

## HANDS DOWN WIN FOR BARE FEET AT EQUITANA DEBATE The Great Debate: "To Shoe or Not to Shoe"

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When Strasser Hoofcare Australia was officially approached by Equitana Asia-Pacific to bring Todd Merrell out from Canada for two sessions of the "To Shoe or Not to Shoe" debate, Julie (Leitl) and I pulled out all stops to organise clinics to offset the costs of such a venture. Unfortunately, being so close to Christmas, and such short notice, it was not viable, and we had to cancel.

Julie had no intention of replacing Todd as a representative for the Strasser Method on the debate panel, but the organisers put her on the spot for the first session. Also on the panel were Dave Farmilo, Paul Smith, both master farriers, Dave MacDonald (ex-farrier and inventor of Old Mac's Hoof Boots), Dr Ian Bidstrup (BVSc), Dan Guerrero, farrier/barefoot trimmer from the USA, and Julie. For the second session, when Julie could not be present, the organisers took me up on a suggestion that Dr Steven Roberts BVSc fill the vacant position. Dr Roberts is a well-known advocate of the barefoot horse, and member of the Australian Equine Barefoot Movement (AEBM) Inc. He wrote the submission which successfully overturned the "horse must be shod" rule for Australian Endurance competition. Both sessions were full: in the first one there were people sitting in the aisles and not even standing room left up the back.

The first session was less a debate than a statement of position from each panellist, with very little time left for questions from the audience. Both farriers stated upfront that barefoot was best, but that in their experience many horses simply could not go without shoes. Dave Farmilo, probably Australia's most respected and well-known farrier with 47 years' experience under his belt, said that this was especially so for performance horses, which make up the bulk of his clientele. Farmilo said that one of the major problems with farriers today was that they had "lost the plot" and were making everything much too complicated. He said, keep it simple, balance the foot properly, and use as light a shoe as possible.

Farmilo said the other major problem he could see with the practice of shoeing is that 90% of farriers do not have enough training, and do not take full advantage of all the most recent research to update their education on a regular basis. He said that horse owners should not put up with shoddy workmanship from their farriers.

Smith echoed many of Farmilo's comments, and said that horse owners should not employ any farrier who discouraged them from asking questions about their methods. But he also pointed out that owners must take responsibility for their own horses, and that part of the problem is that too many owners try to stretch their bucks by having their horses shod too infrequently. He and Farmilo both said horses should be reshod every four to five weeks.

Dave MacDonald spoke briefly of his experiences as a farrier and how he had invented Old Macs as an alternative to metal shoes because he believes that concussion is a major cause of lameness and foot-damage in shod horses. He said that he had, like his peers in the shoeing profession, considered lameness such as navicular syndrome incurable. MacDonald said his "eyes had been opened" to the real cause of navicular and the fact that it is in many cases completely reversible by the work of barefoot pioneers such as Dr vet med Hiltrud Strasser.

Dr Ian Bidstrup is an Australian vet and practising equine chiropractor, with a particular expertise in saddle-fitting. He spoke of his observations about the connection between poor posture and foot pain, and said it is imperative for anyone connected with horses to take notice of the research and new findings of the barefoot pioneers. He agreed that barefoot is best but felt that there are occasions when may be necessary to shoe for the sake of the horse's comfort, including during lameness rehabilitation.

Dan Guerrero spoke of his beliefs as a barefoot trimmer. He stressed the need to "keep it simple" and felt strongly that procedures such as bar-lowering are unnecessary and severe, and that trimming the sole should consist mainly of cleaning out only the top layer of flaking material. He felt that soaking feet is largely unnecessary, and believes that it is imperative to rasp the wall and periople as matter of good hygiene. He also agreed with Farmilo and Smith that farriers needed to educate themselves better. He said that farriers who come to one of his short clinics often have their eyes opened to a new way of doing things, and find it a positive learning experience. He stressed the need for horse owners to educate themselves, too, so they can have control.

It was then time for Julie Leidl SHP (qualified Strasser Hoofcare Professional) to say her piece.

Leidl began by making it clear that she has only been a qualified Strasser trimmer since June and that she does not consider herself an expert in the Strasser Method or anything else. Nor does she believe that she could cure every lame horse through her work. However, she has had some excellent results, including with horses pronounced incurably lame by vets and farriers. She agreed whole-heartedly with the comments made by Guerrero about bar-lowering when they are applied wholesale to every foot and/or by trimmers, farriers or horse owners who do not have the appropriate training in corrective orthopedic trimming. She said that if, when and to what degree such procedures should be applied was why she'd spent the best part of a year training to be a Strasser Hoofcare Professional, and cautioned audience members from trying these things at home. She also stressed that attending a three or even five days clinic and/or reading Dr Strasser's books did not qualify anybody, regardless of previous experience as a trimmer or farrier, to apply the Strasser Method.

During the second session, Dr Steven Roberts spoke of how he'd been training barefoot horses for endurance for years without problems and echoed the sentiments of Farmilo and Smith that there is too much shoddy farriery work around. He referred heavily to the work of Dr vet med Hiltrud Strasser, and the need for horses to get plenty of movement and foot-soaking. (The foot-soaking comment attracted a fiery response from Guerrero, and Roberts qualified his comment, agreeing that every horse is an individual, and how much soaking, if any, depends on a range of factors).

During the second session there was more time for audience comment and questions. One woman countered Farmilo's statement that performance horses cannot do their jobs without shoes by saying that she had just completed a 160 kilometre endurance ride on her barefoot horse. Farmilo at first dismissed this as a training ride, but she assured him it was the real thing.

To one of Smith's comments about thoroughbreds having congenitally flat and shelly feet, another audience member stood up and said that she was glad that nobody had ever told her thoroughbreds they had lousy feet because they had never been shod. This was followed by discussion about the effect of terrain on feet. It was generally agreed that hard terrain is better for horses. Smith said that if you took two foals, each with some congenital foot deformity, and put one on hard terrain and one on soft, the one on the hard terrain had a far better chance of coping much better. Farmilo said the ideal situation is to have horses

living naturally on proper terrain and only to shoe them for short periods when they are required for some performance work.

I don't think there was any doubt in the minds of either the panellists or the audience that barefoot easily won the day at both sessions. Julie was besieged by people wanting to talk to her about the Strasser Method, and hundreds of AEBM fliers I had left on the table outside the debate room went like hotcakes.

After the first session, Julie and I went to visit Dave Farmilo at his trade stand. Julie had gleaned from comments made during the debate that his idea of what a healthy trimmed hoof should look like was very similar to Dr Strasser's, and she wanted to ask him about the methods he used for balancing a foot and determining correct breakover. Farmilo was happy to explain and, yes, it would seem that the principles are not so dissimilar. The fundamental difference is that Farmilo firmly believes that horses must be shod for performance, and Strasser maintains that a performance horse can do anything its shod counterpart can do (and more) provided it is not pushed beyond its individual limitations and also provided the feet are completely healthy and conditioned to both the terrain and the task.

Farmilo initially condemned as "butchery" the work of "qualified" Strasser Hoofcare Professionals, which he claimed to have seen in South Australia. We explained that there were no SHPs in South Australia; nor was any SHP visiting that state at the present time. He was quite taken aback. Julie and I still haven't got to the bottom of who's been doing a "Strasser Trim" in South Australia, but we are looking into the matter. Our enquiries so far have suggested that the trimmer/s concerned may actually not be calling themselves "Strasser", and in fact may not be using her methods at all. It's just that because the name Strasser is so well-known, many farriers and horse owners tend to assume that every barefoot trim they see is a Strasser Trim.

But it's a timely warning for all do not employ anyone who does not have the letters "SHP" after their name to do a Strasser Trim on your horse. And if you are using a trimmer to apply any other type of barefoot trim to your horse, it might pay to check on credentials, training and track record.

This is not to say that there are not some barefoot trimmers out there doing a good job. But we are hearing an increasing number of reports about "butchery" which, in every single case so far, has been tracked down to either a non-qualified person trying to emulate the Strasser Method, or a non-Strasser barefoot trimmer. If experienced, qualified master farriers like Farmilo are so appalled with what they are seeing from 90% of people within their own profession, maybe the Barefoot Movement should take heed it doesn't go the same way. Anybody can hang up a shingle and call themselves a barefoot trimmer, after all.

Horse owners whatever barefoot trim you choose, educate yourselves. Ask questions of your trimmer. Study the subject matter available. Be informed. Take control and assume responsibility. Shoes or barefoot, that's the best insurance against lameness any of us could ever hope to have.