

BAREFOOT SUCCESS

Article Photography © Anna van Rheeden

Cover feature

It's not just about the feet in Indonesia as [Anna van Rheeden](#) explains

At Havana Horses we do things the natural way. All our horses go barefoot and are ridden bitless, not only in the ring, but also when we take them out to the nearby race track, or go trekking for several days. We have a terrific bunch of robust, surefooted and friendly horses, of the hardy Indonesian breeds (Sumba and Sandalwood) crossed with Australian and New Zealand thoroughbred, all living together in a harmonious herd. Our horses are willing to teach people all they want to know about horses, and about themselves!

RIDING BITLESS

For the riders taking their regular lessons at Havana Horses, the

bitless bridle (we use a sidepull or a bitless-bridle-with-wheel) is all they know. It makes me smile when children ask "why do some people put an iron thing in the horse's mouth?" Of course, most of our customers choose to come to us because of what we do and how we do it, so they have already heard about natural horsemanship. However, riding without a bit is, for many, a completely new experience. Some people ask "what is the difference, and what do I have to do differently?" Our answer always is "for the horse it doesn't make any difference. The difference exists in our own mind, not in the horse's mind." After the lesson or trail ride out without exception people will say that they either completely forgot about the matter, or just didn't notice any difference, at all.

We take our horses for a full

gallop to the local nearby race track, of course bitless, and the horses are just as responsive, or maybe even more so, without a bit. We do jumping and dressage, go trekking for hours, with or without a bit is not an issue, as long as it is comfortable. What is important is how we ride. Do we have soft hands, do we have an aware connecting seat and an open mind?

When riders think they need to control the horse, or that they won't be able to stop a galloping horse without a bit, the relationship with the horse is based on mistrust (he might take off with me), misunderstanding (I'll have to pull hard to stop him) and fear (he will bolt and I'll fall). To build a relationship that is based on trust, mutual understanding and confidence, all lessons and courses at Havana Horses, start with liberty work,

A bitless and barefoot full gallop on the racetrack



ground work and grooming. We see this as essential so that the horse and rider take the time to get to know each other, to learn how the other responds and reacts. We need to adjust our body language and energy level to the needs of the horse, considering the personality and type of horse, whether he be a lead horse, a submissive horse or a dominant horse. Each needs something different from us. We need to set the rules of communication based on our leadership, in order to feel comfortable with one and other. In this way fearful riders will also become confident and happy leaders for the horse, and this is a necessary condition for a carefree and happy ride. A quick brush, hurried tack up, mount and start riding, will not happen at our place. We take at least half an hour for quiet ground work and grooming, without exception.

Our riding style is a natural one, where you ride with focus, leadership and seat, and with loose reins. You only put pressure

on the reins, or use leg, when you ask for something specifically, to release immediately when the horse responds. This makes the horse light and responsive with or without a bit. We are happy to say that many riders, even the very experienced ones, have eye opening experiences here such as handling and riding a horse in a gentle and respectful manner, having a relaxed and eager horse wanting to be with you after join up and ground work, giving your horse a break when he needs one, and yet, or we think exactly because of that, having excellent riding experiences! One of our experienced customers told us she found it a very sensitive, even sensual riding style.

As horse trainers who are very specific about how things are done, my husband and I sometimes use a bit when we feel the horse benefits from it, for instance to release the jaw, or to refine the communication. For public lessons and trail rides, however, a bit simply is not an option.

THE NATURAL LIFE

At the root of all this lies the natural life style that makes our horses trusting, kind and well-balanced in mind and body. Imitating nature is the key to success: let the horse be a horse. Our horses have shown us through the years that the closer we get to natural conditions, the better. Thus, just as in the wild, our horses live in a herd of 15 to 20 horses. They are always outside grazing two spacious paddocks of 5000m² in rotation, with shelter provided by trees and a rooftop.

The paddocks are not square, even fields with lush grass, but instead provide a variety of footing, from hard rocks and gravel to mud on an uneven terrain where the horses move up and down rather steep hills, similar to the footing out on the trail. By providing shelter, food and water at different distant locations throughout the paddock, we make sure the horses move about. On top of this, at the watering hole, where the horses



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come at least three times a day, we have made a footing in accordance with Xenophon's valuable advice in The Art of Horsemanship. "This place would be best suited in the purpose of strengthening the horse's feet if you threw down loosely four or five cartloads of round stones, each big enough to fill your hand. Stones thrown about in this way strengthen the frogs too."

Even if you don't have a holistic approach, horses will show you that feeding, keeping, training and the condition of the hoofs are all closely related. A change in one of these will show immediately in the horse's behaviour, or in the condition of his hoofs and coat. We feed a diet that is as natural as possible. Our horses thrive on extra feeds of failed crops of paddy (rice grass). The local Indonesian ponies do very well on grass and hay only, but we found that our bigger horses need a bit more. After having done a lot of research and some trials, we now make our own organic mixture of rice bran, wheat bran and a bit of corn, together with loads of chaff to which a Pat Coleby's mineral mix, consisting of natural available minerals, is added daily.

Also we provide free choice electrolytes in the form of natural salts and sugars once a week. We don't feed artificially produced vitamin supplements as it is our experience that these contain too much unwanted stuff and can cause serious problems in hoofs and general health.

NATURAL HOOF CARE

All our horses go barefoot, including our Thoroughbreds, notorious for their weak hooves. We have horses who arrive with a variety of issues from a shod and confined past. It is our strong conviction that all horses are better off without shoes and our horses prove it. Of course, sometimes we encounter problems. We have had extreme cases of horses who had been shod and confined for a long time, who took almost two years to make the transition, but with patience, the help of hoof boots and with regular, natural trimming, all horses become comfortable in the end.

Unfortunately we still meet people who say they have tried going barefoot, but it didn't work because after three months the hoofs were completely gone and full of abscesses, so they put the shoes back on. If only they

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The happy, healthy herd



The healthy, natural hoofs of a five month old foal

had given it another three months! The healing process needs time but it is worth it.

In case of an abscess, a sign of the body cleaning up, we never use bute, painkillers or other chemicals because these will cause more problems in the hoofs and not treat the cause. With regular soaking in Epsom Salts, we clean the hoof thoroughly and usually within three days the abscess will break through and the hoof can start healing. In all cases of

injuries or sickness, we never put the horse on box rest but leave him in the paddock. He will know exactly what to do to heal himself.

HERD LIFE FOR HEALTH

Essential for healthy, strong hoofs is a natural diet and movement, plenty of movement. This is especially provided by herd life. As horses are grazers and animals of movement, they need plenty of space to move about and graze to keep on munching continuously. It is essential for horses to live in a herd, so they can show their natural behaviour, choose their own lead horses and be part of dynamic herd life.

We started breeding our horses ourselves when we found that horses who have been kept in a box on soft bedding, even if only for a couple of years or just the first couple of months of

their life, will never have the hard, healthy, rock crunching hoofs that our horses born at Havana Horses possess. We think that's down to the fact that they have been living outside on a hard and rocky footing right from the start.

Our foals are born in the paddock among the other horses, and will be raised in the group. Not only is herd life essential for good health of the hoofs, body and limbs, it also provides the young, or inexperienced, previously confined, horse with a horsey education, essential to develop good manners and a healthy mind. Difficult or over-confident horses who come to us become friendly and easy-going very quickly, just by letting them live the life they are designed for. We learn, when we take the time to observe a herd of horses, that all, literally all, behaviour of horses is related to the pecking order. They

move up the ladder of the ranks by showing politeness and modesty, not by showing dominance or aggression, and we in turn learn how to adjust our own behaviour with horses accordingly.

A COMPLAINT

The one big complaint of our customers is that they seriously wonder where to go horse riding after their experience here. "How can I go back to my former traditional stable after this? I don't want to ride a stressed horse with a bit any longer!"

It is plain that the key to happy, calm, healthy and well-behaved horses on strong feet, is a natural life in the herd.

Anna van Rheeden is a practitioner of natural hoof care and runs Havana Horses, a natural horse riding school, in Central Java.
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