

YSABELLE DEAN INTERVIEWS TOMAS TESKEY, DVM

An American equine veterinarian who is now dedicating himself to spreading the word about barefooted horses.



YD: What is your experience with horses and how did that lead you to make the decision to become an equine veterinarian?

TT: My father's ancestors came to Central Arizona in the 1870's and made a start in the cattle industry on open range conditions. Some of the same rangeland is still managed by my family the oldest continually family-owned ranch in Arizona.

Over the last two generations, our family has found itself less and less dependent on the ranching, venturing in to other enterprises ... like veterinary medicine. I was born in Colorado while my father was attending veterinary school. Not only did I follow in his footsteps, I attended the same university in Fort Collins after being accepted into the Veterinary Class of 1995. My wife and I had children of our own while we were there. The first two were born in the same hospital I was born in.

Although most of my work at this point in time involves horses, my familiarity with, and love for, livestock has helped steer me towards learning all I can about the nature of these larger animals. These are the animals that ensured survival of my family over the last century.

YD: What did you learn through veterinary training about horses' feet and the treatment of lameness?

TT: Veterinary school was as intense a learning experience as I have ever had. There didn't seem to be a lot of extra time for independent study and reflection. Leg and hoof anatomy was much better than the physiology we studied. Conventional veterinary medicine really stresses diagnostics. Lameness exams include overall assessments, palpation, manipulation, flexion tests, nerve blocks, radiographs - even nuclear scans - to try and pinpoint the actual problem.

Most of the lame horses we studied were shod. Their shoes were generally removed and the edges of the hoof walls taped to prevent chipping during lameness exams. Never once did I hear mention of live sole planes or bar position or hoof mechanism. If the horse had pain in the heel areas, a farrier would be called in to fit a certain type of shoe. The horse would be examined again to note the results.

We saw dozens and dozens of heel-sore horses during our equine clinical rotations. I remember listening to resident veterinarians lamenting over how "common" this problem was and how "sick of this navicular syndrome" they were. We had the treatments down pat, though: eggbar shoes, three-degree wedge pads, with or without impression material if they needed help decontracting (impression material was said to help spread out the heels). Those owners with horses that were very sore even in the shoes were encouraged to have digital neurectomies done (cutting the palmar digital nerves on both sides of the affected leg so that the horse is unable to feel the pain coming from the diseased heel areas).

I cannot remember a single case where it was highly recommended that a lame horse remain barefoot and have a certain type of trim done. Nor was it ever recommended that

horses have large areas to live in. Time and again, confinement to a stall, or stall with a small run, was the order of the day. It was stressed that, in order to heal, lame horses must rest, generally for a period of weeks, with specific instructions on hand-walking. A larger turnout space and more exercise were allowed as the weeks went by, provided the horse was "improving".

Specifically, acutely laminitic horses were stall-rested in six to eight inches of sand, given Phenylbutazone (Bute) or Flunixin meglumine (Banamine) for pain, Acepromazine and Isoxsuprine to try and dilate digital blood vessels to improve circulation, and general nursing care. Depending on the severity and duration of an acute attack, lily pads or other materials were taped to the bottom of the feet until the horse stabilized enough to allow the application of special nailed-on shoes.

YD: At some point you obviously decided that conventional treatment had little to offer. Was there a specific incident that triggered this?

TT: Early in my veterinary career I was pretty sceptical about the so-called "barefoot movement". But people kept asking me so I finally started looking into what was going on. I began hearing about Dr. Strasser and barefoot horses from a farrier who felt he knew how to perform the trim.

It wasn't long before he and Martha Olivo were contacted to help with a client's foundered horse. It was one of the worst I'd seen, with coffin bones protruding through both front soles. I had nearly made up my mind to euthanize the horse, but when I found out Martha was a specialist and had studied under Dr. Strasser, I decided to give this a try. I felt excited and a little apprehensive. I was supposed to be the veterinarian, after all, and I should know what was best for the horse, not some hoof trimmer lady.

Martha showed us how to trim the horse and how to keep it trimmed over the next few weeks. At first that horse walked almost entirely on the back feet, leaving bloody front hoof prints, but within a short time he was motoring around pretty well. He is fully healed and being ridden now, but it took six months for him to get there. I was used to at least two years before a horse was better, and could never tell if they might or might not ever be rideable after all the special shoeing. Needless to say, I was impressed.

After seeing a few more barefoot horses that people were able to ride over the rocks, and thinking back on horses that I used to ride when I was too lazy to put shoes on them, I started really reading the available literature. This was making too much common sense. I began to ask myself why certain horses couldn't walk on their own feet any more. I was able to attend a 10-day Hoof Groom course with Martha Olivo and her United Horsemanship organization. I learned more about the horse's foot in those 10 days than I had ever learned in a lifetime of being around horses, and my life was changed at that point.

YD: The work of which of the "barefoot pioneers" has been of particular use/influence?

TT: Though I have never met Dr. Strasser, or taken any of her classes, she is a beacon of light for me. She is a veterinarian who is unafraid of speaking the truth. I have read her textbook and smaller books, each which have helped me help huge numbers of horses get better - better feet, legs and overall better health. She has been an example of strength and integrity for me and I deeply respect what she has done and continues to do to educate us all.

Martha Olivo, who was one of her first students in America, is also an important person for me. Martha gets around horses very comfortably and they trust her with their feet. She will always be my mentor, and I continue to consult with her. We share our findings and learn from each other.

I have read books by all the other big names in natural hoofcare and have learned a tremendous amount of good stuff, but have been a little disappointed in their failure to give respectful mention to Dr. Strasser. Even if they don't agree with her trimming methods, her philosophy and integrity deserve attention and appreciation. I am continuing to participate in workshops and courses offered by these people and I'm sure I'll always learn good things from them.

YD: Why do you think farriers and other vets are so ready to dismiss "scientific proof" in favour of keeping horses barefoot?

TT: All it takes is about half an hour with these veterinarians or farriers, face to face, to convince them that such proof does exist. Deformed feet on shod horses is an epidemic problem, but they don't recognize it as such until they are shown. They may not want to believe all the ex-farriers and trimmers out there spreading the word - in fact, both veterinarians and farriers largely dismiss the work of Dr. Strasser and the concept of a barefoot lifestyle as a viable option. I think veterinarians will start to listen more if I, as one of their colleagues, am able to send out more information. The relationship between veterinarians and farriers is set to become increasingly contradictory. Farriers will have to become trimmers if they want to remain in the good graces of veterinary medicine in the years to come.

There's an awful lot of ego and pride in both camps, but it simply won't matter for much longer. The evidence that steel shoes harms horses is overwhelming.

YD: What is your success rate in treating lame horses by removing the shoes and correctly trimming the feet? How does it compare with your success rate in treating lame horses with conventional methods?

TT: If the other ingredients of natural lifestyle, movement, herd life, moisture and nutrition are used in conjunction with correct trimming, I have yet to have a horse that failed to improve. It is so easy I can't believe it. The barefoot, natural lifestyle concept respects the nature of the animals and is low-cost in the long run, reducing unneeded expenses and getting horses to be useful for more years of their lives. I have healed all kinds of foot problems AND leg problems by getting shoes off horses. I have a keen understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the horse's foot, and it is such a powerful tool that I can not only diagnose lameness quickly and accurately, but can help horses on the spot if needed. Trimming a set of bars, and having a lame horse go sound in two minutes really catches an owner's attention. I have a good reputation for helping horses with foot problems get better quickly.

Three years ago I was prescribing egg bar shoes, wedge pads and impression material like a madman. These horses would go better immediately, but kept coming back with another problem, injury or an abscess ... it never ended. But there was always the next "trick" in the farrier's truck, and we kept them going the best we knew how. In hindsight, I know that none of those horses got better, because now my definition of "better" means healthy physiologic function in the feet and legs, not whether their head bob goes away.

YD: Can you describe one of your most successful cases?

TT: One of my own horses, a quarter horse stallion when I got him, had feet the size of Texas all splayed out, with exposed solar corium in all four feet. He was standing in mud and manure up over his ankles in a set of panels, with the hose left dripping in the corner for his drinking water. He was fed a flake of alfalfa twice a day. His eyes were so dejected and cold. I bought him and brought him home. It took me two days to trim his feet; he didn't want me looking at them, they hurt so bad. We struck a deal and he let me take care of his feet every few days for about eight months. My daughters and I now ride him all over this part of the world, up the Huachuca Mountains, along the San Pedro River and over the roughest terrain a man can imagine ... barefoot. His feet have normal concavity and he doesn't have boots - he doesn't like them and will try to tear them off with his teeth. He enjoys his freedom in a bigger area and generally runs around me twice before coming and sticking his nose in the halter.

YD: Can you describe any cases that have been less successful? Why might treatment have failed?

TT: I have a checklist that I use to go over treatment and progress with my clients. There are a few horses that are kept in panelled corrals that haven't gotten better to the degree I would like. They are generally overweight, and some of them look like they have insulin resistance or equine Cushing's syndrome. I've found evidence of some of them getting grain, sweet feed, senior feeds, treats and bags and bags of carrots at different times, even though I've left specific instructions to totally avoid these things. Of course many of them are exercised every day for ten minutes and put back in the corral, a totally unsatisfactory situation.

Another big factor limiting healing is being kept alone. With those patients living in solitary confinement. I've yet to see the kind of healing occur that I know a horse is capable of. There is something going on here more than just getting movement. Psychological health and its relation to physical health is real. These animals are herd animals. It's hard-wired into their brains, and no amount of bargaining or complaining will change the fact that horses need other horses to be healthy. This is one of the top items on my checklist.

YD: Do you have any thoughts/advice for horse owners who believe that barefoot is best but are under fire from other horse owners, trainers, vets and/or farriers?

TT: Just smile and politely invite them on a ride with you sometime. Show them your cool hoof boots. Pick up your horse's foot and rub the sole, nodding your head and humming to yourself, setting the foot down and saying, "Oh, that wall needs a little touch up right there. Do you see that wanting to pull right there?" Ask them, "How is a nailed on shoe is going to affect circulation to the circumflex artery?" Mention that you had a horse that lost a shoe one time ... and half of his hoof wall with it. Tell your trainer, "This horse feels so springy and light ... would you like to ride him?" Or, upon riding your neighbour's shod horse, exclaim "I think I just lost a filling - she is jolting me so hard the way she pounds the ground." Ask the farrier, "Is it OK if bacteria and fungus and manure get up inside the holes that the nails make through the white line and wall?" Or, "Why are my horse's feet getting narrower in the heels/ridges on the walls/ thrush in the frog/bruising on the sole?" Pull a horse's coffin bone out of your pocket and start playing with it until someone asks you, "What the heck is that?" And believe me, they WILL ask you. Then you can show them how it's shaped like a dome and it has a concave shape on the bottom and holes for blood vessels to come through.

Tell them all about the horses that go for 100 miles barefoot over rough terrain. Tell them about the three day eventing horses that are barefoot and winning their competitions. Explain to them how important it is for your horse to feel the ground and avoid mis-steps so that you are safe when riding. Tell them your horse doesn't like nails in his feet. Be an example for others. Let them see your barefoot horses, but let them come to you with their questions or criticisms. Show how much you care about the health of your horses, including their feet.

YD: There is hot debate within the barefoot movement about the pros and cons of various methods for trimming to maintain/restore soundness. Do you have any thoughts as to how we can overcome our differences?

TT: We have strength in sticking together with what we know. There are organizations like United Horsemanship that are always looking for ways to bring all barefoot horse supporters together, wanting to be the vehicle of solidarity for worldwide education about the hoof. Truly, no man is an island. We need each other to help keep each individual strong.

It's simple to form riding clubs, and I think it's important to invite people from all the different trimming "camps" and even shod horses to ride along with you. All trimming methods have a sound barefoot horse in mind as the end result. Let's concentrate on that which we have in common rather than how one group thinks another group is too aggressive about getting heel height correct. These are little things in the long run, and they will work themselves out more in the future as we keep learning. There is so much to keep up with. It's quite a ride. Let's get on with it.