

**D**espite anything you might have heard from your local dealer of all-terrain vehicles, horses still play important roles on many American farms and ranches. It's true, however, that ties binding the horse industry to that of cattle have weakened. Cattle folks today represent a minority among horse buyers, while the majority view horses as part of a popular lifestyle. Western events like cutting, roping and team penning are popular pursuits for growing numbers of upscale, suburban Americans, while some prefer the Eastern disciplines or simply riding for pleasure.

Whether old Dobbin is used for pleasure, sport or to fetch in the cows, an age-old maxim holds true: No hoof, no horse!

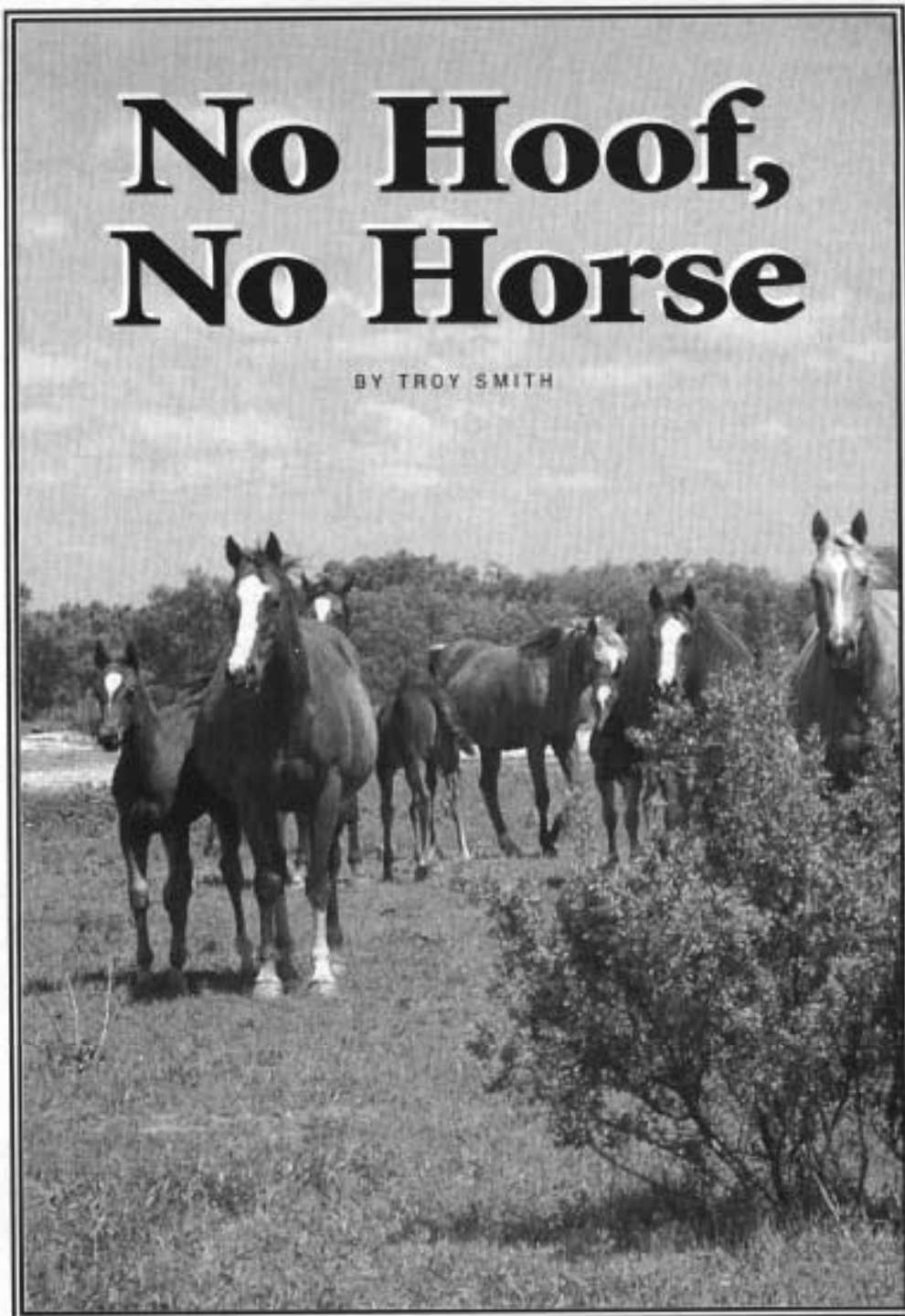
Outside of nutrition, hoof care may be the single, most important aspect of keeping a horse sound and suitable for its intended purpose. In most cases, proper hoof care means regular trimming and, depending on the circumstances, shoeing.

**Farrier Troop Bennett** has plied his trade from Ohio to Nebraska, providing hoof care for animals used in a broad range of activities. Now headquartered in Sargent, Neb., Bennett works mostly with performance horses used in the arena or on the ranch. He says it's important to consider for what purposes a horse is used, how often and the type of terrain. Any particular structural problems also should be considered when deciding if shoeing a horse would be helpful or necessary.

"You have to shoe the horse rather than the foot," explains

# No Hoof, No Horse

BY TROY SMITH



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Bennett, who dislikes the term corrective shoeing. "It's commonly used, but I think it's misleading, especially when you're dealing with a mature horse that's a little crooked or flawed in his way of going. Shoes won't cure a structural problem, but they can help a horse travel better. Instead of corrective shoeing, I call it correct shoeing for the particular need."

Bennett adds that not all horses require shoes. However, regular use on gravel, rocky ground or pavement demands protection from hoof wear.

The average hoof grows about 1/2 inch per month. If conditions cause the hoof to wear off faster than they can grow, shoes are needed. The same may be true if the horse's conformation or an injury causes uneven hoof wear.

Even if a horse has good, sound feet and conditions don't demand shoes, those feet probably need regular trimming. Again, the frequency of use, terrain and wear patterns vary, but most of Bennett's clients' horses need trimmed at eight-week intervals. This is particularly true in young horses with soft, growing bones. Uneven wear or broken hooves might cause the horse to travel abnormally. If neglected, permanent damage could result, affecting the horse's usefulness at maturity.

When hiring a farrier, many people rely on referrals. Bennett says it's good to ask around to find a reputable person.

"You can't always go by experience," he adds. "The most experienced farrier ought to be the better farrier, but it isn't always true. A less seasoned shoer might actually have a better understanding of horse

conformation and action. That's important. I think the biggest problem this profession has is that too many shoers don't have a basic understanding of conformation."

Equine veterinarian George Baker agrees that an understanding of conformation is important, since many common hoof and leg problems may be related to how the horse is made. Practicing in

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Ord, Neb., Baker's clientele includes the notable Pitzer Ranch, known for raising and showing performance Quarter Horses.

Horsemen from a wide area turn to Baker when illness or injury strikes their arena and ranch mounts. Baker says two debilitating conditions that are becoming increasingly common are injury to the suspensory ligament and navicular disease.

The suspensory ligament connects bones in the horse's lower leg and foot. Baker treats 40 or more pulled ligaments each year, usually prescribing wraps and an extended period of confinement to curb the patient's activity. Ninety-five percent of the treated horses respond favorably, but Baker believes many of these injuries could have been avoided.

"The horses with pulled suspensory ligaments often are high-performance animals involved in stressful events, like roping or barrel racing," says Baker. "But I think a lot of these

injuries happen because of arenas that are worked too deep. Just because you can stick that hydraulic equipment a foot into the ground doesn't mean the arena needs to be that deep. That deep ground just increases stress. Four inches is deep enough."

Baker says the 5% that don't respond to suspensory ligament treatment probably were misdiagnosed in the first place.

Something else was creating the lameness and most often it was navicular disease. In other cases, navicular disease is easily diagnosed and, adds Baker, with increasing frequency.

Navicular disease involves degeneration of the foot's navicular bone and most often affects the front feet. The condition results from reduced blood supply to the navicular bone or the membrane (bursa) surrounding it.

"Navicular disease has been around forever and a lot of things can contribute to it," offers Baker. "Horses fed high-quality feeds and kept in close confinement are at risk when they are used strenuously without proper conditioning. But I'm convinced that conformation is a key factor.

"Most navicular horses are Quarter Horses, or that type, like horse show ring judges were picking back 20 or 25 years ago. They were placing horses that were a little lighter-boned, really straight in front and with small

feet. By trying to breed for the type, horsemen also bred for conformation unsoundness that predisposed the horses to navicular disease."

Baker says horses that are heavy muscled have problems when they are too steep in the shoulder and have short, steep pasterns. Navicular problems usually surface when a horse is 8- to 12-year-old. Treatment can give affected horses comfort and extend their usefulness. Baker says the drug isoxsuprine hydrochloride (also used to treat arthritis in humans) can help increase blood circulation, thus slowing the condition's progression. He always recommends regular trimming and shoeing to maintain a raised heel and ease breakover of the hoof. Therapeutic shoes, including bar-shoes and raised-heel shoes may give favorable results.

Baker admits he never has cured a case of navicular disease. If the problem goes away, it likely stemmed from something else in the first place, he says. If some other aspects of conformation or injury are ruled out, many foot and leg problems can be avoided through proper hoof care.

When seeking a professional farrier to provide that care, Troop Bennett says promptness, dependability and attention to detail are traits horse owners will want to see.

"Certification by the American Farriers' Association is good, too, but there are plenty of capable shoers who just haven't been certified. Your veterinarian may be able to recommend a good shoer," adds Bennett. "But make sure you pick one that is willing and able to answer your questions."

