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A photograph of a rider on a brown horse in a performance arena. The rider is wearing a grey helmet, a grey vest, and grey breeches. The horse is in motion, possibly performing a dressage movement. The background shows a white building and trees.

The BAREFOOT *performance* HORSE

By Geri White

Margaret K. Boyce and her horse, Big, after their barefoot transition.

The journey to competing barefoot needs to focus on more than just your horse's feet. Here's how a whole horse approach helped one FEI rider and her horse make the transition.

More and more people in the performance horse world are taking a serious look at the many benefits of barefoot hoof care for their performance horses. Yet I often find myself at a crossroads with one of those horse people who feel assigned to guard the past. In a recent conversation with a respected Thoroughbred racehorse trainer about horses racing barefoot, I was told: "It cannot be done

— you'll have to prove it to me." Little do these people know the proof already exists in the form of many equine athletes performing successfully while barefoot!

BAREFOOT SUCCESS

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to work with a horse in the Competitive Trail Riding discipline who won the Florida

"At every crossway on the road that leads to the future, each progressive spirit is opposed by a thousand men assigned to guard the past..." – Maurice Maeterlinck

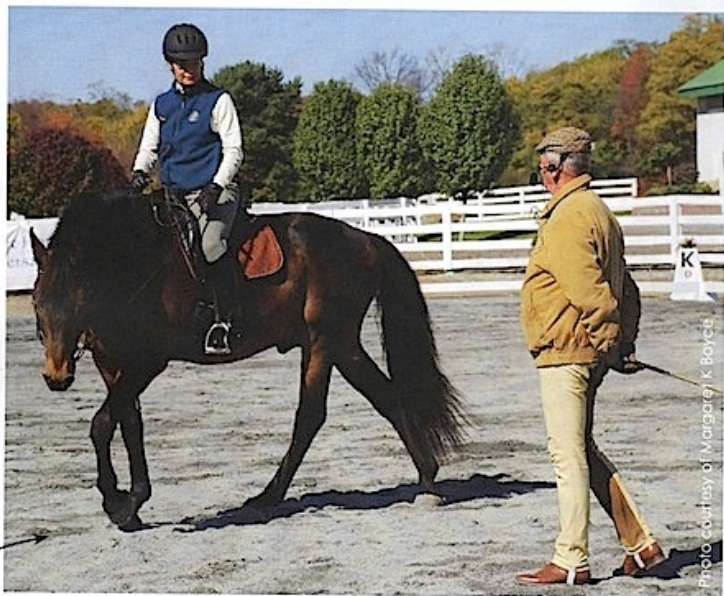


Photo courtesy of Margaret K. Boyce

"There were many extremely expensive imported horses being presented at the Symposium, but in my opinion Gideon moved the very best," says Margaret. "He was the most level and even in his gaits, and had the most solid connection to the ground. He was barefoot! It was seeing the way Gideon moved that made me want to go barefoot with Big."

BAREFOOT CHAMPIONS – the list continues to grow

Joe Camp, renowned author of the bestselling book, *Soul of the Horse*, has a long and growing list of "Barefoot Champions" on his website (thesoulofthehorse.com). The list details successful performance barefoot horses in nearly every discipline, all competing and winning without shoes.

100-mile CTR for the Lightweight division two years after going barefoot. I also worked with a Thoroughbred mare at the Oklahoma Training Track in Saratoga, New York, who trained noticeably well while barefoot.

In the discipline of dressage, the accomplishments of USA Olympian Steffen Peters and his wife Shannon, who successfully transitioned many of their top equine athletes to barefoot, sent a ripple effect across the country. East coast dressage competitors immediately began contacting me to see if their horses were good candidates for barefoot performance in the dressage arena. One of those calls was from a certified dressage coach and judge, Margaret K. Boyce of MKB Dressage.

A PASSION FOR DRESSAGE

For Margaret, dressage is not only a profession but her passion. In 1994, she was exposed to classical dressage, and was immediately hooked. She began her studies with top German dressage master and judge, Dietrich VonHoffgarten. Eventually, Margaret became one of Dietrich's working students in Vancouver, Canada and obtained her NCCP Dressage Instructor Certificate, as well as her Equine Canada – Official Judge status.

Margaret accepted two working student positions to further advance her dressage education. The first was in Verden, Netherlands with Dutch Dressage Olympian Bert Rutten, and the second in Voerde, Germany with dressage master Johann Hinnemann. Her education was further expanded when she visited the Spanish Riding School and received lessons at the French National Riding School with Head Trainer, Olympian and FEI Judge, Colonel Christian Carde.

BAREFOOT BEGINNINGS

Margaret moved to NYC and quickly brought Carde over to teach. She helped arrange Carde's participation in the 2008 International Dressage Symposium "Classical vs. Competition", alongside German Dressage Master Klaus Balkenhol and FEI vet Dr. Gerd Heuschmann. It was here that Margaret met Kim Walnes. Kim rode Gideon, a Connemara cross stallion, in lessons with Carde, and also participated as a demo rider at the Symposium.

Seeing Kim and Gideon perform together was the beginning of Margaret's barefoot journey with her Hanovarian gelding

Bigello (aka Big). It was around this time that Big began showing signs of unsoundness after showing on deep footing. Big had long toes and a distinct medial-lateral imbalance, and Margaret could constantly feel his unevenness up front, as he paddled badly. She had been told this was just how his hooves grew.

Dr. Carol Edwards, a top equine vet and chiropractor and an advocate for barefoot, insisted that Big's hoof was much too long and that he would go lame if it was not addressed. Margaret finally removed his shoes.

BIG'S BAREFOOT TRANSITION

Big and Margaret suffered several setbacks during his transition. They encountered everything from over-trimming and incorrect feed choices to not enough turn-out. Many other vital aspects of hoof rehabilitation were missed when Margaret embarked on this journey. Transitioning to barefoot is not as easy as simply removing the horse's shoes and going on your merry way into the performance arena, especially if your horse has been shod long-term without ever having an opportunity for a rest from shoeing. More than once, Margaret was told to put Big's shoes back on, and she was often ridiculed by other professionals as being eccentric.

It was at about this point in her journey that Margaret contacted me. I began working with her and Big as well as some of the other horses Margaret was training. We had to review diets, supplements, turn-out time, hoof boots, dentistry, and have serious discussions on current vaccine and chemical deforming programs.

Margaret and I worked together using a more holistic approach, treating Big and every other horse as an individual. She quickly understood that natural horse care principles differ greatly from an approach that focuses only on the hoof without considering the whole horse and the many other factors that can cause soundness problems. After making many of these crucial changes over time, Margaret and Big are set to enter the performance arena this year – barefoot and sound!

Every equestrian in the performance realm who has taken their first steps toward allowing their equine athletes to also be "horses", by implementing a healthy lifestyle paradigm, comes to the same crossroads Margaret and I did, where they are met by a thousand people guarding the past. It is up to each of us whether we continue stepping into the future, or become one of the thousand. 🌱

Gerri White has an Equine Sciences Degree, Natural Hoof Care Certification and is a Field Instructor with the Equine Sciences Academy. She is a Certified Hoof Care Professional with the American Hoof Association and currently serves as President. NativeHoof.com

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