Ideal Guy’s track-to-hack story

Hoof rehabilitation by Andrew Bowe

Racing places specific demands on a horse’s physiology and, as well as re-training, Ideal Guy’s transformation includes a complete health and fitness rehabilitation. A key contributor to Ideal Guy’s journey from track to hack is Master Farrier Andrew Bowe who is providing regular hoof care and documenting the hoof rehabilitation process.

I am a regular visitor to knackeries.

It’s not a pretty subject, but I use cadaver hooves for beginner students to practice hoof trimming at the workshops I conduct around Australia. Beginners’ mistakes are best made on cadavers.

Whilst I fully respect the important job that knackeries do (I think knackeries should get more kudos for the service they provide for the entire equine industry), I am regularly confronted by the large percentage of horses that come from Standardbreds. There must be a disproportionately large wastage rate in the harness racing industry. Instead of track to hack, reality suggests that it’s more a case of track to knack.

I have often contemplated the reasons for this, because ‘Standies’ are likeable animals. They are not rogues. On the contrary, they are quite tractable and turn up in large numbers at trail riding ‘schools’ where they suit beginner riders.

Why then are there not more Standies recycled after their racing careers have ended? Is it simply the sheer weight of numbers that pass through the industry each year? Is it because they are all damaged goods courtesy of working at sustained speed in harness? Or is it the perception of them being a tough ride? Maybe it’s all of the above?

I am quick to admit that we don’t have a Standy amongst the dozen or so saddle horses at Mayfield. We have tried them in the past but they didn’t appear suited to chasing cattle around steep hills. Nor were they sweet movers. But then, maybe we didn’t know how to correctly school them to get the best out of them? That was also back in the shoeing days and maybe that my traditional hoof care was unable to deal with their rough gaits.

There is still much to learn about Standies.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the Unharnessed Potential project with “Andy the Standy”. As the farrier, I should be able to make a worthwhile contribution; after all, hooves are plastic and dynamic and constantly changing and are thus a great litmus test for a horse’s biomechanical and metabolic health.

Standies are resilient

The story of an off-track Standardbred would be quite unremarkable if we just lived for the moment and simply tucked on a set of shoes, sharpened up the spurs and just went riding. Standies are good soldiers. They will just suck up any discomfort and get on with the job at hand. Eventually they may get a dull eye and an even rougher gait, but they will keep plodding along.

If, however, we stand back and take the interests of a horse into consideration and not just our own ‘selfie’ interests, and we actually look at the long-term picture, there is always quite a story to tell - even with Standardbreds.

Andy’s hooves

Andy the Standy presented with hooves fairly typical of an off-track Standardbred coming out of shoes; robust walls and reasonably thick soles, but with non-weight-bearing and contracted frogs on the front hooves and ‘tall’ hooves from being jammed upwards into the coronet bands, due to excessive hoof call weight-bearing. The breed is actually known for having tough hooves that tend to grow tall and more contracted, rather than splaying outwards like Thoroughbred hooves. Constand shoeing amplifies hoof contraction. The hind frogs are larger and functional, but only because they have been weight-bearing since prolonging down between the branches of the shoes.

One thing not so typical was that Andy’s hooves had relatively good medial to lateral (side to side) balance and both his front and hind hooves were only slightly turned in. They had obviously been getting well trimmed from the horse’s point of view and had not been subjected to significant gait correction; at least not recently. Due to prolonged gait correction to optimise travelling in harness, not many off track standies have good medial lateral balance. So, this at least is a good start! (See main title photo on the opposite page).

The problem with harness horses

Horses are rear wheel drive animals that are built with exceptionally strong hind quarters so they can flee predators. They are not designed to ‘pull’ loads in harness with their front end.

This suggests that the power has been coming from the forequarters and the hindquarters are weaker than they should be.

A consequence of such movement is that the front hooves impact the ground toe first which causes damaging pressure in the soft navicular area. Many horses ultimately succumb to chronic lameness that is caused by toe first landing. Such manifestations as navicular syndrome and degenerated tendons, ligaments and joints can all he attributed to this faulty movement.
Andy palpated sensitive to the heel bulb / navicular area in both front hooves. He was not lame, only sensitive. But this is a red flag.

The big evolution in hoofcare in recent years has been to and holds them for trimming, even the slightest restriction of can be done to the balance of the hooves to help the body realign when the body issues are addressed.

Issues that are not originating in a horse's hooves need to be referred to a body therapist; in this case I believe it will be the ChiroVet Dr Ian Bidstrup, referring Andy to the AEBR.

Feedback will then be sought to determine whether anything can be done to the balance of the hooves to help the body above, but experience suggests that the hooves will begin to realign when the body issues are addressed.

I should add here that when a farrier picks up a horse's legs and holds them for trimming, even the slightest restriction of movement in the limbs can be felt. Andy didn't so much as feel restricted, rather he just felt weak behind.

The most important member of the team - at least in this case - is the occupational therapist (that would be the rider). It is the rider that needs to work the horse in a fashion that overcomes any remnant issues from its earlier life on the track. In this case the horse is fortunate enough to be getting professionally schooled at the AEBR. The experienced riders there would see and feel everything in the saddle that the farrier does when holding the legs (and more) and would have no doubt recognised and reported accordingly.

Long-term, however, the responsibility will fall to the eventual owner and rider of Andy who will need to have the good conscience to ensure he is only worked within his physical limitations. Sorry, but I don't think he will make it to the Rio Games.

If Andy's riders can get him moving correctly, the heel pain will dissipate; he will then stand in a better posture and will begin growing a thicker caudal hoof (frog and digital cushion) and his arched hooves should return to a physiologically correct steeper angle.

Dependant upon the advice from the Dr Ian Bidstrup, trimming management will be fairly simple – don't touch the hind heels with a cap (they are too low already) and keep the breakover short. Trimming will also need to be regular to maximise the rate of hoof remodelling.

If there is no improvement after a couple of trimming cycles, my prescription would be to assess movement and posture with Andy wearing hoof boots that are built up with fully supportive heel wedges on his hind hooves. If this appears to help him, then a practical approach would be to turn him out during the day with boots on and keep them on when he is being worked, but remove the boots at night and yard him in a deep bed. That way his hooves would be able to air out and he could stand all night with his toes 'dug' into the pebbles, thus relieving pressure from his flexor muscles. (See photo on right).

Sub clinical laminitis is probably the main reason why domestic horses need to be propped up by shoes because laminitic pressures prevent soles from reaching their optimal thickness. There has been a huge upheaval in Andy's system, courtesy of moving from Queensland to Victoria. When a horse moves into a totally foreign environment, everything changes. It will be grazing a totally different pasture, drinking totally different water and eating totally different hard feed. If you add to this the effects of 'coming down' from racing and the obvious mental stress of such a large topographical move, there is certain to be a major impact on his intestinal flora. Most laminitis arises from digestive upset.

The omnipresent sub clinical laminitis will need to be carefully managed, especially when attempting to build up his body weight.

There should be no race to build him up. And then he doesn't need to be built up too much. There is often a great deal of difference between the ideas of horse owner and farrier as to what is a good body condition. Some horse owners may ask what does this subject ever have to do with the farrier, but very simply, the best hooves belong to those horses that sit right in the middle of a body condition scoring chart. A hint of ribs is good!

Diet is a huge subject, but in summary Andy will need to have any 'dangerous' sugar-based conditions such as grain removed from his diet, to be replaced with 'safe' fat-based conditioners. In addition, it would be wise to add a mild gut pH buffer, as well as optimising mineral balance, particularly magnesium.

Intestinal health can be further helped by being proactive with worm control and pro-biotics.

Laminitic issues

The other main concern with Andy's hooves is the presence of low grade (sub clinical) laminitis which is indicated by the presence of blood in the laminar line. (See photo below). Although he is not lame from this pathology, it is a mechanical weakness that will need to be nipped in the bud and not allowed to progress.

To Shoe Or Not Shoe?

Every aspect of hoof function and therefore long term soundness requires healthy and load bearing frogs. Therefore, it is in Andy's long term interests to remain barefoot with the frogs well grounded. Fortunately his hooves should be robust enough to cope with a life out of shoes, although if he is to ridden on gravel roads he will likely need front hoof boots.

Sub clinical laminitis may not cause lameness, but it is a mechanical weakness that will need to be nipped in the bud and not allowed to progress. It is a red flag.

If available, the best deep bedding in this case would be pea sized river pebbles which have the added benefit of stimulating the solar surface of the hooves, thus maximising blood flow for tissue remodelling and sole growth.

In the unlikely event of heel pain and toe first landing persisting in the front hooves, padded boots can be put on the fronts.

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Lucky for Andy, he is in the care of experienced professionals and the author expects these low grade laminitic issues to pass.

In conclusion

Andy has arrived at a fork in his life's road. Let's see that he takes the path which will not only keep him sound for life, but give him the best possible movement. Not just a good soldier, but a comfortable one.

Hopefully Andy can quickly become a shining example of the potential for off track Stalles.

Andy should be working the rider in the same way so that he becomes a good soldier, but a comfortable one.