



## Hoofin' it barefoot: Stevi man trains for certification in natural care of horses hooves

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By PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian

STEVENSVILLE - A couple of years back, Jay DeHart decided he wanted to learn how to shoe his own horses.

So he signed up for classes with a certified farrier in Bozeman and began to study the craft.

The more he learned, the less sense it all made.

DeHart's 20 years as a mechanical engineer probably had something to do with that. He knew a thing or two about physics, energy conversion and fluid dynamics.

And as he learned how nature had intended a horse's hoof to expand and contract to absorb its weight as it moved across the landscape, and that movement was vital for its circulatory system, the idea of confining the hoof within a metal shoe seemed strange.

A horse's hooves are meant to act as shock absorbers. Putting a constrictive metal shoe around the hoof is about the same as putting a board in the springs of car, DeHart said.

"The hooves can't absorb that force when they're shod, especially with a rider," he said. "Mechanically, it just didn't make any sense to me. I thought there had to be another way."

DeHart's search led him to a Missoula bookstore where he discovered a book by natural hoof/horse care guru Jaime Jackson. After years of studying wild horse hooves - which, of course, aren't shod - Jackson developed techniques to mimic what he'd seen.

Now, horse lovers like DeHart and his wife, Q, are embracing the idea of letting their mounts go "barefoot."

The couple's three horses - an Arab, a draft/quarter horse cross and a miniature - are all without shoes these days. Q takes her Arab on long rides into the rocky Bitterroot Mountains without even the protective rubber boots that are recommended for the newly barefoot mounts.

"My horse goes everywhere barefoot," Q said. "And her feet look beautiful. Š The more riding you do, the tougher they get."

It takes some time for a horse's hooves to readjust to their shoeless environment.

But that doesn't mean horse owners have to give up their trail rides or hunting trips. While a horse's hoof is getting stronger through regular trimmings, diet and exercise, its owner can outfit it with rubber boots when it ventures out of the pasture.

The shoes cost about \$100 a pair. The DeHarts have found that front hooves are usually the ones that need the most protection.

“It does take some time and patience to make the switch,” Q said.

Horse owners can also help their mount's hooves adjust with a diet low on sugar (put that sweet feed away), making sure they get plenty of exercise, and adding about 4 inches of pea gravel around the water trough.

The gravel stimulates the hooves and the horse's feet respond.

“Pea gravel works wonders,” DeHart said.

DeHart is currently working through the intensive two-year process to become a certified natural hoof practitioner through Jackson's America Association of Natural Hoof Care.

“I've almost completed all my training,” he said. “Working with mentors and peers, I've learned how to trim a horse's hooves to resemble the wear patterns of wild mustangs.”

Through mostly word of mouth, DeHart has been finding work around Montana.

Every horse presents a different challenge. DeHart's first visit includes a mustang trim and sometimes some advice on how a horse owner might be able to improve the living conditions of their steeds.

“A horse's hooves mirror what's going on above,” he said. “Trimming is only about 10 percent of this. I often can offer some information that will help steer owners in the right direction for improving their horse's environment.”

The cost for keeping a horse barefoot is comparable to shoeing, he said.

While every horse is different in how often they'll need to be trimmed, DeHart said the average is about once every five weeks. Right now, he charges \$40 a trim.

Horse owners who want to learn more about natural hoof care might want to circle March 29 on their calendar. The DeHarts will host a workshop that day at the Bitterroot Valley's Sapphire Event Center in Corvallis. The cost for admission is \$30 in advance, \$40 at the door.

“We're planning on offering a lot of information to people,” he said. “Hopefully people will get interested. For us, it's all about having healthy horses. That helps everyone in the long run.”

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