

## SHOELESS OR SHOD?

### What to consider before taking the first step

#### **Why it's important to consult with an appropriate professional**

Consulting with a qualified equine podiatrist, specifically one who has achieved a Diploma in Applied Equine Podiatry, and is an alumnus of the 'International Institute of Equine Podiatry' and a member of the Applied Equine Podiatry Association guarantees you are taking responsible steps to ensuring your horse's welfare. The IIEP & AEPA exist in order to ensure and maintain a high standard of service and professionalism.

#### **How is an Applied Equine Podiatrist different to a Farrier?**

Applied Equine Podiatrists (AEPs) are not just interested in trimming the horse's hoof. They are also concerned with the overall welfare of the animal and work closely with the client to ensure ongoing conditioning and management of the feet. Not only do EPs have an holistic approach to ensuring a strong and healthy hoof, they are also knowledgeable about the structure of the foot and are trained to identify any specific areas that may need addressing.

#### **Don't commit to going shoeless until you and your horse have had an initial evaluation**

Deciding whether or not to take your horse shoeless requires commitment from the owner. During the initial assessment and evaluation with an AEP, they will discuss with you the current state and condition of your horse's feet and what you should realistically expect by following their advice. They will also provide you with a tailored conditioning programme that will be crucial for you to adopt in-between consultations. It is important therefore, that you discuss in detail with your AEP beforehand what the implications of committing to the shoeless programme will mean to you and your horse.

#### **Do consider the costs involved**

In the long term, owning a shoeless horse should save you money. However, at the onset it can prove quite costly. As well as any professional fees, you will also need to consider the possible cost of products, equipment, and resources, for example, therapeutic pads, removable boots and topical treatments, and in some instances, the hiring of a sand school. You may feel that some of these recommendations are too expensive and unnecessary. However, any prescriptive given is done so with the best interests of your horse, which will enable a stronger response to treatment and ultimately a shoeless horse.

#### **Why it's important to be able to undertake change**

The conditioning programme may require a rethink of your daily routines. You may need to re-evaluate your horse's diet, bedding and turn out. When renting livery you may also be restricted in choices/changes you would like to implement, so do give consideration to the facilities available, before making a commitment.

#### **Understanding the transition period**

Going shoeless is not always an easy process. No two horses are the same and it will depend on the condition of your horse, its feet and your ability to commit to providing daily support, before your AEP will advise on whether going shoeless or not is an option for you.

Horses that have previously worn shoes, or haven't done much work on hard ground will need a transition period to become fully sound without shoes, on all surfaces. This may mean a rest from riding, where hand walking only is necessary, since doing too much or too little in the early stages of treatment can cause inflammation, bruising or abscessing. In contrast, doing nothing can severely delay or even reverse the healing process, so it is important you are able to fully commit to the advice given to you by your AEP.

It is equally important you are able to set aside adequate time for you and your horse. This may require you to cancel any shows or upcoming events in order to have uninterrupted time and dedication to ensure your horse is given the utmost support during the transitional period.

#### **Being realistic about the outcome**

Be realistic in your approach to what you expect from owning a shoeless horse. Most horses can be conditioned to a general riding/hacking level. However, if you have a high performance horse, and wish to enjoy such disciplines as endurance riding or eventing, your horse will need exceptional hooves to withstand such activities. Because of this, you will be required to offer a high level of commitment to the programme from the outset. It is also important to understand that many horses have inherent problems that can limit their overall performance, so it is vital to maintain a realistic view on what you ideally want to achieve.

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### **Being able to provide a suitable living environment**

As much as it is crucial that you have the time to dedicate to the shoeless programme, it is equally important that you are able to provide the right environment for your horse in order to promote healthy feet. Domestication can sometimes place your horse in an unnatural environment, such as a waterlogged field, which can often prove troublesome. Be prepared to consider laying alternative surfaces that are more conducive to your horse's needs.

### **Why teamwork is crucial to owning a shoeless horse**

Following each consultation, an AEP will leave you with written conditioning recommendations. This advice will be individual to you and your horse, and is specifically tailored in order to improve upon any hoof problems your horse may be experiencing. It will also contain advice on the type of care needed in order for you to work alongside your AEP to ensure the desired outcome of strong, conditioned and healthy feet. This may only take a commitment from you of around ten to twenty minutes a day, but it is important you are able to adhere to this advice and implement the treatment on a daily basis. If you skip days, the rehabilitation period will be longer and ultimately more costly.

### **Shoeless versus shod**

Once you have decided to go shoeless, you will be taking on a bigger commitment to your horse's welfare. The feet of a horse that is shod is the responsibility of the Farrier. A shoeless horse becomes the responsibility of the owner. Most owners, who have committed to going shoeless feel empowered by the process and armed with new knowledge and responsibility, are better able to understand their horse's needs and in turn develop a stronger bond with their animal.

### **Don't just take advice from your Applied Equine Podiatrist**

Always keep in mind that some horses will require the additional support of a vet, chiropractor, osteopath or other therapist, according to their individual needs. Be selective about taking advice from other owners. Everyone has an opinion about correct horse/hoof care. It doesn't necessarily mean this advice can be applied to your own horse. Remember, horses are as individual as humans, and what might work for one person, doesn't necessarily work for the other. So do keep an open mind when researching the vast array of information available and always check any treatments or remedies with the relevant professional caring for your horse, before carrying out any changes to the Programme.

### **The journey onwards**

I do hope this information has given you a comprehensive insight into the journey you are considering and that it provides sufficient advice in order for you to make an informed decision as to whether or not the shoeless approach is right for you and your horse. Always bear in mind that a lack of commitment to the programme may mean it is in the best interests of your horse to remain shod. However, if recommendations are followed consistently and conscientiously, improvements to your horse's feet will be immeasurable.

### **Finally.....**

Although the whole process takes time and effort, the benefits are immeasurable. Aside from the improvement in my horse's hooves, we now have a closer relationship, she is living a more natural and comfortable existence and I honestly feel that she just loves the fact that she no longer has to have shoes nailed to her feet.

**Your horse, your dream, your goal**

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