

Putting your best foot forward

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Paula Lasersohn

Paula Lasersohn – a natural winner

No blanket, no stable, no shoes – a scenario as far removed from the spit and polish world of showing as one could imagine, right? Not when it comes to Paula Lasersohn, one of a growing trend of people worldwide following the barefoot horse movement and who has an ever increasing list of showing victories to her name.

'Natural' approach

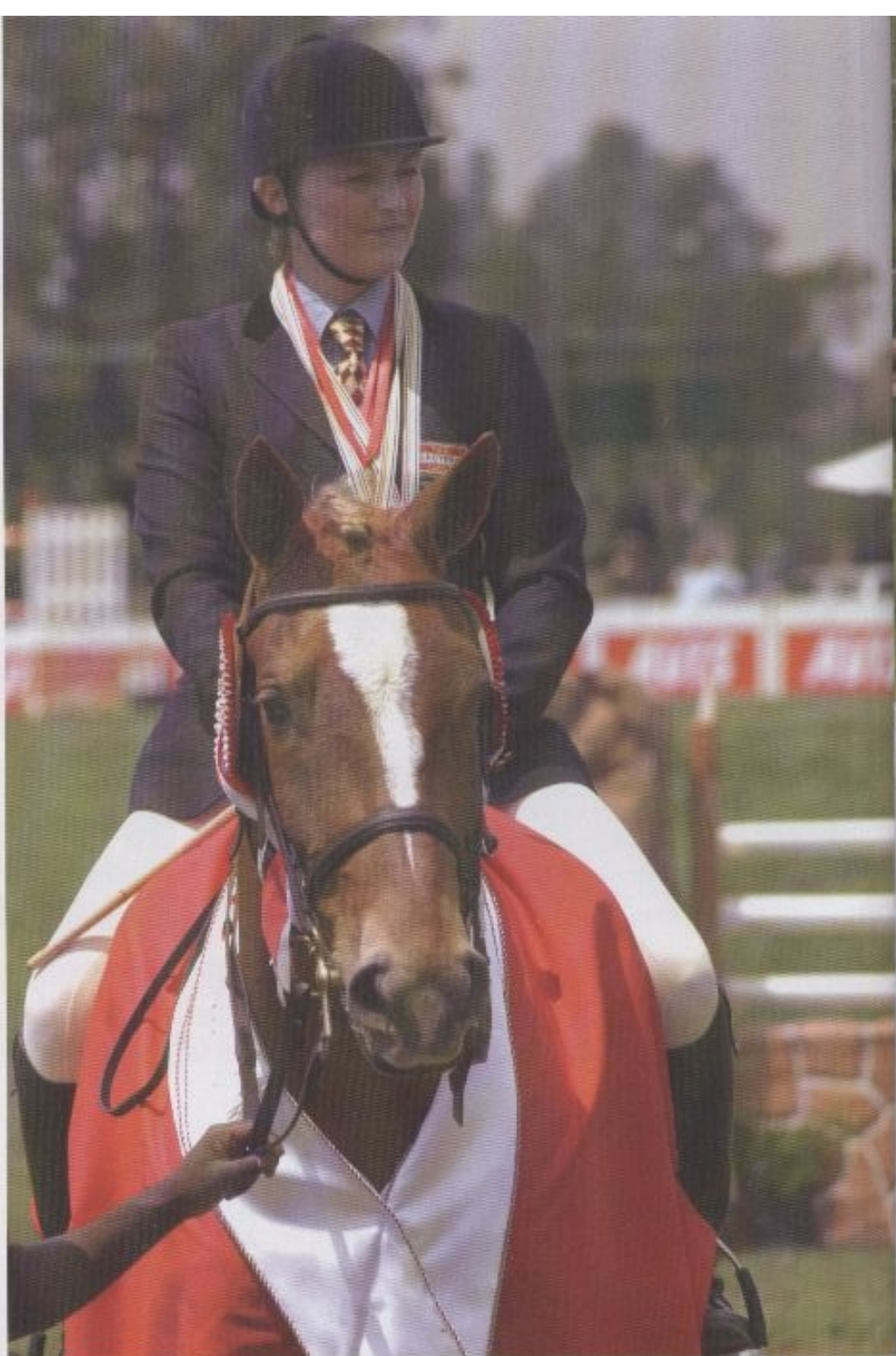
Following the methods taught by Dr Hiltrud Strasser, a German veterinarian specialising in the rehabilitation of unsound horses, Lasersohn believes in keeping her horses as close to their natural environment as possible.

"People often humanise horses and think that by buying them the most expensive duvet rugs, high-tech boots and saddlery, that they are doing the best thing for their horse, but we need to remember that horses aren't humans," says Lasersohn.

Growing in popularity around the world, but particularly in the United States, the barefoot horse movement advocates the use of barefoot horses in both non-competitive and competitive riding, coupled with a more natural approach to horse care. The movement is still relatively small within South Africa, but is gaining recognition particularly among endurance riders.

Dr Strasser

Dr Strasser's theory is based on naturalisation of a horse's management i.e. no stall, no stagnation, on removing the



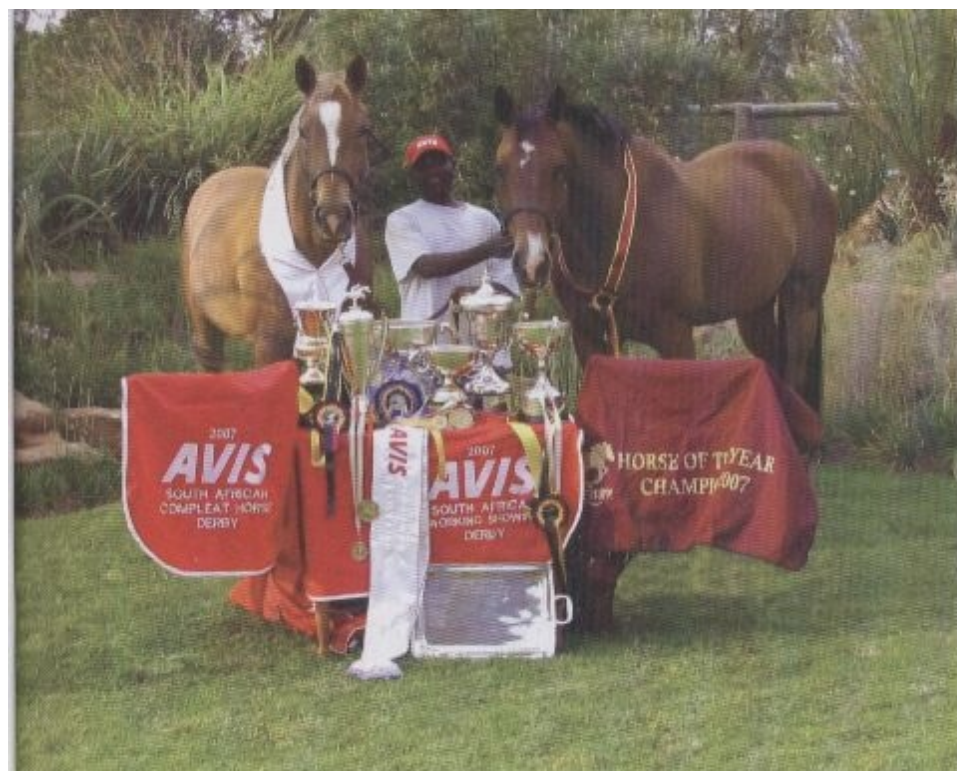
Showing competitor Paula Lasersohn and her horse Winchester, winners of the 2007 SA Avis Working Horse Derby as well as the Compleat Horse Derby

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shoes of shod horses and on a trim devoted to restoring normal shape and function of their hooves.

Dr Strasser, who runs courses for horse owners, farriers and veterinarians in Europe and further afield, is one of several professionals steering the barefoot

movement worldwide. Her theories and methods are considered controversial in some traditional circles, but particularly her support of self-trimming by horse owners themselves. Lasersohn herself completed one of Dr Strasser's trimming courses in 2002 and effectively trimmed her own



Winchester and Shamrock with their groom Maximus Zimogwa and all the trophies they have won in the last year

horses until she fell pregnant a few years later and was unable to continue.

The thinking behind the barefoot movement in general is that for centuries horses were left to roam free in their natural environment, but over the last few hundred years we have changed that through domestication and the way we keep horses, resulting in them being more prone to illness and lameness.

Strasser's message in essence is firstly to keep the horse in an environment that is as close as possible to its natural environment. Secondly, to allow the foot to be the shape and consistency that nature intended. Thirdly, horses should be encouraged to move as much as possible and therefore should not be confined to a stable, because in the wild they travel an average of 35 km a day. Lack of movement equals weakened hooves and legs due to reduced circulation. Unlike humans, horses only sleep for short periods and naturally keep moving through the night as they graze – and their feet and legs seem to require this continual movement. Lastly, a change in food to a mainly grass-based diet, including oats (a type of grass) and less sweet feed, is also important.

However, one of the concerns in South Africa, particularly in high risk areas, is that allowing horses to roam freely at night may make them more susceptible to viruses such as African Horse Sickness, although a stable is no guarantee against disease-carrying midges.

The foot's function

While Strasser may have focussed much of her attention on the hoof, it is the natural lifestyle that is her overall objective to ensure a happy and healthy horse.

"To keep them barefoot, I work on conditioning their feet by doing a combination of tar work, sand work and even make them walk over a patch of gravel."

"Before Strasser came to South Africa, she informed us that she would not trim stabled horses' feet as she believes it to be counterproductive and her certified Strasser hoof-care specialists are actually forbidden to work on stabled horses. This is primarily due to the foot's function as a heart supporting circulatory pump. As the foot expands on impact and contracts as the weight is lifted, the action helps to move blood back and forth from the organs to the heart. The sole is not intended for compression, but is designed to stretch,

which it is unable to do when restricted by a shoe," says Lasersohn.

"In addition, this flexion of the hoof is able to act as a shock absorber by absorbing 70% to 80% of the impact force of each step. A shoe restricts the foot from being able to fulfil its natural functions while boots or bandages similarly restrict movement and circulation in the legs.

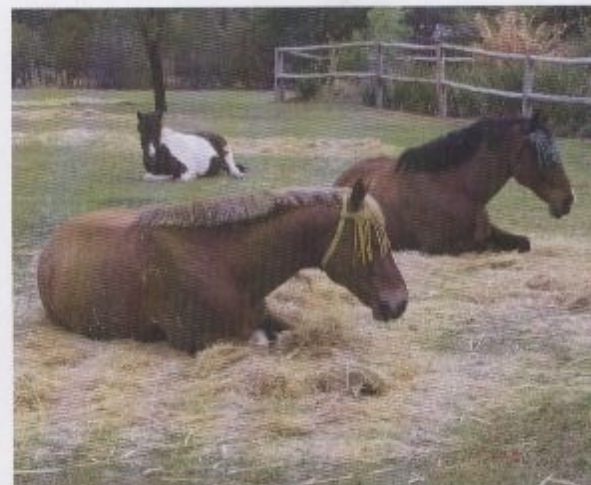
"Another function of the hoof is protection, proprioception and traction. Protection of the sensitive structures contained inside the hoof and the vital sensory information that is related from the frog concerning the type of surface the horse is travelling on, allowing the horse to adjust his stride and balance accordingly, is reduced through the use of shoes."

Takes time and maintenance

Joining the barefoot movement is, however, not merely a matter of taking off the shoes, boots and rugs and turning the horse out, but takes a lot of planning and understanding of horse and hoof care. Removing shoes, particularly if the horse has been shod for many years, results in it taking time for the hoof to adjust and the horse may be unsound at first. The hoof needs to regain its strength and get used to a variety of surfaces. Once the hooves have adjusted to being barefoot, care must be taken to ensure the hooves are well maintained through regular and correct trimming. In addition, the hooves should be soaked daily in water and careful attention should be given to nutrition to ensure a strong and healthy horse and hoof.

Competing barefoot

Lasersohn uncovered the barefoot movement after battling to get an unlevel horse sound for several months, until she



Winchester, Shamrock and Gordon resting at home

removed his shoes. After six days without shoes the horse was sound. Six months later she replaced the shoes and the horse was lame again within three months.

Doing some research on the Internet, Lasersohn discovered an entire movement dedicated to shoeless horses, together with the teachings of people like Strasser. Together with a group of like-minded people from around South Africa, she was able to bring Strasser to South Africa in 2002.

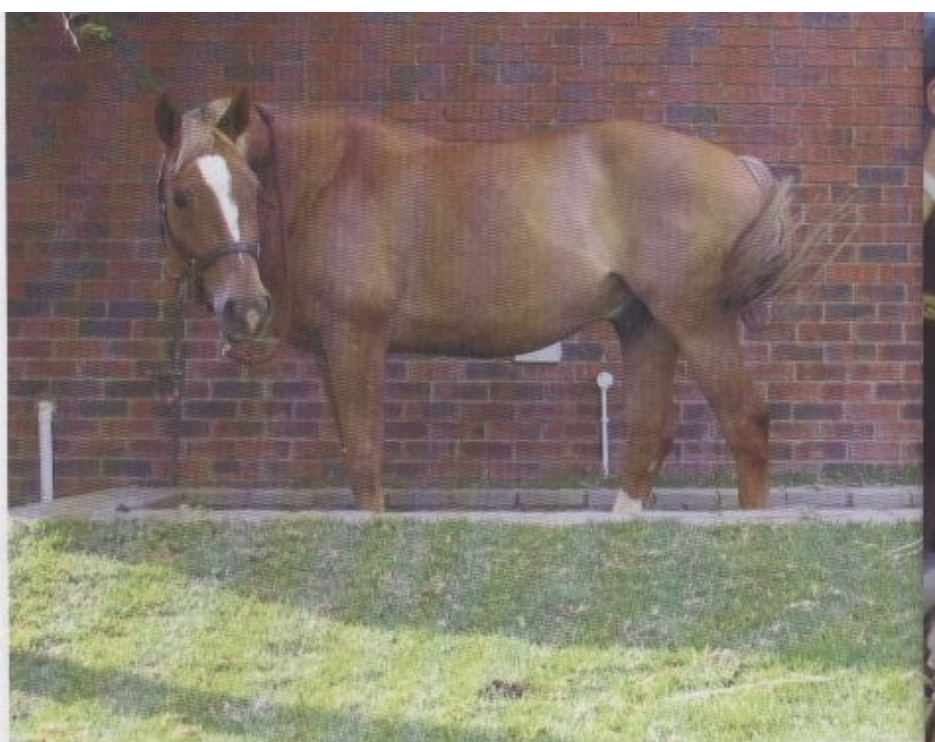
"Many people don't feel that horses can compete barefoot, but horses' feet adapt to the environment they are in. My horses' feet and legs now function as they should without shoes and boots and they don't get puffiness, swelling, heat or splints. To keep them barefoot, I work on conditioning their feet by doing a combination of tar work, sand work and even make them walk over a patch of gravel into my dressage arena as part of the conditioning so that their feet are accustomed to all types of terrain," says Lasersohn.

Foot bath

According to Strasser, hooves need daily exposure to water to keep them hydrated and more resilient. She bases her theory on the concept that horses in the wild stand in shallow water when drinking from a river, stream or dam. Following this concept, Lasersohn has built a foot bath particularly for this reason and after each ride, her horses stand contentedly in the water for ten minutes while devouring a bag of carrots.

Outdoor lifestyle

While she has stables available for her horses, she uses these at feeding time only,



Winchester soaking his feet

the remainder of the day and evening the stable doors are left open so that the horses can wander in and out as they desire.

The outdoor lifestyle and grassy diet have done little to affect the horses' show condition and while in winter they throw thick coats, this does not deter Lasersohn whose main showing calendar runs during the summer months.

"If you work with the nature of the horse rather than against it, it makes things a lot easier."

"Even if there is a show during winter, it just means that my horses are woollier than the rest, but I do not clip them. I mainly compete in working classes in which the results are more performance-based than appearance-based," she says.

Her show successes

And performance is definitely what her horses hand out in abundance if their list of achievements is anything to go by.

Despite having taken time off last year to have a baby, Lasersohn impressed the judges at her comeback at the South African Derby where she won both the Compleat Horse and the Working Show Horse Derby on her chestnut Warmblood, Winchester, while winning

the Show Hunter class on her bay Irish Sport Horse, Shamrock.

During her pregnancy, a friend successfully competed on her horses having won the Supreme Champion Working Hunter of the Year on Shamrock at the Horse of the Year Show 2007. Shamrock also won the Irish Sport Horse under saddle title while Winchester was Reserve Champion Adult Working Hunter to Shamrock and also Champion Adult Working Riding Horse.

Similarly, at the Rand Show last year Winchester was the Champion Adult Working Hunter and Working Riding Horse. Both horses also fared well in dressage with Winchester having won the EM Musical Kur at the Freestyle Dressage to Music Festival in May and Shamrock placed second in the Novice Transvaal Championship at the end of September.

In 2006 at the SA Showing Championships Winchester took the SA Champion Working Riding Horse and Reserve Champion Working Horse of SA title along with the Compleat Horse, narrowly beating Shamrock who came second in the Compleat Horse.

Asked if she has noticed a positive change in her horses since changing to Strasser's methods, Lasersohn said it has made them generally happier and easier to work with.

"If you work with the nature of the horse rather than against it, it makes things a lot easier. But, I also realise that I have very special horses."



Paula and Winchester doing their free test as part of the Compleat Horse Derby