

“NATURAL BALANCE” OR “NATURALLY, WE BALANCE EVERYTHING”

As a Veterinarian, I was originally schooled only marginally in Farrier Science in Veterinary School. I work with Equines, and especially because I work in Alternative Practice with a focus on Acupuncture Balance and Non-Force Chiropractic, it is important for me to make sure my patients' feet are not part of any problem. I have tried to educate myself, since graduating from Veterinary School. I have taken many extra-curricular courses and seminars over the years, and followed the various theories of Farrier Science, as it applies to my patients, which are for the most part Performance horses. Not only that, I have had a “never-ending” litany of always trying to find the best farrier for our own nine horses, wherever we lived. Unfortunately this has had some interesting consequences, especially recently.

When we moved to Monterey County, CA, in 2001, we had difficulty finding a farrier to meet our expectations. About this time, I was introduced to “Natural Balance”, which has been the method recommended by Gene Ovnicek, I was so impressed by the “common sense” of this, I wanted to use this paradigm on our own horses. It seemed so difficult to find a farrier in this area to do this for me, I decided to learn how to trim our horses myself, and employed a Natural Balance farrier and personal friend to teach me. In addition, I went to one of Gene's workshops in the area.

As I learned on our nine horses to follow Gene's methods, I was amazed at how well they did barefoot. The feet all looked healthy, there were no lameness problems, and if I missed a week or more past their ideal due dates, the feet still stayed pretty much in balance. At the same time, I worked together on many of the horses with this particular farrier friend in the East Bay Area. My methods of Chiropractic and Acupuncture in addition to her very fine expertise with Natural Balance trimming and shoeing, improved the entire picture for these horses. I became very much sold on the efficacy of this method of handling the foot, and believe that this is the way of the future.

I also give classes called “Integrated Balance Therapy for Horses,” which has a module describing Gene's method. When I sent out my first flyer to my first class, I was challenged immediately by one of the foremost Farrier outfits in the area. The owner called and challenged me to tell him the name of the "Journeyman Farrier" teaching the shoeing course. I informed him that I was not teaching a shoeing class, but an awareness class. I also informed him that as a licensed Veterinarian, I can teach anything I want.

I found his inquiry frankly very strange. His partner, however, was the first to sign up for my first class.

At that time, this partner professed to be an expert on everything regarding the feet and well versed in “Natural Balance”. “I can do anything you want!!! I do Natural Balance, I just use my own shoe.” In fact, I took him at his word, especially with all his accolades, and agreed to have him work on our horses, thereby saving my time and my back.

If I ever had any question as to whether Gene Ovniczek's method was truly the right direction to take my horses, what happened to all nine horses over the next 6 months left absolutely no doubt in my mind. Now, mind you, this was the best that I could find in the area as a conventional farrier who professed to also know about Natural Balance.

I truly admit to not paying the attention I should have and taking these people at their word. I was busy with my calls in other areas, and gave them a free hand. At first, I didn't notice much of a difference, but as time went by, I noticed that the horses weren't as active as they had been. On examination of their feet, I saw changes I didn't like. The frogs were not as nice, the toe callous had disappeared for the most part, and the feet were starting to go back to the place they were before I started trimming them with NB.

I have found out later that the "toe callous" is about like the "Abominable Snowman" or the "Lockness Monster," of the conventional farrier world. In fact, in reading some of the old, but recommended texts about farrier science, that annoying hump in the front part of the foot is just in the way, and must be carved out for proper shoeing. In fact, when we confronted the owner of this Farrier complex with our dilemma at a later date, he stated for an absolute fact: "There is no toe callous in domestic horses – only in the wild horses." My husband replied that that was indeed true, in most cases, "BECAUSE YOU CUT IT OFF, AND THE DOGS JUST ATE IT!"

Of course, as Gene has proven, the toe callous is part of the tissue which protects the tip of the coffin bone, and the more the toe callous is whacked away, the fragile connections holding the coffin bone in its proper location are compromised. This leads to lengthening of the toe and foot deformity. In addition, one of these old texts states that the increase in the length of the toe is CAUSED by "heel-first landing." As we know, one of Gene's most important points is that the horse should land heel first, to maintain the proper alignment of P1 and P2, as well as help to normalize the circulation.

As I saw changes I did not like, I mentioned to this well-recognized farrier whom I hired, that I would like him to preserve that tissue and make more of a "breakover" on the front part of the foot as taught by Ovniczek. On that occasion, he reluctantly created more of a breakover on my Lipizzan mare, but did not finish one foot, and left her lame in the process. I realize in hindsight, that he hadn't had any idea of how to do a "Natural Balance" breakover, not that that is "rocket science."

The next session was even more of a disaster, and we were finally realizing that we were not getting what we had paid for. So much for trusting someone and depending on his so-called "credentials" to actually mean anything! This time I demanded that he leave the toe callous, and do a better breakover. When my husband, Ray, saw him whittling large amounts of foot off one horse, he suggested that I go out and supervise. I went out with my apron and a rasp, and found myself in a real pickle.

I do understand the ego involved, and was not surprised that he felt that I was "invading his territory." However, I am a veterinarian, and these are our horses. As if to prove a

point, he did the most bizarre trim I have ever seen on my 7-year-old Kiger mustang. As I found out later, it was this farrier's understanding of a "4-point trim," and had no relationship whatever to Gene's Natural Balance trim, obviously proving to me that this hugely touted and advertised farrier school had no inkling of what the Natural Balance method was at all, and equated it with what I consider the antiquated "4-point trim." That horse was so lame after that trim; he was standing at the tie rack and pulled over a rubber bucket to stand in to get some relief. We staged the picture above, but believe me when I say he looked pathetic. Two others were lame as well.

At this point we fired this prestigious bunch and fell back to my NB teacher to help these horses get back on the track.

If there was ever a question in my mind about the common sense of Gene's methods, they have been dispelled forever. When we pulled the shoes on the horses that were shod, and saw the deformity that had taken place in those 6 months, I was just sick. There was not enough foot left on my Foxtrotter to replace the shoe with an NB shoe, and he was scheduled for a clinic the following week. The older mustang was way out of balance, and I was surprised that he wasn't lame. The 2 and 3-year-old colts were underrun at the heels and the toe callus was gone. The two-year-old's foot had started to close up at the heels on his slightly clubby foot. On the lame foot, he was walking on a bar that extended at least ½ inch from level, and the lateral toe was much too long. The 7-year-old Kiger mustang was overrun with bars, which had grown out and over the toe callus. The point of the frog was at least ½ inch deep, and there had been no attempt to balance the landing surface. He was walking on bars that had not even been leveled and were humped up in the middle. His foot had not been leveled at all. But at least there was enough foot to start the process of bringing him back into balance.

To see all these horses with the beautiful feet we had after a year of my less than perfect trimming, go back to deformed feet which is so typical of much conventional farrier work is just heartbreaking. Who is watching out for the horses?

In hindsight, I take full responsibility for not paying enough attention. But unfortunately, most horse owners would understand even less that I did about what was going on.

I am writing this article to make people more aware of taking a serious look at how your horses are being trimmed and shod. Many people claim to be using Natural Balance methods; and if you do not really know these methods yourself, it is easy to be fooled. Some farriers will tell you that they know how to do NB, slap "one of them-thar toe heavy shoes" on your horse, and you'll wonder why he went lame. Fact was, he used the shoe, but didn't have a clue how to do the preparation. To add insult to injury, he or she probably charged you more for it as well.

This is so common, "Natural Balance" gets a bad name because of it. This is what happened in the Endurance World. Many people wanted NB done because it became a fad. People merely put the shoes on, called it Natural Balance, but did not understand the

paradigm. Many horses went lame as a result and the whole method ended up taking the blame. You can check credentials, and it still may not be enough. Be Careful!

Early in this saga, when I still trusted this local farrier group, I recommended a client to request Natural Balance from them for her horse. Their reply -

“WHY YES, NATURALLY, WE BALANCE EVERYTHING!!!”