

Trainer's Tip: Happy Feet

by Scott Whinfrey, head trainer, Harmony Equine Center, Denver Dumb Friends League

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If you own an equine—whether it's a horse, donkey, pony or mini—chances are good that you'll need to have its feet maintained on a regular schedule. Equines' hooves are continually growing, and unless they're walking 20 miles a day or more on rough terrain, the hooves will have to be trimmed, balanced and possibly shod by a farrier. Due to the rate of keratin growth in the feet, most farriers will generally want to keep your horse on a six- to eight-week schedule.

So how does this relate to training? While all horses need regular hoof care from the time they're born to the day they die, they don't come into this world with that understanding. There isn't space in this article to cover all the aspects of training a horse to pick up its feet for the farrier, but what I hope to impress upon you is the importance of maintaining that training.

Training horses involves both mental and physical aspects, and they often overlap. It's a never-ending process that can be constantly refined. Just because your horse knows how to stand for the farrier when you first bring him home doesn't guarantee he'll be a sweet angel with his feet if you don't continue to work with them. It's not the farrier's job to train your horse. It is his or her job to maintain the balance of the feet and legs of your animal, and a farrier can't do a great job if your horse is losing his balance or taking his feet away every few seconds. If you get your horse's feet worked on every eight weeks, that's only six sessions per year. If you ride your horse twice a week, you'll have 104 riding sessions in a year. Which do you think your horse will be better at: riding or picking up his feet?

In order to teach a horse all sorts of maneuvers—such as gait changes, lead departures, lead changes, stops, spins and more—we have to build their strength and balance through repetition. The same is true of lifting and holding their feet. The biggest problem for horses is not that they're afraid of lifting their feet, but that they can't hold one leg up in the air for three to five minutes at a time without losing their balance. When they lose their balance, it's mentally taxing for them, so they try to correct this by taking their foot back and putting it on the ground where they think it belongs. This will lead to an angry farrier if it happens at every session. Equines are stronger than human beings, and if they commit to taking their foot away from a farrier, they'll do just that. As a responsible owner, you can correct this issue by picking up all of your horse's feet for several minutes on a regular basis. It's a good idea to clean debris out of their feet anyway, so you'll be accomplishing two things at once.

If your horse can't hold his feet up for very long, try to increase the amount of time over several weeks or even months. Every time you do this, you'll be building balance and allowing your horse to be more comfortable with a human handling his feet for prolonged periods of time. And when the farrier does come, the whole experience will be faster, smoother and calmer. Your farrier and your horse will thank you.