

My Barefoot Journey: Driving, Dressage & More

by Jill Owens

It was early 2006; my main riding horse Gypsy was laid up with a stifle injury, and I had time on my hands. Inspired by a veterinarian friend's enthusiasm about a Pete Ramey clinic she'd just attended, I started researching the natural hoof care philosophy and the barefoot trim. I read books by Pete, Jaime Jackson, and Hiltrud Strasser, and explored Marjorie Smith's website (barefoothorse.com), and others. I learned about the strategy of diet, activity, and barefoot hoof care—inspired by the wild horse model—that promises greatly improved health and longevity for our domestic horses.

I was sold! I talked it over with my farrier and good friend Val Christensen, and found that she was willing to give this new approach a try. She pulled all the shoes, followed the trimming instructions in Pete's book, and fitted the horses with Boa Boots for the transition period, as we did not expect them to adjust immediately to living barefoot on the hard, dry, rocky hills of our California ranch. That was 2-1/2 years ago, and since then Val has taken not only mine, but all eight of her own horses successfully barefoot!



Mustang mare Gypsy is a trail, liberty, and trick horse extraordinaire.

I don't mean to imply that the barefoot journey has been an easy one, nor has it turned out as I would have expected. Ironically, my twenty-year-old Quarter Horse—a breed not always known for their good feet—made the transition beautifully, and, within a year, could be ridden long distances without coming up sore. Nowadays, Toby doesn't get ridden much, so we play it safe with Boa Boots when we take him out on the trail. Otherwise, he is quite comfortable living barefoot.

Gypsy, who is a Mustang and is supposed to have wonderful feet, has been the most challenging of my horses to keep comfortable barefoot. She had to wear Boa Boots constantly for the first several weeks of transition, and even now, she still requires her boots for trail riding on hard or rocky ground. Radiographs indicate that her soles are thin. Perhaps this is because she has a lot of draft breeding in her blood—I have been told that draft

Photo by Cindy Ewing



Gypsy, USDF All-Breeds Champion in Mustangs at Training Level (2005) and First Level (2007).

horses are known for their thin soles. Perhaps her feet were compromised by years of inactivity before I bought her, followed by years of wearing shoes. I'm convinced that had she lived her entire life in the wild, she would have developed naturally excellent Mustang feet.

When I threw out the horseshoes, I also had to throw out Gypsy's career in competitive trail (in which she had won a novice championship and was pursuing at a higher level), because NATRC (North American Trail Ride Conference) does not allow Boa Boots in competition. Maybe someday that will change, but for now, we stay pretty busy with dressage, trail riding, carriage driving, and liberty work.

My third horse came to me with a very deformed and painful front foot, the result of a chronic founder of many years that shoeing could no longer relieve. A friend and I took her on from some neighbors as a rehabilitation project, and we started her on natural hoof care. I wish I could say Molly's foot returned to normal and she became sound to ride, but we got her too late to cure her badly sunken coffin bone, and the bone loss and other damage resulting from years of "corrective shoeing." What we were able to accomplish was still pretty amazing, though. With natural hoof care, weight loss accomplished through a controlled diet, and increased activity as she grew more comfortable,



Gypsy, carriage driving in her Boa Boots.

she became pasture-sound and actually moved from underdog to lead mare in her small herd. Sadly, about a year ago Molly died of causes unrelated to the founder, but I am grateful we could help her live out her final year in comfort.

Meanwhile, I was shopping for a dressage prospect. I've taken Gypsy to Second Level, and, though she tries very hard, she is not suited for the sport and the work is difficult for her. I needed a talented horse that could take me through the levels, but who could also adjust to ranch life. My



3 yo Trakehner Pokani is a fancy horse...turned ranch horse (below)! Jill's lucky horses live on 500 acres in California.



trainer advised buying a schooled horse, but every one I considered had been shod and housed in a stall its whole life.

Finally, I found a lovely barefoot, pasture-raised, 2-year-old Trakehner colt. It was with trepidation (tempered by a deep fundamental trust in his native horse-sense) that I first turned Pokani loose on 500 acres with my other horses. He has now adjusted fully to ranch life in a herd and races up and down our rocky hills with never a misstep. It is breathtaking to watch him open up, out on the open range, in his stunning extended trot! He's quiet and sane, too, which I'm convinced is also a by-product of living a natural life. At present, we're giving him a good foundation of ground-work while he matures a little more; next year we'll start him under saddle. It is my goal for him to train and compete in dressage, while remaining barefoot and living outside. Wish us luck!

About the author: A retired schoolteacher, Jill Owens shares the ranch with her husband, horses, dog, cat, and 40 pet chickens.