

PROFESSIONAL DISMISSIVENESS OF EQUINE BAREFOOTEDNESS

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“Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

- Thomas Paine (‘Common Sense,’ Feb 14, 1776)

Veterinarians are indebted to Dr. William Jones, editor of the *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science*, for fostering a discussion of the barefoot movement. A recent issue of the journal carries an article by two veterinarians and a farrier entitled “Commentary – Equine Barefootedness” (Volume 23, Number 5, pp 226-227, May 2003). The authors, Drs. Balch and Collier from Oklahoma State University and Robert Sigafoos CJF, are somewhat dismissive regarding the research findings of Dr. Hiltrud Strasser of Germany and her advocacy of the barefoot horse. Yet the Strasser method has for many years been shown to be good news for the horse and horse owners. News commentators should strive to be objective and so it is puzzling that three experienced professionals should evince so little enthusiasm for Strasser’s landmark contribution to the welfare of the horse. The eagerness with which horse owners have successfully adopted the Strasser method, worldwide, is in marked contrast to the negativity expressed by these professionals. One has to wonder why. Perhaps this is what George Bernard Shaw had in mind with his taunt that *“Professions are a conspiracy against the laity.”*

As a group, veterinarians and farriers have been slow to acknowledge the merit of the Strasser method. Too many have been inclined to say, *“... this be madness ...”* without completing the quotation *“... yet there is method in’t.”* I am reminded too of Oscar Wilde’s epigram, *“The play was a great success; the audience was a total failure.”* The barefoot story is a great success but the professional audience, as a group, is sitting on its hands. Fortunately, there are notable exceptions to this generalization, and it is these open-minded individuals who will catalyze the group, in time.

Though Balch *et al* are aware of the way in which horse owners have enthusiastically adopted the Strasser method, yet they do not appear to understand why the barefoot movement is growing so fast. They correctly write about *“a celebrated cause;”* about *“a vocal group of horse enthusiasts;”* about *“fervent advocates;”* and about a method that resonates powerfully with many horse owners and is *“philosophically compelling.”* In noting how veterinarians and farriers have seriously *“underestimated”* the strength of the support for the

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Strasser method, the authors even draw attention to passions that reach such an emotional level that they can only be expressed by the power of poetry. Such praise, from a user group that has a reputation for being conservative and highly critical, is not easily won. Its prominence is especially significant when it relates to the introduction of a new method that requires equestrians to take a leap of faith and reject two management practices (24-hour stabling and shoeing) that have been customary for a millennium.

The horse has been domesticated for six thousand years. Within this time frame, stabling and shoeing are relatively recent inventions. Shoeing has been customary for less than a thousand years. The horses of the Greek and Roman armies were unshod, as were the horses of the Mongols. Closer to the present day, the Bayeux tapestry shows that at the battle of Hastings (1066), the horses of William the Conqueror were shod. The word *farrier* is derived from the Middle French *ferrier* and implies the use of iron (L. *ferrum*). In England, the Worshipful Company of Farriers was not formed until 1264. Batch *et al* are therefore incorrect when they write, "*farriery is essential to equine husbandry and (was) co-developed with the domestication of the horse.*" The domestic horse has been barefoot for the greater part of its history. The horseshoe is not "*an irreplaceable component of domestication.*"

Balch *et al* concede that in the debate over whether to shoe or not to shoe "*Dr. Strasser and her advocates have achieved an unusual and vigorous prominence.*" It is interesting to study the five reasons they give to explain this prominence. The first two comprise the rejection of shoes and stabling. As these are defining principles of the Strasser method it would appear self evident that these principles work, otherwise prominence in the debate would not have been achieved. The third reason given is that the method is supported "*by individual owners uncomfortable with employing a traditional farrier.*" Rather than being surprised at the audacity of owners in rejecting advice from "*traditional professionals*" the authors might ask themselves why owners have such courage and determination. The answer was succinctly supplied by a horsewoman during the discussion period at Tufts University's conference "Hoofcare for the Millennium: Exploring the Strasser Method."¹ She stated quietly that she was "*not satisfied with what veterinarians and farriers had to offer.*" The fourth reason was "*the increased willingness of horse owners to seek advice and solutions through the Internet rather than traditional sources.*" This reality is surely a wake-up call for professionals to study the Strasser method and to give it a trial, rather than to try and suppress it by a process of innuendo². It was in the hope of alerting veterinarians to the risk of being sidelined that I wrote my open letter two years ago.² The fifth reason was that the Strasser method was "*more philosophically compelling*" to owners who no longer view their horses as "*functional but replaceable workmates.*" I will not dwell on the unfairness of this summary of attitudes in the past. The horse has

² The word 'innuendo' is unavoidable, as I have yet to see any scientific arguments that refute the Strasser principles.

long been considered a companion animal and it is no surprise that owners love their horses and wish to adopt a method of management that enhances their welfare. Balch *et al* do not mention that the real reason why the Strasser method has achieved such prominence is that ... it works

A sidebar provides what is ostensibly a short biography of Dr. Strasser, but does so in such a way as to infer criticism. What is wrong with someone having “a well developed, official, polished presence on the Internet”? Her three books³⁻⁵ and one video⁶ are available through her website www.strasserhoofcare.com so why was it necessary to add that they were “difficult to find elsewhere”? Dr. Strasser’s third book is an immense and scholarly work, generously illustrated with her own excellent drawings and photographs.⁴ It has been well compiled and written, in English, by her co-author, Sabine Kells. Yet Balch *et al* state that “little of her information and arguments have been presented in English-language, refereed veterinary journals; that scarcity makes careful evaluation of her ideas difficult.” Every veterinary school library should have at least one copy of this magisterial book and several copies of the two shorter and eminently readable books that were published previously. It is not difficult to evaluate Strasser’s research but it does require time and an open mind. The sidebar closes with a reference to an article by Lisa Simons, the subtitle of which might suggest that it is highly critical of Strasser’s work.⁷ However, those who read it will find that it is an excellent, perceptive and tactful review by a farrier for farriers. It is written by a professional who has studied and successfully applied Strasser’s principles.

Balch *et al* state that “many experienced veterinarians and farriers ... argue that barefootedness is appropriate and a healthy (even preferable) alternative ... ” but then they miss the point entirely by adding “... if the horse does not need shoes” to prevent wear and provide traction. The hoof of the properly managed barefoot horse does not need protection from wear. It also provides better traction by far, under all conditions, than any shoe. Sixty million years of evolution have resulted in a terminal structure to the horse’s leg that is a wonder of engineering. It can well accomplish the job it has evolved to do if not hindered by man-made additions. The only thing we need to do is to provide the right management conditions (room to move on varied terrain) and to trim the hoof when it does not wear down enough. Excessive wear of the unshod hoof is not a problem. Horn of higher quality grows in greater quantity when hooves are allowed to expand when weight bearing and contract when non-weight bearing. Only in this way can normal vascular circulation in the foot be assured. Once a normal blood supply is established, plenty of horn will grow. Barefoot horses that have completed a 100-mile endurance ride will often need their feet trimmed within three days of the ride, because of excess growth.

Being barefoot for a performance horse is not, as suggested by Balch *et al*, “a literally crippling alternative.” If a previously shod horse is managed correctly and given enough time to recover from being shod, it will not have thin soles that

get bruised. But it does need care, patience, trimming, and time. For Balch *et al* to say that the recovery period is too painful and, therefore, that a horse should not be allowed to recover is putting the shoe before the horse. It is akin to saying that a child whose feet have been crippled and deformed by being forced to wear shoes that were too tight and who had to use crutches because of the pain, should continue to wear those shoes and depend on crutches because if he took them off and threw away his crutches he wouldn't, initially, be able to stand.

There would be no need for cautionary (and protectionist) statements to be issued by organizations that claim to have the welfare of the horse in mind if more veterinarians and farriers would recognize that shoeing is harmful to the health of the horse. Readers should study Strasser's thirteen indictments of the horseshoe. They will find these online, in a convenient one-page format.⁸ An owner with a shod horse who is unable to find a veterinarian or farrier willing to help them through the de-shoeing period should not be blamed for looking elsewhere for help. Yvonne Weltz has expressed it well in a recent article that reviews the five-year history of the barefoot movement.⁹ In a crisis, when no veterinarian or farrier will help, many an owner has been faced with a choice to either "*pick up a knife or put the horse down.*"

It does not follow that just because something is possible it is therefore to be recommended. It is possible to shoot bullets through a human skull but no coach would regard this as a profitable long-term strategy for training an Olympic athlete. Just because the horse is the only animal that will allow us to knock nails into it is not a good enough reason for assuming that such a procedure is either beneficial to the horse or profitable to man. A 14th indictment needs to be added to the list already cited. Horseshoes kill horses. The shoe acts like a slow poison. In most cases it kills so slowly that the interval of years between initiation of the cause and the final long-term effect masks the connection between the two events. Whenever we hear of a horse being humanely destroyed because of incurable laminitis or navicular disease, we should consider shoeing as a likely culprit. Insurance companies please note.

In order to overcome the counter-attraction of medieval technology, the barefoot message will apparently have to be driven home with some energy. All shoes are harmful to the health of the horse. There is no right way to do a wrong thing. The phrases 'physiological shoeing' and 'therapeutic shoeing' are oxymorons. To nail an iron clamp on a horse's toe is "*murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, savage, extreme, rude, cruel, (and) not to trust.*"

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