

FREEDOM FOR THE FEET

by Dr Tomas Teskey DVM



We are intertwined heart, mind and soul with these animals. They perform for us with a work ethic never seen in human circles, and they become capable of so much more when we allow their feet to function properly."

One thing about steel shoes, once you get them off a horse they can be used to make all kinds of decorations, hangers, napkin holders and paperweights.

When removing shoes from a horse, work on him being as calm as possible to avoid giving him any more anxiety than necessary. He has been through a traumatic experience and may not initially trust you looking at his feet. He may have been tied up, yelled at, twitched or even thrown down to have shoes nailed on, so be as friendly as possible to avoid a misunderstanding. Once you let the horse know that you're going to free his feet, there is very often a bond that will develop between you.

Using an old rasp, file off as much of the clinched nails as you can. I avoid using a clinch cutter because it involves hammering, which the horse may misunderstand as more shoeing, and you don't want that kind of miscommunication right from the start. A rasp also cleans the area a little bit so that not as much contamination will get pulled through the hoof as the nails are pulled out. Next, give the horse a bit of a break to prepare for shoe removal and then, with an old pair of nippers or shoe-pullers, start at the heel, grab the shoe and pry carefully, forcing the handle of your tool towards the toe.

This is likely to be a bit uncomfortable, partly because the horse feels like his hoof capsule could be pulled off its coffin bone if things got out of hand. Remember there is always a little bit (or a lot) of separation when a horse has had concussive steel nailed on his foot for any length of time, and the horse will feel this separating even more as you pull the shoe. Also, soreness along the sole wherever you work with the pullers is likely to become even worse with pressure, so reassure the horse and try to work carefully but deliberately and as quickly as you feel is possible. Keep moving your pullers further towards the toe, lifting more and more until you have all nails pulling through.

If you're careful and you pull towards the toe, you won't cause much further damage to the hoof walls. Remember, the presence of the nails has caused a severe breach in the integrity of the hoof, so take care not to make it worse. You can also use nail pullers, which work well to minimize further damage to the hoof, but you may not have such a tool if you're not a shoer of horses. After the shoe is off, rub the bottom of the foot with your hand and then rub all over the lower leg area before setting the foot down. The sensations the horse will suddenly be feeling by having his own foot on the ground can be pretty intense. Watch the horse's expression and study what the eyes, posture and actions are telling you. Make sure the horse has a good spot to put its now more sensitive foot to get the opposite shoe pulled off. Repeat the procedure all the way around the horse.

Now, the feet of many horses will be in NO condition to motor along at this point, as they have become dependent on the shoes, which have forced their feet to circulate and attempt to survive in a TOTALLY different (and abnormal) way. The circulation and sensation changes will often cause a horse to start breathing faster, the eyes will become more alert and the muscles may tense all over the body. Be conscious and sympathetic to what is happening to a horse at this time! What was once disallowed has now been set free.

Sadly, the horse will not likely run off happy as a lark. No, the damage that has been brewing inside the feet and legs and body will need time to heal and readjust. In preparing a foot for a shoe, the normal architecture of the sole aspect of the foot is largely destroyed. Quarters need to be given a little relief so that lateral cartilages are able to settle down where they belong. The digital cushion will suddenly be brought back into service, where before it was left in the cold. The sole will begin to flex as it is no longer being forcefully held in a vaulted position. The entire hoof capsule will begin to flex and undergo movements unfamiliar to the horse. The hairline and coronary corium will soften and relax very quickly, allowing increased blood flow to all areas of the foot, and all around the solar areas where the damage is often severe. These are all phenomena that horses with normal feet experience at every step, but it may be days or weeks or months or longer before a de-shod horse can begin to enjoy these normal functions. If your feet are bound tightly all your young life, then left unbound, leaving you to walk on your own, you may end up having to crawl on your deformed feet. Many horses will spend more time lying down as their feet try to heal.

Some horses will have an increased amount of toxin begin to burden their bodies, because the increased circulation to the damaged feet begins to clean up and remove damaged tissues, which acts as toxin on the body. If a horse's liver, kidneys, lungs or heart become overburdened by this clean-up process, he can become ill and even die. Starting a horse on some charcoal orally can reduce toxin from the gut so that at least he won't have that normal level of toxin to deal with when the filth from the feet begins to assault the system. There are also other herbs that help support circulation and liver function and can also give a little "lift" to the horse's spirit during this process. Jiaogulan, for example, has shown good promise in this regard.

After the shoes are off, go back and make sure that any bar material is trimmed to be passive (non-primary weight-bearing). This will allow the greatest amount of soft tissue in the rear part of the foot to begin to relax after being jammed and crammed up for so long inside the rear areas near the navicular bone. Scrape or clean off any obviously loose or chalky layers to start the exfoliation process that has been disallowed, and trim the front half of the frog to be passive. Bring heel height and balance to its proper place as quickly as possible over a few days or a couple of weeks. Bring wall length to near sole level, especially in areas with white line separation. As the horse moves, this will stimulate a callous to form across these areas, as trimming in this manner stimulates circulation and horn production. Clean between frog and sole, and clean out central sulcus of the frog.

Some of these feet have MAJOR toe jam! If they are especially smelly or soft, use apple cider vinegar to discourage further bacterial and fungal infestations.

Control any obvious flares of wall, whether in heels, quarters or toes. Collect the foot and control these areas of "hang nails" so that any further separation can be held to a minimum. Lastly, put a really good 3/8 inch radius roll all the way around the toes and quarters especially - and the heels if they aren't too badly contracted or atrophied.

Come back every few days and make sure bars are staying passive, and ensure that all nasty, soft material is cleaned out. Keep rolling the edges of the foot to try to keep chunking off of hoof wall to a minimum.

Natural doming of the sole will come with time.

Now you're set to start in on further rehabilitation of not only the feet but the entire horse! His muscles will have to totally readjust to the freeing of the feet. The psychological changes that occur are fascinating, as well: horses that were once dull and depressed become active and alert, and sour and mean horses become playful and sociable.

Giving a horse his feet back will liberate him and positively change his life, and it will be a liberating experience for you, too, changing your life as you learn firsthand what a powerful tool this knowledge is. We are intertwined heart, mind and soul with these animals. They perform for us with a work ethic never seen in human circles, and they become capable of so much more when we allow their feet to function properly. Remember, honestly sound, bare feet provide the horse with more than simple locomotion. They provide insulation, circulation, and excretion of wastes, protection, FEELING. The horse will not and cannot fully give himself to our will if we shut down all these vital functions with the application of steel. Let's grant our horses freedom for their feet, provide for a more natural lifestyle, and enjoy their partnership on our journeys. The respect we show to them will return to us many times over.

Dr Tomas Teskey DVM graduated in 1995 from Colorado State University and has been practicing in Southern Arizona USA since that time. More than 90% of his work is with horses. He grew up on a cattle ranch in Central Arizona, rode shod horses all the time, and only three years ago began to understand what the horse's foot was all about. Most of what he learned early on was from Martha Olivo, who studied under Dr. Strasser. He now holds equine barefoot workshops and is planning to offer rehabilitative opportunities for horses in a working ranch environment. Dr Teskey rides barefoot horses along with the rest of his family, including his brothers and father, who also rode shod horses for decades and are

now consistently amazed at what the horses are truly capable of: soundness way beyond expectations, and vitality unmatched by any shod horses the family had ever ridden before.