

The Farrier’s Corner: by Ray and Michelle Smith

Considerable discussion has occurred regarding whether feral horse hooves provide “natural” guidelines for trimming domestic horses. Some barefoot advocates support the theory of the “mustang trim” while many conventional farriers regard it with skepticism. Others remain undecided and/or confused as to what constitutes a “natural barefoot” or “mustang trim”.

Over the last three years, new research has emerged bringing to light the complexity of hoof form and condition within feral horse populations.

Early feral horse studies focused on arid region herds in the U.S. and Australia. Observations of their hooves contributed to the idea of them as the natural ideal. After all, these horses seemingly survived well without professional hoof care in some of the harshest environments. From these observations arose concepts for “natural” trimming such as establishing four points of ground contact on the hoof wall, solar loading and the “mustang roll”. These studies were limited in number and generally did not include feral horses living in wetter climates or on softer terrain.

Recent research on Australian brumbies, and additional observations of American mustangs, are causing reevaluation of the ideal mustang hoof concept and its application to domestic horses. Australian brumby research was conducted from 2008 through 2012 by Dr. Chris Pollit and Dr. Brian Hampson of the University of Queensland/Australian Brumby Research Unit (ABRU). As previous studies generally only investigated arid area herds, Pollit and Hampson undertook research to fill the knowledge gap.

Over a four and a half year period, Pol-

lit and Hampson conducted fourteen studies on herds ranging from 12 to 100 animals. They examined genetic structure, travel profiles, nutritional factors, foot health and foot morphology. They surveyed animals across a number of environments from moist alpine mountains to deserts with abrasive ground surfaces. An additional facet of the study involved capture and relocation of feral horses from one environment to another. Relocated animals were monitored for hoof changes and overall environmental adaptability.

Here’s some of what they found:

Based upon GPS radio collar tracking, desert herds watered every 2 to 4 days, routinely traveling 18 to 31 miles between waterings. Horses in wetter areas did not follow the same movement pattern or have strict home ranges.

Of 100 left forefeet examined, only 3 exhibited no gross foot abnormalities. Some feet from high travel populations exhibited overuse changes such as excessive hoof wall wear.

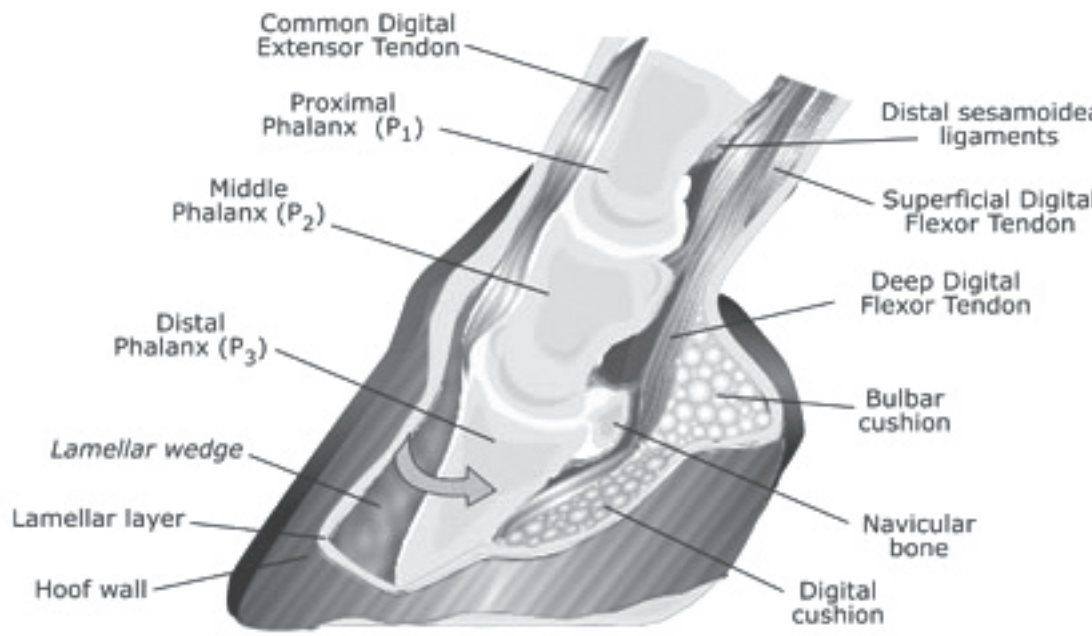
In 3 populations surveyed, the incidence of chronic laminitis ranged from 40 to 90%.

Signs of serious pathology such as cartilage calcification and concussion related laminitis were discovered in the feet of brumbies living on hard footing, yet the animals appeared outwardly sound. The researcher hypothesized that hard desert hoof types may allow feral horses to endure some pathologies without exhibiting obvious lameness. According to Dr. Hampson, “Previous observers and proponents of the ‘natural foot model’ were apparently unaware of this inner pathology, but regardless, had made assumptions and recommendations for domestic foot care, such as promotion of solar loading and excessive beveling of the hoof wall.”

Obviously, environment had a profound effect on feet. Each environment produced unique feet in terms of morphology, general appearance and health. There was no singularly ideal feral foot. Desert horses had short dense hard feet. Horses living on sandy ground had longer spread-out hooves, and those in wet areas had longer flared deformed feet. If an animal changed environments, the original hoof characteristics eventually changed. However, animals introduced into new environments often did not adapt quickly or fare well in the new location. Based on these results, plans to release domestic horses into the wild for study were cancelled. It was decided that their ability to adapt would be low. Herein lies a cautionary tale for those considering releasing unwanted domestic horses into the wild.

Results indicated that, even on robust feral horses, movement and substrate can have negative long-term effects on hoof health. This reinforces the necessity of considering these factors when using and maintaining domestic horses. The study should not be interpreted to mean that domestic horses can never go barefoot. Such a conclusion would go beyond the scope of the data. However, the researchers stressed the need for further studies to evaluate techniques and models of hoof care as they apply specifically to the health needs and lifestyles of domestic horses.

Look for our follow-up article with additional insights on American mustang findings and guidelines to help determine if your horse is a good barefoot candidate. Until then, enjoy the ride!



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