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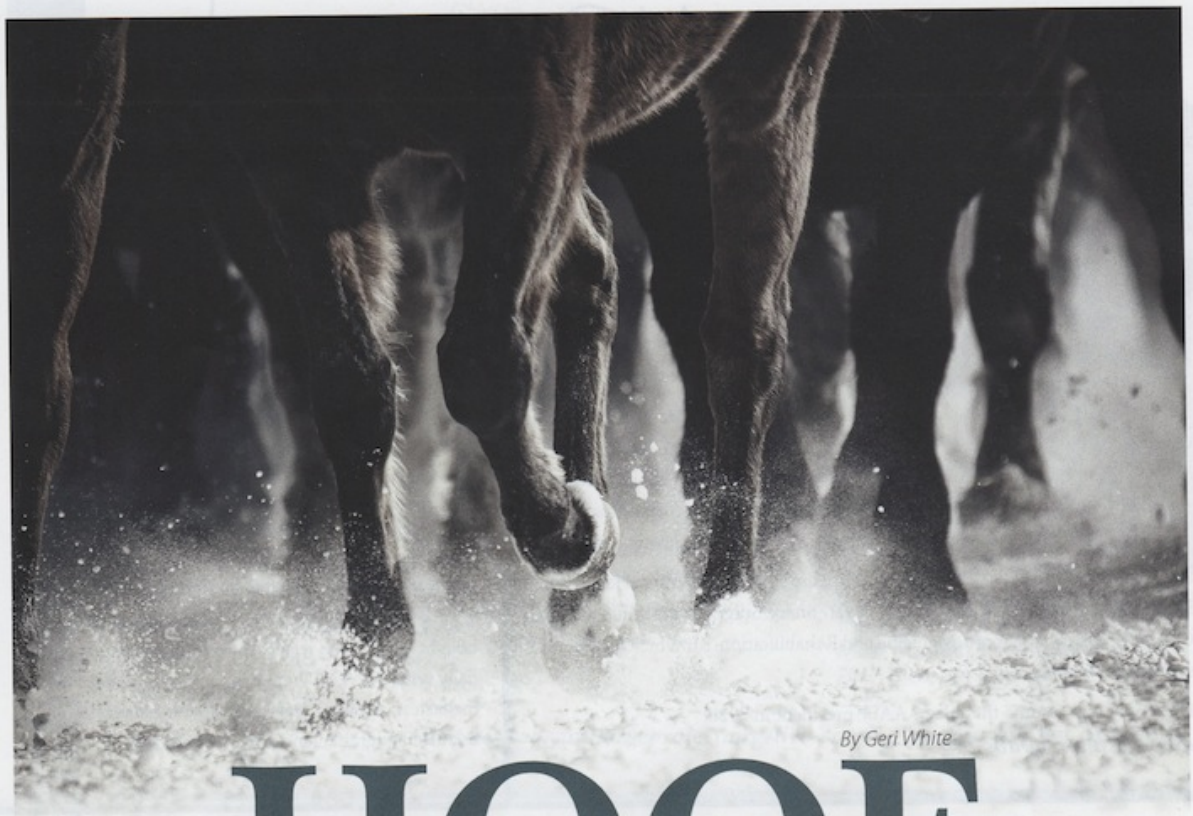

By Geri White

HOOF

TRACTION IN THE WINTER

Sleet, snow, rain and freezing mud can cause traction problems for horses and humans alike. Here's how our horses cope, and what we can do to help.

Living in upstate New York, we get very cold temperatures, brutal wind chills and a moderate amount of snow in the winter. We also have to deal with hard frozen ground when there's no snow, as well as freezing rain, slush mixed with mud, and what many of us call "lava rock" or "moon rock", when slushy mud freezes solid and every hoof print is frozen in time, leaving a rough textured surface that's very difficult to navigate. All these conditions cause traction problems for both us and our horses.

NATURE'S GUIDANCE

Many years ago, when I first started trimming my own horses and didn't have the experience I do now, my trimming approach was one of routine maintenance. One winter during a brief

warm spell, I took the opportunity to trim my horses in more comfortable temperatures.

We had a lot of rain and some melting snow, but about five days later, it all froze solid overnight. It became quite a struggle for us to get to the barn. One of my morning chores was to check the water hole to make sure the spot the horses drink from wasn't frozen over. I took careful baby steps all the way there, slipping and sliding even while holding onto the fence.

Before I even made it to the end of the fence line to go down the slight incline to the water, my horse, Sage, walked passed me with each of his feet simply sliding forward a little before stopping. He just kept going forward, using this slide-stop, slide-stop motion on each foot. He made it to the water hole, took his drink, and walked back past me again toward the barn area, seemingly without a care.

When I finally made it back to the barn, I took a look at Sage's feet to see how he was able to navigate the terrain so much better than I did. To my surprise, the bars I had trimmed only days ago had returned to the same length they were before, providing a natural heel caulk. A V-shaped caulk on each heel gave him the traction he needed to navigate the icy terrain. From then on, when I trimmed horses, I started to really pay attention to environmental and seasonal changes as they relate to traction.

I was determined to learn from nature rather than interfere with each horse's ability to navigate our winter conditions,

WHAT ABOUT SNOWBALLS?

I am often asked about snowballs getting stuck in horses' hooves. For the most part, a horse that lives outside in a large enough environment where he can move in a herd will remove snowballs naturally. Since my horses live in a Paddock Paradise track system, we often see hoof-printed snowballs on the trails as we put out hay and clean up manure.

Where I live and trim, the moisture content in the hoof horn is generally higher in the winter. My thoughts and observations suggest that the extra flexion in the moist hoof horn helps remove packed snow as the horse moves and the hoof mechanism expands and contracts. Movement also creates heat by sending blood through the hoof capsule, which will also assist in removing the snow.

Again, there are always exceptions, especially in horses compromised by hoof pathologies, injuries or lameness issues.

so I challenged myself by really studying each foot. I mostly left the bars alone or trimmed very little, and backed off on the amount of wall length I removed. Over the course of a couple of trim intervals, I found there was much less growth if I allowed for that bit of extra hoof and bar material for traction. I found a balance that gave most horses what they needed. Of course, there will always be exceptions, as each horse needs to be maintained for his individual needs as well as his environment.

THE "SELF-TRIMMING" DOMESTICATED HORSE IN WINTER CONDITIONS

I had an opportunity to observe some horses that lived as feral as any I have seen, apart from wild horses. They were in a large herd living on 100+ acres with fields, streams, steep hills, woods and severe winter conditions. One of them was a three-year-old Appaloosa gelding that I was going to bring home to my own herd. After looking at his feet, and those of the other horses in the herd, it was clear their hooves were quite different from the classic western desert foot (see photos at right for comparison).

A VISUAL COMPARISON: Different environments forge and demand different hoof characteristics.

The hoof on the left is from an Appaloosa gelding that was living on a large range with fields, streams, steep hills, woods and severe winter conditions. The hoof on the right was found by a friend and came from a deceased wild horse in Nevada. As you can see, there is quite a difference between the length and definition of the heels, walls and bars on these two feet.

HOOF BOOT STUDS

For brave souls who don't mind bundling up and riding in cold and snowy conditions, hoof boot studs save the day. These studs are available through many hoof boot companies. They give a horse the extra traction he needs for safe riding in winter conditions. When you are finished riding, the boots are removed. The studs themselves can be removed from the boots when the season is over. Talk to your hoof care professional about studs for your horse's boots.

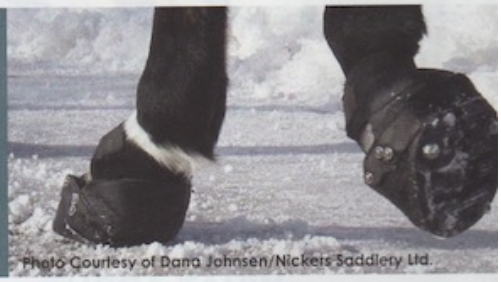

Photo Courtesy of Dana Johnsen/Nickers Saddlery Ltd.

The bars of the feet in an unshod horse can provide a natural heel-caulk, providing increased traction in snowy and icy conditions.

In the early days of the barefoot movement, the focus was on the desert foot as a model. It has its place, but we have to consider that different environments forge and demand different feet. My advice for professionals and owners who trim their own horses would be to challenge yourself, as I did. It took one horse to lead me to rethink my approach. Consider working with nature and the environment by observing how your horse's hooves respond to changing environmental conditions.

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