

Enlightened Equine

Better Horse Management through Science

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Toy Story

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Toy & Aubrey

I want to share the story of a horse named Toy who recently reappeared in my life. I consider my experiences with Toy to be pivotal in my development as a hoof care provider because they were particularly eye-opening with respect to the knowledge of veterinarians and farriers. And I also hope his story may save other horses and owners from needless pain because his situation is not unique; I've since seen a number of horses suffer for very similar reasons. So here goes...

It was early 2000. Although I'd been trimming horses for a number of years, I'd just discovered Jaime Jackson's first book entitled *The Natural Horse*, and was eagerly digesting its contents because I recognized that finally there was someone in the horse hoof care world who made sense! I met Toy's owner Susan at a horse show, where she shared his very dire circumstances with me. But I'll let her tell you in her own words -

Toy was a barefoot horse from birth until age 6 or 7. I always thought in the back of my mind there is just something not right about nailing metal to a horse's feet, but I had no idea about proper barefoot trimming. I had a track farrier trimming him - the guy that did the whole barn.

Toy started coming up unsound. He was diagnosed with navicular disease around 6 or 7 by a vet in Johnstown, Ohio, and we started to shoe him then. We started out with just plates, and then over the years continued to get more and more aggressive with his shoeing in accordance with what the vet would tell us.

Then around 11 or 12, he started getting progressively worse. He was then put on Isoxsuprine by another vet in Delaware, Ohio, and we were told he now needed pads and high-heeled shoes. He would go sound for a while - or what we thought was sound - but then as that started to not work, the vet in Delaware did x-rays and said his navicular bone was full of holes and in terrible shape. He then told us to jack him up even more, and put wedge pads on him too. It was to the point where the farrier I was using said he didn't want to shoe him anymore because he said if one of the shoes and pads came off, it could be a disaster because of the angles Toy was at, and he was very concerned. The vet at this point told us that Toy had reached the end of the line and that we needed to start thinking about putting him down and that he had had a great life.

This is the point where I entered the story. From her description, I thought navicular disease was a pretty far-fetched diagnosis, and urged her to consider de-shoeing the horse and getting him properly trimmed before taking the final, irreversible step of euthanasia. I loaned her my copy of *The Natural Horse*, and she contacted Jaime to see what



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he recommended. Jaime set her up with an appointment with Mike Lagrone - one of his very first students - who was doing a clinic in Kentucky the following weekend. So on the appointed day, we loaded up Toy and headed to Kentucky. Back to Susan -

Before the first visit with Mike, though, our vet caught wind of us taking Toy to a barefoot natural trimmer from someone up in Delaware, and he called me at work and told me that I was making a huge mistake. He said that if those shoes and pads were removed from Toy's feet, he was in grave danger of the navicular bone completely crushing, and he would have to be put down on the spot. I chose to take my chances, as his only option was to put him down. I felt I had to try everything before that decision was made. This horse had carried my little girl as an infant, and taught her to ride and never made a wrong move with her. He was one of the most important things in her life at that time.

Everyone reading this probably knows what a "three-legged lame" horse looks like. Toy came off the trailer barely able to bear weight on his left front foot. He was wearing what I call "the usual hardware" in these situations: wedge bar shoes with full wedge pads, with silicone poured in between the pad and the sole. I've since taken this same combination off many, many horses - particularly those with laminitis or navicular syndrome/disease.

Mike looked over the radiographs and remarked that he didn't see anything particularly problematic. He then removed the shoes and cleaned out the soles; so far, pretty routine stuff. His next move, however, was truly astounding.

After examining Toy's left front hoof, Mike picked up his nippers and proceeded to cut away hoof wall from the lateral heel quarter to the toe, about a third to half of the way up the hoof! When he was done, we were looking through the side of Toy's hoof at his coffin bone. Although Susan was practically beside herself, Toy never reacted and there wasn't a single drop of blood. You see, in spite of the veterinarians and farriers telling her otherwise, and in spite

of their willingness to put this horse down, Toy didn't have anything wrong with his navicular bone. Instead, he had a raging case of white line disease, and the disease had absolutely decimated the lamellar connections holding the hoof wall to the coffin bone in the area that Mike resected. And because the bottom of the hoof had been sealed up with the full pads and silicone, the anaerobic organisms present in white line disease had "gone to town," wreaking havoc on the lamellar connections.

Mike told Susan to take Toy home, buy a wire brush and her favorite hoof cleaner, and scrub the affected area with the wire brush every day. He stressed how important it was to keep the area absolutely clean, and assured her that Toy would be fine! Here's Susan again -

After being off for a year and doing the barefoot natural trim, Toy and Aubrey went on to win the State Championship in English Equitation out of 70-some horses. That day he was not on Isoxsuprine or bute, and was barefoot.

Today he is almost 27 years old. He has arthritis - probably from the ignorance of shoeing him and keeping his weight on his toes for all those years. I often wonder if we had gotten the correct information right off the bat how much better he would be today. But at least he is still with us, and my daughter had many more wins, trail rides, and her best friend, through junior high, high school, and college.

What a story! From death's door to state champion, only because Susan was willing to go against the advice of her veterinarians and farriers and give Toy the chance she knew he deserved. I've not seen Susan, Aubrey, or Toy since that day. But I'm excited because Aubrey, now grown up, has relocated to my area and, by mere chance, found me through a referral. So I'll get to take care of her new horse's hooves!

As I mentioned at the beginning of this post, this was a key learning experience for me as well. Up until this point, I, like most horse owners, thought veterinarians had a generally good grasp of the equine foot. Toy's situation really shook



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my confidence in that belief. How multiple veterinarians and farriers could miss such an obvious problem was, at that time, simply beyond my comprehension.

I've since found out that veterinarians typically don't learn much about horse hooves in school, but instead rely on the knowledge of farriers and other veterinarians. That revelation, just so you know, was "straight from the horse's mouth" from multiple sources, although I can't go into details. This is an unfortunate circumstance; one that I sincerely hope will change in the near future. Until then, the horse owner has very few options when it comes to accurate, up-to-date knowledge of the equine digit and its unique problems.

All the best to Toy, Susan and Aubrey for their courage!

UPDATE: According to his owner, Toy passed away in 2020 at age 34 – 22 years and a good life after his near-death experience at the hands of incompetent equine health care providers!

About the author: Retired professor and award-winning product designer, musician, and recording engineer Steve Hebrock taught, among a number of other technical subjects, hoof care at The Ohio State University ATI for many years. He now concentrates his efforts on his and his wife Dora's hoof care practice, on developing technical products for horse and hoof care, and on writing for *Enlightened Equine* — his blog dedicated to applying science to horse management. An AANHCP-Certified Hoof Care Provider and Liberated Horsemanship Master Hoof Care Professional and instructor, he is a frequent speaker at the Equine Affaire and other horse events, including the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association's national conferences. www.enlightenedequine.com

