

Geri White is an AHA and ESA certified barefoot hoof care specialist and a field instructor for the Equine Sciences Academy. She also currently serves on the Board of Directors and Chair the AHA Education Committee. Geri works with other equine professionals in Dentistry, Chiropractic, Acupuncture, Homeopathy, Massage, Reiki, Body Work and Essential Oils in order to offer whole-horse wellness. She believes in educating her clients and teaching owners through Educational Clinics in a more natural paradigm of horse keeping. She believes that healthy feet grow from healthy horses. Healthy in body, mind and spirit. She offers, "more than just a trim. . ."

How did you get your start as a barefoot hoof care specialist?

I own a Arab/Paint cross named Sage, and because he has spent his developing years in an exaggerated foal grazing stance, he has a low grade club foot (smaller, narrower and with a higher heel). Years ago as a shod horse, he would become imbalanced within 2 weeks after shoeing. He would trip often and lead balk. My farrier at the time had no suggestions other than to shoe him more often, but never encouraged me in any direction.

As autumn approached, I removed his shoes for the winter as I had always done. We had an unusually long autumn season here in upstate NY that went into mid January, so I enjoyed riding Sage barefoot for 3 months. I really came to notice the difference and that the benefit of some natural wear made him a happier horse to ride. The only thing I did different was remove his shoes. I couldn't deny the difference, and thought long and hard about what to do next.

I walked out to my mailbox and sitting on top of the bills and junk mail was my Horse and Rider magazine and printed in the red banner on the top of the cover it read: Is Barefoot For Your Horse. You can imagine that it really got my attention and I wasted no time reading it. I bought Jaimie Jackson's book, [The Horse Owners Guide to Natural Hoof Care](#), and Pete Ramey's book, [Making Natural Hoof Care Work For You](#), to get started, and began to look for a Barefoot Trimmer.

I found one that lived a couple hours away, Amy Sheehy, and she was willing to come out and show me how to get started trimming my own horses. She told me I had a good grasp on this and that there are not enough trimmers around. She strongly encouraged me to seek a career in hoof care and recommended the Equine Sciences Academy. I applied and was accepted, and shortly after I applied for a ESA scholarship, I was awarded the Excellence Scholarship for the remainder of my studies.

I traveled with and shadowed Amy for 9 months while I worked through the first term course material. Word began to get around about what I was doing with a few horses in my area and I started to get a lot of calls and inquiries and quickly grew a significant client base. I became the first student to complete the Equine Sciences Degree Program as well as the Natural Hoof Care Certification from the ESA. I was asked by the ESA administration if I was interested in applying for an Instructor's position, which I did, and now serve in that capacity for the ESA.

At the same time, I had also applied to the American Hoof Association for membership and was accepted as a Certified Member. I currently serve on the AHA Board of Directors and chair the Education Committee. I currently trim around 300 horses in the capitol region of NY, western MA and parts of western CT.

What is the most common reason owners give for wanting to transition from shoes to barefoot?

There really is no one reason that stands out, but here are some of the most common I encounter :

-I heard about “Barefoot” and want to try it with my horse.

-My horse has been diagnosed with laminitis or navicular syndrome and the conventional recommendations are not working. They are recommending euthanasia and I want to try your approach.

-Word of mouth carries a lot of weight with horses that have been successfully rehabilitated or significantly improved, and some of these owners meet someone who is in the same position they were in, and put them in touch with me.

-I also received a lot of calls because someone read Joe Camp’s book, [Soul of the Horse](#), or Pete Ramey’s book, [Making Natural Hoof Care Work For You](#) or found his website. They came to a crisis of conscience and just had to get the shoes off their horse!

In your opinion, will barefoot work for every horse?

Sadly there are some horses that do not do well barefoot, and I usually put them in 2 categories. This is important.

- The horse that cannot go bare because the owner cannot or will not make the necessary changes in horse keeping practices with respect to diet, environment or use and many other changes or alternative therapies I often recommend. My care plans strive to set both the owner and the horse up for success, and where we set the bar for that depends on the horse’s health history and the owner’s determination to follow through. The owner’s level commitment can make or break a successful transition.
- The horse that has been shod back-to-back for the majority of their lives and used heavily for riding. Their feet never had an opportunity to heal from the restrictive and damaging effects continuous shoeing often causes, and they never had the opportunity to develop a naturally-functioning foot.

I have 2 stories to describe each case here:

#1: An owner bought a new horse that had been used in lesson programs and shown extensively. They were getting him for their daughter to show. He was shod all around when he came and we pulled the shoes and gave him some time. He had difficulty in the beginning, which I had expected. Then she told me she wanted to get him into showing this season! I knew with his shoeing and use history, and how he presented being bare (even in boots) that this was not going to work for this horse.

I told her that ideally he needs at least a year off from work, possibly 2, as well as some alternative therapies. I felt that if he could not have the necessary time off that he needed to develop his hooves that she should shoe him for the show season. She was surprised at my recommendation, but I will not set a horse up for pain or failure. This is not about a method, but about the comfort of a horse. Yes, it is a compromise, but she wants to give him another chance to go bare after September.

#2: A QH gelding who just turned 30 had been a 2 y/o champion reining horse, a working horse and was heavily ridden for much of his life, and shod all around for 28 of his 30 years without ever having a break. When he turned 30, the owner decided to retire him and had her farrier remove his shoes. He was painfully lame for 5 weeks and she called me to see what I could do to help him. I tried a boot and pad option that improved his situation, but it was still not comfortable for me to watch him move. We tried another boot with about the same amount of improvement. After watching him walk after I trimmed him 2 more times, I had to ask her, "How was he in shoes?"

She said he was fine and never like this. I told her that at the age of 30, it was not likely that he would live long enough or even move enough to develop the feet he would need to be comfortable barefoot. He was struggling in boots. This was such a significant change that it was affecting his weight and his attitude, and his owner was stressed. I told her that if he was happy and sound in shoes, she should have them put back on. She did, and she called me to thank me for caring more about the comfort of her horse than in a hoof care method.

Sometimes I am surprised with what some horses will pull through despite some of the odds. One of my clients took in a 19 y/o upper level dressage warmblood who had stayed in a stall most of his life except for riding, lessons, and showing. He was shod. When he came to her place, we pulled his shoes and he was turned out 24/7 with 2 other horses. To my surprise he did well right from the beginning. Never needed boots. He was able to come off almost all the medications he was on in 5-8 months, and she was trail riding him barefoot!

Another was an older horse who was lame in shoes, with dubbed toes and long under-run heels. The owners treated his thrush, we kept 4 week trim intervals, used padded hoof boots, changed his diet, started fecal egg counts and wormed with herbals, balanced his mouth through natural balance dentistry, he received chiropractic, acupuncture and massage. These girls ate peanut butter to help this horse! He was able to go out for rides 3 times a week in his boots and was bare out in his pasture with his herd mates the rest of the time. He sometimes needed boots on frozen

ground even in turnout, but they took care of him. We had a lot of steps gained and some steps lost along the way, but with owner determination we found a combination of things that worked for this horse.

I can honestly say, from years of experience, that the majority of the horses that enter the transition process from shoes to bare, with committed owners willing to make all the necessary changes in horse keeping practices, are successful in varying degrees. Again, this depends on a lot of factors, and we need to consider them all.

I have seen excellent results too with high performance horses. I am working with several dressage horses that are showing bare that were previously in shoes and an endurance horse who won the Florida 100 mile CTR Lightweight division barefoot, just 2 years after coming out of shoes.

I also worked this spring/summer with a 6 y/o Thoroughbred mare training for racing barefoot- she was shod for 4 races the previous year. She did extremely well bare because the owner was doing something different than what is the "status quo" with her daily care, but due to circumstances beyond his control, we were not able to get her in a race. During the 4 months of training she was doing great and I had no doubt (and neither did any of the riders who worked her) that she would have raced well had she been given the chance.

These success stories happen when owners are committed to changing horse keeping practices that respect the horse as a species as opposed to our convenience. There is a lot we can do. The more we can give them that is in tune with their nature, the healthier they will become.