

## GOOD THINGS TAKE TIME

by Carola Adolf, SHP  
(republished with permission)



This horse, standing out there in your paddock, is the result of about 55 million years of evolution.

*Yes, we are talking about YOUR trusty mount (fiery steed / plodder / ex-racer / dressage star / show jumping champion / broody / mini / bronco / charger / pony / donkey etc.).*

*Your equine - The one you know so well.*

Horses living in the Ice Age, today's wild horses and ALL other modern sport-, performance- and pleasure horses, including yours, are all anatomically, physiologically and psychologically alike and therefore have the same biological requirements for optimal health and survival.

Let's go back a few thousand years and see when and why we humans made an impact on the lifestyle of the equine:

About 5000 years or so ago, someone, somewhere decided to domesticate a horse instead of hunting and just eating it. It was the first "natural horseman" (or woman) and a practical thinker at the time. Besides still being at the bottom of the food chain, horses became work animals as well.

In time the art of horsemanship developed. People learned to train and care for equines so they could drive and ride them. With their help, human explored and conquered the world, fought battles and worked the land. We all know that without horses world history would have looked very differently.

The earliest records of such a work relationship was discovered on tablets in the ancient orient and reveal the sophisticated horsemanship methods of the Hittites and Mittanites at around 1350 BC.

About a millennium later, Xenophon wrote his treatise on horse care and training, which is still relevant today.

So, the question is: If its natural lifestyle and environment has only changed "very recently" thanks to human interference, how much did the horse's health and survival needs have changed within that time?

Can the equine organism evolve to our requirements within a few thousand years? Of course not. Good things take time. A lot of it. Nature works slowly but very efficiently. In the case of evolution that means a few million years of time.

Since we humans interfered with the natural day to day life of our equine friends (most of them have stepped up from being work-slave to "friend-in-pleasure-and- sport) we have to know the ramifications of our influence and thus avoid mistakes which could be detrimental to the horse's health.

The healthier the horse, the better it functions (and the less vet bills we have).

## **What are the biological requirements of the horse and what can we do to provide our animals with the best life possible in a domesticated situation?**

In about 55 million years, horses have evolved to be:

### 1. Herbivores/steppe animals/grazers

Their anatomy and physiology is designed and functions optimally when the animal is:

- Moving continuously in a head-down posture (long neck, long head, strong forehead, acute sense of hearing and good vision)
- Is feeding continuously on a vast variety of grasses/plants (set of continuously growing teeth for clipping and grinding; digestive tract with small stomach and long intestines for maximum extraction of nutrition from large amounts of plant matter)

### 2. Herd and prey animals

Their anatomy, physiology and psychology is designed, functions and is programmed to:

- Survive in a group as part of a team and hierarchy where the individual finds
- Horses are fright-flight-fight animals and almost all equine behaviour originates on the instinct to survive a predator attacking a herd. We are predators and if behave like them (intentionally or unintentionally) we will trigger instinctive reactions

In a domestic situation we can easily make "natural compromises" so that we come close to meet the biological requirements of our horses and therefore care for them in a way that they stay sound in body and mind. And we can enjoy them longer!

### **Here a few ideas for your consideration:**

You just have to follow Mother Nature's example and do what your can in your own four fences:

- Provide your horse with enough space to move freely (e.g. paddock to roam, large enough to stretch, in walk trot and canter) with shelter or trees for protection against the elements or for a rest in the shade.
- Good paddock management is important if you have land limitations (who hasn't?) This includes safe fencing besides maintaining the pasture. Ensure (sow) a good variety of grasses and look after ground conditions, clean or break up manure.
- If you hand feed, feed at ground level and in various places (to encourage movement and healthy posture). Get hay from various sources, as every paddock has different ground/mineral content).
- Provide a body of water (dam, creek or overflowing trough) with clean water, large enough so the horse will stand in water or mud when drinking. Water is essential for healthy hoofs.
- Give your horse a friend or two (or three or four.) of its own kind, so it has the social and functional importance of the herd to take care of its emotional well being.
- Allow your horse to regulate its own body temperature by letting it grow a winter coat in winter, remembering that they have survived the Ice Age without rugs! (To all Australian readers: We are known as rug-crazy nation. The average horse owner here in Oz is gathering more rugs in her tack room than an average riding school in Europe! Since our climate is relatively mild, nobody really knows why?!)
- Avoid force-medication (supplementing) feed, unless you are absolutely sure your horse needs a certain nutrient/mineral/vitamin. If feeding a good variety of pasture hay, your horse should get everything it needs.

- If you use chemical wormers, make sure your horse needs worming first! Chemical wormers are poison!
- In case of sickness, discuss alternative treatment methods with your vet first. Unfortunately most conventional medications and treatments suppress symptoms and obstruct healing. Find ways to help the organism to heal itself.
- Ride and train "horse friendly". Gymnasticise your horse so it is physically able to do what you expect from it. Allow it to warm up, stretch, and warm down. Train with compassion, tact and patience so your horse is mentally ready to understand your requests and physically able to do them. Be a rider whom the horse can enjoy (they love to please).
- Learn about and provide natural hoofcare. Your horse needs its hoofs for a variety of important reasons. Look beyond the traditions of only a few hundred years, again, remembering the horse survived very soundly for the past 50+million years: Their anatomical, physiological and psychological make up has not changed. Not even that of your flat, shelly hooved thoroughbred!.

**Natural hoofcare includes:**

- Learning how a functioning hoof looks like (look over your farriers shoulder and ask questions, so all farriers know that putting shoes on horse's feet is just not good enough!)
- Regular trimming to mimic natural hoof wear on breed appropriate terrain and in optimal lifestyle conditions (including water, travelling 15km per day).
- Facilitating hoof mechanism
- Ability (feel ground) and traction.

Hoof mechanism and function is not possible when shoes are attached to the hoof.

To conclude this little article and to come back to YOUR horse - the one you know so well. It is only natural that you want the best for him or her. Thank goodness!

Like most of us horse lovers, it is our endeavour to be the best horse owner for our horses as we can be, but we have to keep an open mind and sometimes just let our instincts guide us a little more through all this commercialised, "civilised" confusion. We may have re-discovered now that it is not the new rug or the latest fashion shoe that makes him happy. It is a healthy body and mind.

A healthy HORSE body and HORSE mind (this of course includes his foundation: HIS HOOVES!).

Learn as much as you can about this "creature horse" and what makes him tick, learn about his body and mind. He is a horse and has profoundly different needs to a human. For example, he does not need a stable: he needs freedom and movement. He does not need a cosy warm bed: he needs a place to rest with straight forward escape routes. He does not need 2 or 3 meals a day: he needs to have continuous feed intake to keep his gut filled. He does not need a "private yard": he needs a herd to keep him safe (at least in his mind, since sable tigers haven't been seen for a while).

His body and mind is already perfect and functions optimally in an environment in which he has adapted to survive the past 55 million years.

Let's not spoil this success story with anthropomorphisation. (treating the horse as if it needs what we need and thinks how we think.