health and welfare benefits of a barefoot, natural lifestyle. In an age where, despite shoes, serious lameness and premature breakdown is a common affliction of horses trained for any sport or discipline, perhaps these are benefits that no horse lover can afford to dismiss too lightly.