

C H O O S I N G   A   H O O F  
C A R E   P R O F E S S I O N A L



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B r u c e   N o c k , M S , P h . D .

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# CHOOSING A HOOF CARE PROFESSIONAL

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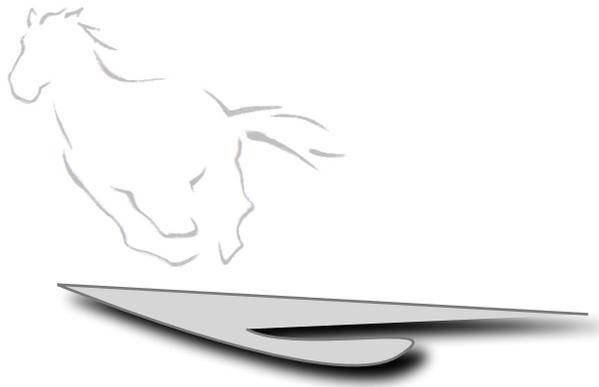
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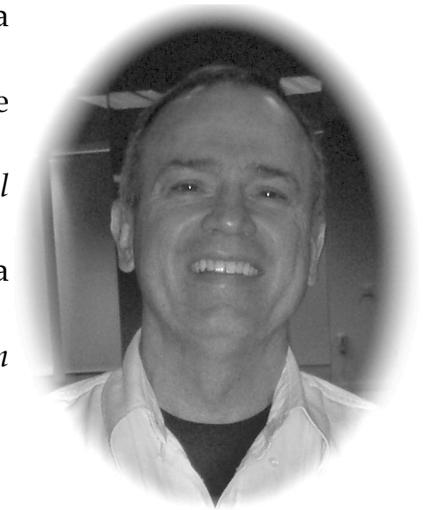
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A B O U T  
T H E  
A U T H O R

**B**ruce has been a scientist for 39 years. He is a tenured faculty member of multiple departments at *Washington University School of Medicine* in St. Louis, Missouri. He is a subject of biographical record in both *Marquis' Who's Who in America* and *Who's Who in Medicine and Healthcare*.



Bruce has published numerous articles of original research in leading scientific journals on diverse topics including learning theory, wild horse behavior and stress physiology. Currently, his research is funded by the *United States National Institute of Health* and focuses on transgenerational and epigenetic effects of morphine.

Bruce has a deep practical and academic knowledge of animal behavior and related

topics. He has a Master of Science degree from a psychobiology program at *Bucknell University* that focused almost entirely on animal behavior and related subjects. He earned a PhD from the world renown *Institute of Animal Behavior, Rutgers University*, and continued with four years of post-doctoral studies that focused on behavioral neuroendocrinology. The best part is, he can communicate what he knows in straightforward, understandable terms, so, people can put it to practical use.

Bruce is an avid horseman—a dressage and trail rider and dressage instructor. He is the author of the acclaimed book *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Levels and Riding Styles*, the newly released book *Ride For Tomorrow: Dressage Today* and the highly regarded series of articles entitled *The Biology of Natural Horsemanship*. He has been helping people train and ride horses for many years through clinics and private lessons.

In addition to *Liberated Horsemanship*, Bruce serves on the faculty of *The Kerulos Center*—a non-profit organization which finds science-based solutions to pressing questions and concerns that affect the lives of animals. He is also a member of the Advisory Board of the *American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign (AWHPC)*, a broad-based coalition representing over 10 million supporters, and has written a series of science-based articles for the AWHPC on how *Bureau of Land Management* practices negatively affect the long-term health and welfare of America's wild horses. He has also written a number of declarations to support legal actions against the United States Government's management of our wild horses.



C H O O S I N G   A  
H O O F   C A R E  
P R O F E S S I O N A L

**I**t can sometimes be difficult to find a good natural hoof care professional. There are not nearly enough to satisfy the current demand. If you enjoy working with horses and would like to make a living doing it, natural hoof care might be something to consider. Educational and startup costs are low compared to many other businesses and earning potential is high. Most natural hoof care professionals charge \$40 – \$60 per horse. They typically trim 4 to 8 horses per day. That translates to an average of \$300 per day, \$6,000 per month, and \$72,000 per year, and overhead costs are very low. Nevertheless, there is a true shortage of well-trained hoof care professionals in many parts of the United States, Canada and abroad.

Notice I said “well-trained” hoof care professionals. There are plenty of people out there these days who say they can do a natural trim, but they are not skilled or knowledgeable.

You see, you don't have to have a license to trim hooves. You don't have to be certified. You don't even have to be trained or particularly skillful. Just buy yourself a few tools, convince someone to pay you, and have at it. It's as simple as that.

Here's the problem. In *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training*<sup>1</sup>, I tell a story about playing Ping-Pong when I was a freshman in College. I had just finished a game when another freshman who I didn't know challenged me to a match. As we were about to begin, he asked me whether I would like to put a wager on the game. I said "No, not really; let's just play for fun." But, he wouldn't take "no" for an answer, so, I finally agreed to play for some small amount of money—50 cents I believe it was. Then, just before he served the ball he looked at me and said, "I should warn you I have read three books on Ping-Pong." "Hmmm," I replied not knowing what else to say.

Then, the game was over as quickly as it began. The guy didn't score a point. Now, you might be thinking I must have been a pretty good Ping-Pong player. That wasn't it. I won easily because this fellow had never played the game before—literally. He actually believed he would play well just because he had read three books on the subject. Well, he discovered it isn't that simple. You can't learn to play Ping-Pong just by reading books. You can't learn to do it well by watching others play either or by hearing people talk about it.

The same is true for trimming hooves. But many so-called professional trimmers who are out there trimming literally thousands of horses have little more training than that and

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Nock, MS, PhD. *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training: Universal Laws for All Training Levels and Riding Styles* published by Half Halt Press. Available at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

some have even less. Trimming hooves, like a lot of things, looks easy but it's not ... at least if you want to do it properly.

Before I moved to Missouri I lived in New York City for ten years. I was an avid racquet ball player back in those days. I played four to six days a week and for a few hours each time. I thought I was a pretty good player. Then, I went to a tournament for professionals. Compared to those I saw play at the tournament I was a novice with limited skills and knowledge about how to really play the game. Heck, the truth is, I wasn't even playing the same game.

Many so-called professional trimmers fall into a similar category. From their limited education and experience they honestly believe they're pretty good trimmers. They really don't know just how much they don't know. I've seen it first hand in training and certification programs I've been personally involved with. People who have been trimming for some time come into a program thinking and saying they have advanced skills and knowledge. Then they see real professionals trim and have authentic authorities evaluate their work. Suddenly, like me at the racquet ball tournament, they have a whole new perspective.

On top of all of this, there's an astonishing amount of misinformation about natural hoof care. It's being spread by so-called experts, internationally renowned clinicians, veterinarians, even scientists <sup>2</sup>, as well as local hoof care practitioners. It has fragmented the natural hoof care movement to a point where the term "natural" many times has no real

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Nock, MS, PhD. *The Wild Horse Model: Worth Fighting For* published by Liberated Horsemanship Press. Download a free copy from [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

relevancy to what is being done, taught or said. But even worse it has given rise to a myriad of barefoot trimming methods. Some have the potential to seriously harm horses.

Horse owners are caught in the middle of all of this with no basis to separate fact from fiction, sage from charlatan, or competence from incompetence. It's why I've become active in the natural hoof care movement. It's why I give, organize and sponsor natural hoof care clinics and seminars here in the United States and internationally with the help of Liberated Horsemanship's stellar hoof care faculty.<sup>3</sup> It's why I've written this and other articles about hoof care. It's to help horse owners make more informed decisions when choosing a hoof care provider for their horses. The natural hoof care movement is destined to fail otherwise. The movement won't grow and may not even survive all of the incompetency and misinformation that has become so prevalent. To me, it's a tragedy in the making. I believe in natural hoof care. The logic of it is dead on.<sup>4</sup> *When done properly* it has the potential to do a great deal of good for a great many horses.

In the pages which follow, I discuss attributes a natural hoof care professional should or should not have. It's not an exhaustive list. Mostly, I've included qualities which I have come to believe are pivotal to good natural hoof care. Hopefully they will provide you with some food for thought, and help you choose a natural hoof care professional for your horses or evaluate the one you have.

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<sup>3</sup> Go to [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com) for a complete list of the LH faculty.

<sup>4</sup> See Bruce Nock, MS, PhD. *Hoof Adaptation: As I See It* published by Liberated Horsemanship Press. Download a free copy from [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

## CERTIFICATION

Certification is the best place to begin evaluating natural hoof care professionals. I don't think it is possible to be a good natural hoof care professional without completing a bona fide natural hoof care training and certification program. Or maybe I should say the odds are very much against it. Remember the lesson of my Ping-Pong story? You can't learn to trim just by reading books or watching a video. You can't learn to do it by completing some on-line course either. You can't learn to do it well just by watching others do it or by hearing people talk about it. Attending a clinic for a couple of days isn't good enough either, regardless of who the clinician is. I know of people who tell clients they have studied natural hoof care with so-and-so after such two or three day clinics as a validation of their knowledge and skill. Others join organizations but never finish the training program. They tell clients they are members of the organization, again, to validate their expertise. Don't buy into such rhetoric. If a person has gone through a legitimate training program, they will have the appropriate credentials, i.e., certification, to prove it.

There's a problem here though. When choosing a natural hoof care professional, certification should be an absolute requirement. It is up to you and me as horse owners to make sure the people dealing with our horses are qualified and to support their willingness to invest the time, money and effort to learn to do it properly. Nevertheless, certification is not a guarantee of competency and not all training and certification programs are equal.

Too often people jump into teaching or are anointed by organizations as natural hoof care instructors before they are adequately trained and experienced. Some of it is just human

nature. It seems when we learn a little bit about something we are often over eager to begin instructing others. Some training and certification programs have even been started and are now administered by individuals with limited experience and understanding of the theory of natural hoof care, how to skillfully apply it, and the factors which influence its long-term outcome. Moreover, many of the instructors have limited teaching skills and experience. Being a good trimmer does not necessarily make you a good teacher. Two different skill sets are involved.

There are also organizations which “certify” trimmers even though they don’t have training programs themselves. Typically, certification is granted based on submitted information rather than through direct, firsthand evaluation. In addition, the criteria for certification may be only vaguely defined. It is difficult to say whether they are objective and valid. Certification in such cases may be the result of no more than someone’s subjective opinion. That doesn’t mean these certified trimmers aren’t good at what they do; it just means it’s hard to tell just by their credentials.

There are also certified farriers who are now claiming to do natural hoof care or a natural trim in addition to shoeing horses. Be very skeptical of such claims. Farriers are not typically trained in natural hoof care. It’s not part of their curriculum, and, as I’ve said, you can’t learn natural hoof care just by watching others do it or by reading books. Normally certified farriers know very little about true natural hoof care unless they have completed an authentic natural hoof care training and certification program in addition to farrier school. A number of such individuals have been certified by Liberated Horsemanship. John Graves is one example. You

can download a free copy of his fascinating story, *My Conversion: A Farrier's Journey To Natural Hoof Care*, from the Liberated Horsemanship website (LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

So, it is important to choose a natural hoof care professional who is certified **in natural hoof care**. If nothing else, it is an indication the individual has made the effort and spent the time and money to learn to do it right. But don't make certification your sole criteria. Make sure the certifying organization is reputable and stable. Make sure it teaches the holistic nature of natural hoof care. Make sure it teaches a trimming model which is reasonable, was established through objective observations, and has been repeatedly confirmed through practice. And finally, make sure the training program is administered by top-notch individuals ... people who have extensive field and teaching experience as well as an authentic expertise in natural hoof care and related matters.

### CAUTION – CERTIFIED OR NOT

I try to focus on positives when writing and otherwise. I don't typically think in negative terms. Nevertheless, this isn't a time to pull punches. To truly help you, I should mention a few warning signs ... things that should raise a red flag when choosing or evaluating a natural hoof care professional.

If a trimmer tells you she <sup>5</sup> trims depending on the situation, circumstances, terrain, weather conditions, breed, type of activity the horse is used for, and such, my advice is to walk

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<sup>5</sup> There doesn't seem to be a gender difference in natural hoof care aptitude. About 65% of those who have attended our *Gateway to Hoof Care Clinic* have been female and 35% have been male. But, to keep it simple, I use feminine pronouns in this article for natural hoof care professionals. I get tired of writing he/she, him/her and that sort of thing and I'm sure you get tired of reading it too.

away.<sup>6</sup> The same goes for a trimmer who claims to let the hoof “tell them what it needs” or who says she trims according to some intuitive process. These are indications the trimmer does not understand the rationale of the authentic natural trim and how to apply it. Essentially such trimmers “trim on a whim,” unguided by any sound rationale or a theoretical model based on authentic evidence and logic. Why have your horse’s hooves shaped according to someone’s arbitrary decisions? Find someone who unwaveringly follows a trimming model which is reasonable, established through object observations, and repeatedly confirmed through practice.

And don’t be fooled by someone who says she trims this way or that because she has found it to be the best thing to do over her years of experience, or from her “research.”<sup>7</sup> Baloney! Such anecdotal observations are worthless to put it plainly. Even worse, they have made a mess of the natural hoof care movement and have greatly added to the growing body of conflicting information horse owners have to deal with. There is no reason for us to continue to give such people a platform to spread erroneous information. I certainly don’t want them fooling around with my horse’s hooves either.

Also avoid trimmers, certified or not, who believe they can “fix” hoof-related problems solely by modifying the trim ... changing it this way or that. It doesn’t work that way unless the trim was being done improperly to begin with. Otherwise, changing it won’t solve the problem, especially when dealing with pathologies like laminitis and founder. It won’t work

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<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this matter see Bruce Nock, MS, PhD. *Hoof Adaptation: As I See It* published by Liberated Horsemanship Press. Download a free copy at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

even in cases where hooves are just not as robust as expected for the circumstances. General health, lifestyle and environment are of critical importance to hoof integrity in such cases ... again, unless the hooves were actually being trimmed improperly to begin with.

## **P R O F E S S I O N A L   A N D   P L E A S A N T   T O   D E A L   W I T H**

Try to find a natural hoof care professional who conducts herself professionally and is pleasant to deal with. She should keep appointments and be punctual. She should reply to messages in a timely fashion. She should be enthusiastic about her profession. Natural hoof care should be more than a means to make money. Making money isn't a bad thing but a natural hoof care professional should also enjoy the work and be motivated to do the best job possible. She should be honest and personable — bright and cheerful with a positive attitude. If a trimmer is sullen, sulky, moody, grumpy, glum, uncommunicative, unfriendly, ill-tempered or such, pick someone else to help you care for your horses. Horse keeping should be fun.

Having a natural hoof care provider who is pleasant to deal with may be more important than you might think. You see, the two of you should be partners in hoof care. You both play critical roles in producing and maintaining strong healthy hooves. It is important to have a good working relationship.

The principle job of a hoof care professional is to trim the hooves properly—in a way which promotes healthy growth and correctly aligns external and internal foot structures. She should also be able and willing to answer all of your questions and share her knowledge about the

trim itself. In particular, she should be able to explain in understandable terms the theory behind what she does and the factors that affect the long-term outcome of the trim.

Your job, as a horse owner, is to provide the horse with a lifestyle and environment that supports hoof health. Hooves reflect the well-being of the horse. The efforts of even a highly skilled and knowledgeable hoof care professional will be undermined if something is repeatedly or chronically causing the horse physical or psychological discomfort. An unhealthy diet or too little exercise isn't good for hooves either. And that's not the end of it. Many use and management factors impact hoof health. These factors are all under your province. But a good natural hoof care professional should be able to advise you about such factors and help you figure out the culprit when things don't go as well as expected. This is especially important in cases of hoof pathology or when a horse's hooves aren't quite as robust as expected for the circumstances.

So you see, a hoof care professional is much more than just someone who shows up every four to six weeks to trim your horse's feet. In fact, in some cases that might be the least of what they do to help your horse have strong healthy feet. It is important they can think critically and rationally about health, use, and management factors which can impact hoof health, and they should be able to communicate what they know to you tactfully, intelligently and effectively.

## **KNOWLEDGEABLE AND TACTFUL**

A trimmer should be patient, even tempered, gentle and never harsh or abusive to a horse. Don't tolerate anything less. If you are like me, it is important for your horse to trust you—

know you will never intentionally treat him unfairly or harshly. I work hard to develop that trust. But even more, I also want my horse to see me as a companion who helps to make his life pleasant and interesting. I don't want some trimmer to come along and undermine all I've done to build that relationship. Give me a trimmer who handles horses tactfully. Ann Corso, the *Director of Liberated Horsemanship's Barefoot Initiative*, says she gets as many new clients because of her reputation for handling horses gently and tactfully as she does for her trimming skills ... which are considerable.<sup>8</sup>

A trimmer also should have an authentic concern for a horse's comfort while trimming. She should know how to redistribute a horse's balance so it is easy for him to lift a foot and stay balanced. She should also work with the horse's leg in a position that is as comfortable as possible for the horse. It drives me crazy when I see a farrier or trimmer pull a horse's back leg way off the ground and out to the side to trim. It's a very unnatural position for a horse and it strains soft tissues and joints.

A trimmer should also be able to recognize signs of stress and fatigue and know when to give the horse a short break. Too often I see these signs ignored. Then the horse starts to fidget and misbehave and the trimmer gets impatient and inappropriately scolds him or gives him a swat. That's not how it should be done.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ann is featured on the cover picture of this article. Download her article *Form Follows Function: Characteristics of the Natural Hoof* free at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

<sup>9</sup> A trimmer should put the horse's foot down before he starts to fidget. Here's why: When a trimmer puts a horse's foot down before he starts to fidget, the horse will get better and better at patiently standing still. If the trimmer waits until the horse begins to fidget or if the horse actually pulls his foot away from the trimmer, it will encourage the horse to do the same the next time his foot is picked up. It's a basic learning principle. When a horse gets rewarded, in this case, gets to put his foot back on the ground, it reinforces what immediately preceded it.

A trimmer should also understand a little about the psychology of horses, at least with regard to how it pertains to trimming. For example, when a horse is reluctant to pick up one particular foot or another it does not necessarily mean he is not well trained or that he is being obstinate. Many times horses refuse to pick up a foot because it causes them pain in the leg or foot on the other side or in their back. Understanding this can give a trimmer a whole different perspective on how to deal with the problem. It can even alert you to the possibility your horse might have some physical problem.

Trimmers should also have an authentic understanding of tactful training principles. These are described in detail in *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training*.<sup>10</sup> The job of a trimmer is to trim hooves and advise you about factors which affect the long-term outcome of the trim, not to train your horse. Nevertheless, hoof care professionals often find themselves in situations where they have to do a little training too (see footnote 7 for example). They should be equipped with the knowledge and skill to do it tactfully.

## I N A N U T S H E L L

Your natural hoof care professional should be someone you enjoy talking with and who can advise you about hoof care-related matters. They should treat you respectfully and handle horses tactfully with a genuine concern for their comfort and welfare. He or she should understand general health, use and management factors are of paramount importance to hoof integrity. Under all circumstances, no exceptions, they should follow a trimming model which

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Nock, MS, PhD. *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training: Universal Laws for All Training Levels and Riding Styles* published by Half Halt Press. Available at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

is reasonable, established through objective observations, and repeatedly confirmed through practice. In my estimation, the only natural hoof care model which fits those qualifications is the wild horse model as originally formulated based on observations of the free roaming horses of the United States Great Basin.<sup>11,12</sup> My advice is to find someone who has been certified by an organization who teaches that model in its purity. I am aware of only ~~four~~ **Three** such organizations worldwide:

## Liberated Horsemanship

Institute for the Study of Natural Horse Care Practices

~~Association for the Advancement of Natural Horse Care Practices<sup>13</sup>~~

Barefoot Italia



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<sup>11</sup> Jaime Jackson. *The Natural Horse: Foundations for Natural Horsemanship*. 1992.

<sup>12</sup> To learn more about the wild horse model, see Bruce Nock, MS, PhD. *Hoof Adaptation: As I See It* and Ann Corso, CP, *Form Follows Function: Characteristics of the Natural Hoof*. Both articles were published by Liberated Horsemanship Press and can be downloaded free at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

<sup>13</sup> Only trimmers who completed certification in 2007<sup>+</sup> and those who were certified prior to that date and then successfully completed a Natural Trim Workshop. The AANHCP **no longer has a training program** but is the certifying organization for the ISNHCP.

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**L I B E R A T E D**  
**H O R S E M A N S H I P**<sup>TM</sup>

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The advertisement features a black background with a red banner at the bottom. On the left, there are several metal horseshoes and nails. On the right, there are two black Cavallo hoof boots. The text 'Think Different' is prominently displayed in the center.

## CAVALLO, INC ... IT'S NOT JUST A BUSINESS

*Cavallo Horse and Rider, Inc* and *Liberated Horsemanship* have been friends for some time ... linked by a common mission to advance the modern barefoot movement. But there's more to it. In 2010, I gave a talk titled "Horses In Captivity" at Equine Affaire. Cavallo President Carole Herder was there and, afterwards, she interviewed me to learn more about how stress impacts the health and welfare of horses. It was then that I began to see how deeply Carole and her husband, Greg Giles, Cavallo CEO, truly care about what is done to and with horses.

Then, on their own and asking nothing in return, Cavallo included LH in an ACTHA ad—a generous act to promote our educational programs to the general public. It is the sort of unselfish deed for the greater good that too often is missing from today's business world.

Clearly, Cavallo is not just a business for Carole or Greg. It's a way of life, a commitment to advancing use and management practices intended to benefit both horse and rider. It's an honor to have Carole, Greg and their associates as friends and allies to help people and horses worldwide. ≈ *Bruce*



Greg Giles & Carole Herder

### Cavallo — Setting A High Standard

- Cavallo sponsored studies of Australian Brumbies.
- Cavallo generously donated to alleviate disaster-related hay shortages, caused by wild fires and flooding, for example.
- Cavallo developed "Pink Boots" to support BC Children's Hospital Cancer research.
- Cavallo helps *Horses, Hope & Healing*, a volunteer program that provides a safe, positive environment for young people to build self esteem, learn, lead, and develop important life skills.
- Cavallo donates to numerous horse rescues, mounted units and organizations that advance the barefoot movement worldwide.