

# BAREFOOT IN THE WINTER

Do you have to deal with wet, muddy hooves? Dan Guerrero gives some advice on this matter.

When I was a kid we played a game hide and seek. We used to hide our eyes and count to 100. Once that was done cheatingly, we yelled 'ready or not, here I come!' This time the count down is to winter.

The UK winter performs differently depending on where you are. I lived in Chichester for nearly five years. I thought it was the most perfect place on earth to live as a horse person. If it snowed it didn't stay long and the cold was just right if you were a hoof trimmer. Chichester and the area around seemed to have its own special sub-climate which really was perfect for me. OK, the UK has its rain, Dalwhinnie averaging 1217 mm and London 593 mm, but I'm from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and used to 860 mm a year, so I understand the weather and horse feet issues.

The key to wet conditions is to try to find some kind of balance of wet and dry. In short, our horses are not

amphibians nor are their feet meant to live like worms in mud. Sure, we all have mud, every common gated area makes mud and that's OK, if can be considered 'clean mud'. Clean earth is good for the foot, it makes excellent hoof packing and provides great protection when it's somewhat drier. In fact, whilst most horse care guides tell us to pick out the feet before the ride, I suggest that be re-written. I suggest that you examine the bottoms of the hooves for obvious problems like stones or the like, but keep what looks natural, and ride on that, then pick the hooves out after the ride. That dirt will give you a better ride than totally barefoot.

Have a look at your gateways and well trodden places in yards. If the mud is clean there's no need to do anything, but if it's very poached and causing a problem, then there are options including stone fill and honeycombed interlocking mats that hold the earth and allow grass



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growth through them. Somewhere within the day your horse needs to get dry. Its for the sake of the horse's skin and coat as well as the hooves.

Contrary to popular belief, not all horses that live outside are living in the best conditions, not even close. When we choose to have horses, extra work is needed to ensure their optimum care and this responsibility may

bring extra costs. When I hear horse owners say to "me there is nothing else I can do", or "I can't afford this or that", what they're really saying is, 'I need a better management system". Most of us have a limited budget and we can be creative and do things that do not cost much money. Changing entrances, redirecting paths with simple temporary post and electric tape. A shelter

under which to eat is perfect. Free choice eating is really convenient but if the feed is out in the open during our prolonged wet periods we should have a plan B in place to get some dry-time into our horse's day. Straw is nothing more than a very temporary solution. Sure, it looks good at first but soon, very soon, it will do nothing more than hide your problem and be a breeding zone for bacteria.

pick, it cures most problems. In short he is right. It's simple, most of the problems of the hoof are anaerobic, which mean that these organisms can not live where there is oxygen. Aren't we lucky that there is oxygen in our air. All we have to do is get air to the bottom of the foot and in time our hoof problems will lessen.

Fact: on going diseases of the hoof, sole and frog are simply allowed to be there

with our own eyes. I contend that if we can see these external diseases then in the competent hands of a good professional the horse can be cured. If a horse is suffering from such problems which thrive in the wet of winter, those aggravating conditions need to be removed, completely. If they are not, then there are still active, (living) organisms that were very grateful to you for not taking their food, shelter in

in there. The hoof, sole and frog is food made of protein. Heat, food, moisture, darkness, and protection (the hoof keeps the dirt there for some time, and then it falls away and the cycle starts again). Put all that together and what does the foot create? The most perfect biological breeding environment that any organisms could possibly hope to have and they are saying thank-you every day they are allowed to live on your horse.

Looking on the bright side, the winter to me is a time for healing the hoof. Fresh snow cleans and I look forward to the winter for just this reason. Nature has a way of starting over again, and I like to take advantage of this. Shoe removal during the winter is an excellent time for the nail holes to be allowed to grow down. I am completely happy for the horse to wear shoes if this is what the horse needs. My request to horse owners that have horseshoe requirements is they allow the nail holes to grow totally off once a year. There is no question that the bare foot functions bio-mechanically better.

The blood flow improves instantly, a thicker hoof wall grows and the sole and frog get more stimulated. All good, all healthy, and when your work season starts, you will have a far stronger hoof to put the shoes on if you need to. All this coming from a me, a guy who teaches Barehoof Strategy. But it's true. Shoes can do a fine job of protection, but the bare foot functions far better.

Give your horse a soft spot to rest

Photo © Anja Guerrero



Straw gives a false sense of protection, not to mention the serious mess when it's time to clean it up. Some owners say that their horses do not like to be inside. I agree, I see it all the time, but that has nothing to do with responsible hoof care. Be creative. In most cases the answers are right in front of us.

Once we have figured out a way to provide some amount of dry time in our horse's day, we need to think of some practical guidelines in simple but effective hoof care. A wise old hoofman told me the best invention for the horse's foot was the hoof

by the hoof care provider, be that person the owner, trimmer or farrier. That comment might sting a little bit, but in short it is true. To soften that comment up a bit I will admit removing these problems requires a skilled hoof person. I will never give in to the comment of 'Oh, that horse has just always had bad feet'. This type of comment shows up a lack of hoof knowledge. I'm not talking about rock crushing trail-blazing feet, I'm talking about the common hoof and frog diseases like whiteline disease, shelly foot, seedy toe, pocked sole, or frog thrush, diseases we can see

your horse's hoof away from them. The problem does not leave until the cause is taken away, completely. Then after care is essential.

OK, enough finger pointing. Sure there are horses that do have genetic problems but I'm willing to bet yours is not one of them. That's how rare family related hoof problems I come across are.

The perfect environment for bacteria.

Most horse feet are concave. Inside this space dirt collects. The horse's hoof produces heat. The horse's hoof produces moisture. It's also dark

Making sure everything is OK

Photo © Anja Guerra



However, this does not mean the horse's performance either shod or barefoot will necessarily be equal; that must be judged purely on a horse by horse basis, considering the multitude of factors that go into an optimally performing barefoot horse.

The slide phase of the horse's stride is a part of the faster gaits, but ice is different and I like to protect the hoof with whatever means possible for icy conditions. My favourite choice is a pair of hoof boots with ice studs in the soles which do a great job. Some horses just can't manage on frozen ground. Boots to the rescue. Get a set, and see the instant change in your horse. Horses do not have to live with them on, but during the cold spells that transforms dirt into a jagged surface, boots will be your horse's best friend. Just keep be aware of rubbing spots at the bulbs. Wearing sock protection, and knowing if your boots are fitted properly will help here. Hoof boots are simply the best for frozen ground, icy conditions, and for keeping medication on the barefooted horse.

If your horse is traditionally

trimmed when shod, it is in the best interest of the horse to allow for more hoof and sole material. Its true hooves grow at a slower rate in the winter than the summer. In the winter months, most of the body's effort in protein production goes to the coat. In some horses, when autumn comes, a growth spurt of the hooves occurs, then a drastic slow down when the winter coat grows. It is yet another clue nature gives us to help our horses.

Snow build up under the hooves can create snow balls that can prove to be uncomfortable and even dangerous should the horse come from a snow covered ground to a cement surface. You could try to put some very greasy (without water) hoof grease under the foot. This can prevent snow from sticking. Always carry a hoof pick and if the ice and snow is really stuck try to tap the rim of the hoof carefully and the snow will fall out.

Winter does have its wet and dry challenges, but we can overcome them. We can help control these problems with our own creativity. Diseases of the hoof are a totally different matter. Sure, disease seems to thrive when it's wetter outside, but if there is no 'bug' on the hoof to start with then there is no thriving to be done in the wet. Protect your horse's feet with a more frequent hoof care schedule, ignore the feet, and the problems will return. Pick them, disinfect them periodically and you can expect positive results.



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**ATLANTIC EQUINE LTD**

Unit 5A, Low March, Daventry  
Northamptonshire NN11 4SD, UK  
Tel: 01327 314880 • Fax: 01327 314889  
E-Mail: Sales@atlantic-equine.co.uk

[www.online-equine.co.uk](http://www.online-equine.co.uk)  
[www.atlantic-equine.co.uk](http://www.atlantic-equine.co.uk)