



Down on the Farm

Hoof Care For Foals

by **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

Hoof care for foals is crucial for making sure feet and legs grow well-balanced and in proper alignment. Foals grow so fast that any neglect at this point in their lives may lead to permanent problems later. Scott Kintz, the Broodmare Manager at Taylor Made Farm in Nicholasville, Kentucky, says that for most of the foals at their farm, they don't do a lot more than basic maintenance. "We pick their feet daily—pick the mud out and make sure there are no rocks in them, etc. We start trimming their feet when they are ten days old. We trim them every two weeks, up until they are about three to four months old, then we go to once a month. We trim them every two weeks when they are babies, not so much for their feet as for the handling, and for any correction—to make sure they are staying straight," explains Kintz.

"As far as putting anything on their feet, we don't use much besides a basic hoof paint, and use it every day at first, then every other day. This just protects the hoof and helps keep it from getting too wet or too dry. I think it repels excess moisture, but for the most part it helps keep them from becoming too dry and cracked. In the mares' feet, this type of hoof dressing really does help, but it's hard to say how much it helps the foals. I think the babies' feet stay pretty pliable because they are soft anyway. But one reason

we do it is that we need to be doing something with their feet, and handling them all the time," he says. This gives an excuse for handling their feet.

It's good for their training (getting them accustomed to having their feet handled and worked with) and also enables a person to detect any little problems that might crop up, before they get to be big problems. "We start handling their feet as early as three to five days old. That first trimming, at ten days old, is not much actual trimming—just a swipe or two with the rasp, and to square their toes up; that's usually all they need. The foals' toes are usually quite pointed, so if we can square that toe and keep it good and level where it's hitting the ground, this keeps them breaking over straight," explains Kintz. This can make a big difference in keeping the foot and leg growing straight, having the toe break over center instead of off to one side.

"If we have a foal with really pointed toes, I'll take a rasp and square the toe off as early as two or three days of age. But you have to be really careful because the feet are so soft and small at that age," he says. This is just preventative maintenance to make sure the leg doesn't end up crooked.

"We have a team of farriers who work on our foals. We have a head farrier and he has four others who work under him. For the most part, the farriers do all the work on the foals' feet, but I may grab a rasp and do one that's just a few days old, if it needs attention, so we don't need to have a farrier come all the way down here just for one foal," explains Kintz. The farm has somewhere between 230 and 250 foals each year, so taking care of their feet is a continual job.

"If a foal needs more than routine trimming, we are big on corrective trimming, but we also do corrective surgeries if a foal needs more help to straighten up. We are very aggressive about making sure our foals are correct. We get after them pretty hard with corrective trimming, right away, if we feel they need it." Then the people handling these foals can tell, early on, if trimming alone will correct an angular limb deformity, or whether the foal will need surgery.

The younger you can do any necessary corrections, the better success you'll have, while those bones are still growing. "Also, I think the younger the foal when you can make the correction, the less work you'll have to do—if you can get after them early and be consistent about working on them. It is very important to be aggressive on corrections, and it's important to not neglect the feet, on any horse, especially a foal," he says.



Those feet and legs are growing so fast, they can change very quickly. "You really need to watch them, and pay close attention. Small problems can get out of hand in a hurry. We evaluate them very carefully, those first days. The quicker you can get onto fixing a problem, the better off you will be," says Kintz.

After the foals get to the stage where they are being trimmed just once a month, trimmings are aimed at basically just maintaining good hoof and leg balance. "We keep correction on them for awhile. Even now, on the yearlings, we keep doing a little correction, if need be. The weanlings and yearlings are still trimmed once a month, as long as they are here, and the mares also get done once a month," he says.

The foals are out at pasture with their mothers as they grow up, so they get exercise, and are on relatively soft footing—depending on whether the weather is wet or dry. "A dry year can be bad, if the ground gets really hard, but a wet year can be hard on their feet also. Any year that is excessively wet or dry can be bad. If feet are constantly wet and get too soft, they are more susceptible to abscesses and gravels but, on the other hand, if they get too dry they get hard and brittle, and crack," he says.

"On foals we just use a basic hoof dressing to try to maintain hoof moisture (keep the foot from becoming too wet or dry) but on the weanlings and yearlings we often use some homemade remedies we might make up for special needs," says Kintz. Continual attention to feet can keep them healthy.

Joe Yocum, DVM, the veterinarian at Overbrook Farm, in Lexington, says they have a blacksmith come in and trim their foals when they are two weeks old. "We just round the foot up, to take the point off the toe. This helps them break over easier, and straight. I don't like to get real aggressive in corrective trimming with young horses. They don't have very much foot, at first, and also they tend to correct on their own, if their legs are a bit crooked."

He has a theory that a foal who toes in or out is putting uneven pressure on the growth plates of those lower leg bones and this probably stimulates them to straighten on their own. "A lot of them will straighten. Some are so valgus at the knee (knock knees) that you wonder if they will ever straighten, but they do correct on their own. Something must stimulate the growth plate to grow more on one side than the other, to straighten the leg, because very often, without our doing much correction, it will straighten," he says.

"On the other hand, if we start torquing that leg too much with corrections, we may overdo it and are working against ourselves. I like to just trim them level, but if one starts to toe in and look like it may get worse, then we'll do a little more aggressive correction," explains Yocum.

"I don't mind doing the periosteal elevation (periosteal stripping, lifting the bone lining on one side of the leg) to help the leg correct, but I am reluctant to use the screws (transphyseal bridging) because it's more

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extreme. I find that after you use the screws, and take them out, the horse may continue to correct and become too much the other way (valgus will become varus or vice versa) or it may stay the same or go back the way it was. Often the conservative route is the safest road," he says.

"We also do routine care in the barn; we have the people who handle the foals pick up their feet daily. We imprint train these foals, and it really helps make foot handling easier later on. We had one guy working for us two years ago who used a rasp with duct tape over it; he could run the rasp across their feet without actually doing anything to the foot, just to get them used to it. But usually we just pick their feet up, and pick out their feet a little bit, and do that every day while they are young," he says.

"We keep our weanlings outside all summer, and even trim them all summer. If we didn't do that, I think we'd have to do more foot care. Being at pasture, getting natural exercise, is the best thing for a foal's feet. I am a big believer in exercise for young horses—not forced exercise, but natural exercise. We are lucky in that we have the acres to do that," says Yocum. ■

