

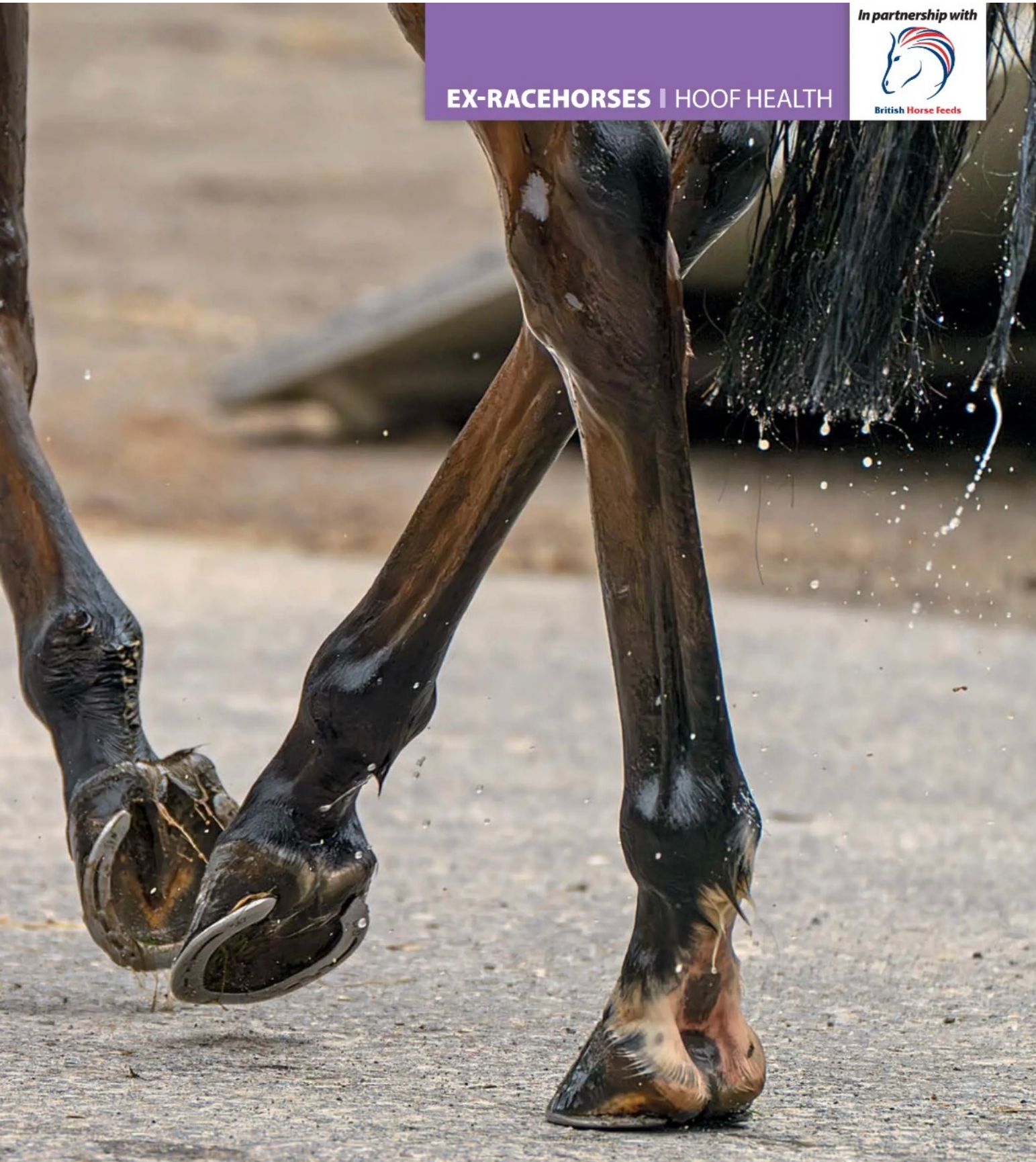
Fragile **FOUNDATIONS**

The owners of former racehorses seem to do more than their fair share of hunting for lost shoes in the field and poulticing abscesses. But are Thoroughbred feet really that different to other horses' hooves — and what's the best way to keep them in tip-top condition? **Catherine Welton** finds out

PHOTO: EURYBIA/SHUTTERSTOCK



EX-RACEHORSES | HOOF HEALTH



BUILT FOR SPEED and precision, the Thoroughbred hoof isn't always designed for life beyond the track. When racing plates come off and new demands begin, many face a period of adjustment — from thinner soles to weaker horn and a tendency to lose shoes.

Understanding how their feet differ, and what they need to stay comfortable and sound, is the first step in helping them thrive in their second careers.

John Chilman has worked as a farrier in racing and has also shod hundreds of racehorses that have changed to different disciplines. He says a Thoroughbred hoof does differ from other breeds.

"It's a finer construction. The fundamental design is the same, but it's lighter and designed for speed. It's like comparing a Ferrari to a Land Rover."

Harvey Lymer, a farrier who works with racehorses that are being retrained and rehabbed, explains further: "They typically have thinner walls and soles, and tend to get longer toes and lower heels."

PHOTO: PIAFFE PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK



Lost shoes, the bane of some ex-racehorse owners

Unique challenges

A thinner sole can leave Thoroughbreds more susceptible to certain issues, as John points out.

"The weather and ground conditions have a great effect on the hoof, especially a wet winter. The sole sheds itself more frequently in a wet field. A Thoroughbred will suffer more than a cob whose sole might be twice as thick. The Thoroughbred is more susceptible to sole bruising, puncture wounds and abscesses, because the sole is thin."

Keeping shoes on can be another challenge. Tom Hardy is one of the farriers at Johnston Racing and also has many former racehorses on his rounds. He says hoof quality in Thoroughbreds varies widely.

"It's more of an issue with some horses — it might be in their genetics, and they just have extremely weak feet. I have one called Max. I manage to keep shoes on him for four weeks, but it always looks like he's gone six. Within two-and-a-half weeks, the clenches are coming up."

Conformation counts

When buying a former racehorse, Tom says conformation is more important than the horse's current hoof condition, which can usually be improved with time.

"Conformation is the biggest thing," he states. "If the hooves are slightly turned in or out don't worry, but if they're really turned in or out, that can be an issue. One of most important things for a foot is to land level. If a horse is struggling with

Regular farriery is important for all horses, but some Thoroughbreds need more frequent care than the norm



It takes around 12-14 months for a hoof to regrow

PHOTO: YURICH20/SHUTTERSTOCK

that and perhaps has been since they were a baby, they can have joint issues and ligament issues, and it can be hard to keep them sound."

Harvey agrees: "You want the conformation to be as straight as possible. If they're already pigeon-toed, they will be weight loading in such a way it can predispose the horse to conditions such as arthritis."

Building a better hoof

As with any breed or type of horse, regular, correct farriery is always the first step when it comes to managing hooves. The difference is that many Thoroughbreds require more frequent attention.

"Definitely make sure they're on a regular trimming or shoeing cycle, whether they are barefoot or in shoes," confirms Harvey. "Devise a plan with your farrier, which is personal to the horse's needs."

John adds that time off after racing — a 'let down' period — can be of benefit for hoof health.

"Often when a human changes occupation, a rest or holiday is a good idea before taking on another challenge — and horses are no different," he says. "Two or three months off [without shoes]

TRANSITIONING TO HOT SHOEING

Many ex-racehorses will not have been hot shod while in training — and this new experience takes some getting used to.

"The first things I do is shoe them like a racehorse," explains Tom. "Then I hot shoe them starting with the back hooves and see how they take that. Next, I put a more traditional shoe on that's harder wearing and heavier, with a quarter clip instead of a toe clip."

Classic, an ex-racer belonging to *Your Horse* editor Aimi, disliked the smoke and smell caused by hot shoeing.

"This became apparent from day one. Classic was standing patiently being shod, until smoke blew his way and he reversed at speed in panic."

"From then on, he was always shod downwind, so that smoke blew away from him."



Ex-racers need time to get used to hot shoeing, the smoke and smell

PHOTO: ANKE VAN WYK/SHUTTERSTOCK

EX-RACEHORSES | HOOF HEALTH

CASE STUDY

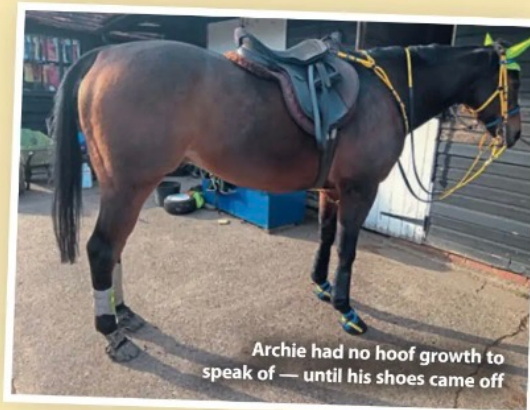
A barefoot breakthrough

When Kathleen Botting bought Archie, he'd been out of training for two years and she struggled to keep shoes on him.

"He has thin soles and white lines. Despite feeding every hoof supplement there was, he didn't grow any strong hoof," says Kathleen. "X-rays showed big negative angles in all four feet, with soles only 3mm thick. So, he was shod in heel supports, pads and packing, at a cost of about £350 per set."

After 18 months, a new farrier suggested going barefoot.

"Over the winter, when I wasn't hacking very much, he suggested a rest from shoes. With much trepidation, I agreed and ordered hoof boots."



Archie had no hoof growth to speak of — until his shoes came off

It worked — and Archie has not worn shoes since.

"His feet now grow well and he has hard horn. He's remained sound and even managed to be reserve champion at the Trec National Championships in hoof boots last year."

CASE STUDY

Alfie's long road to stronger feet

Lauren Taylor-Smith bought Alfie as an 11-year-old in 2020. He'd been out of racing for some time and his feet were in poor condition.

"We decided to take his back shoes off to give him a break as he was difficult to shoe at first. This became better with more frequent farrier visits. If it was wet and muddy, I would use hoof oil to stop his hooves from becoming too wet; if it was dry, I would

switch to hoof butter," says Lauren.

"This was a daily application first thing in the morning. I still apply hoof moisturiser or hoof oil every other day. I also added biotin to his diet."

Cracked hooves meant Lauren kept Alfie's workload light, mainly hacking at a slower pace. With a strict routine of diet, farrier care and management, his hooves gradually improved — but it took over a year to grow strong, solid feet.



Alfie suffered with cracked hooves, so Lauren kept his workload light until they grew out



Improvement was gradual and took more than a year

allows the hoof capsule to grow and, with regular trimming, the nail holes will disappear and the heels restored if they are weak. After a rest, the horse will be ready with a nice hoof capsule to start work again."

Owners need to be realistic, however. "It takes 12-14 months to grow a completely new hoof capsule and the rate of growth is slower in the winter."

Help for sensitive soles

A former racehorse with particularly problematic feet may require more than a good diet and regular attention from the farrier.

■ Hoof pads

"You can use pads for a thin sole, which gives protection," says Tom. "Also, bar shoes — either straight or heart — puts the pressure across the back of the heels and the frog, distributing it more evenly, which allows everything to function better."

■ Feed supplements

When it comes to feed supplements, Harvey suggests keeping things simple.

"The more basic the better, stick with the stuff that's well researched and give the right amount. I recommend seaweed, which is good at helping with horn quality, and biotin, which is good for the rate of growth."

■ Hoof ointments

There are also topical treatments, such as hoof hardeners to help thicken the sole.

"The sole grows from underneath, so if you harden the surface, it seals it and becomes thicker," advises John. "This means it won't shed layers as quickly. The thickness of the sole will also help the horse and it will be less likely to have problems. Additionally, good-quality hoof grease will provide nutrients to the outer part of the hoof wall and make it more weatherproof."

A fresh start

Harvey says one of the best ways to ensure optimal hoof health for a former racehorse is to know as much as possible about their previous life.

"Get the most in-depth history of the horse prior to buying it, including a vet history. If you know that prior to buying, you have the best chance of providing an environment that the horse will flourish in."

Ultimately, their hooves may need more attention than some breeds, but with patience and a tailored approach, they can build strength, resilience and a solid foundation for whatever comes next.



Give the right amount of feed to support hoof growth and choose supplements that are well researched, such as biotin and seaweed

PHOTO: GROOMEE/SHUTTERSTOCK

"The fundamental hoof design is the same, but it's lighter and designed for speed. It's like comparing a Ferrari to a Land Rover" Farrier John Chilman

CASE STUDY

'It took two years to get him sound'

Elaine Soones has had Coffers for 10 years.

"He had typical 'TB' feet — low heels and thin soles. We had him shod every five weeks in the summer, and every seven in the winter, with 2mm pads and impaction putty. As the angle of the leg changed, he needed time to readjust. I use a hoof hardener in the winter and a hoof moisturiser in the summer, as well



Elaine's care and patience pays off

as a supplement. It took two years to get Coffers sound and happy again, but now he's competing at British Dressage elementary."



X-rays confirmed thin soles...



...And low heels



A farrier may advise putting on correctly fitted over-reach boots for turnout in the field

PHOTO: GROOMEE/SHUTTERSTOCK

A SIMPLE SAFEGUARD

For Thoroughbreds prone to losing shoes in the field, over-reach boots are a good precautionary measure when fitted correctly.

"They should fit neatly around the pastern, around the hoof and they should extend just over the heels of the shoe to the ground," says John. "There's no point if they only reach halfway down the bulb of the heel."

CASE STUDY

'There was no hoof growth'

It was the start of a wet, difficult winter when Vivienne Elizabeth took on ex-racehorse Ruby.

"Keeping shoes on her already weak feet was challenging and there was little to no growth," recalls Vivienne. "I put her on a supplement and started to use hoof products to help maintain hoof wall moisture and elasticity.

"Last year, Ruby started to wear pads in front and these, alongside all our other hoof-care measures, have made an exceptional difference to her hoof structure, sole depth, wall strength and overall hoof health. We are lucky to have an excellent farrier. Without him, I don't think we'd have seen half the improvement we have."



A combination of hoof-care measures works for Ruby

CASE STUDY

'He never lost a shoe'

Louise Watts says the feet of former point-to-pointer Ben — whom she took on straight out of training in 2018 — were "OK" for a Thoroughbred.

However, a few years later, after a mild hock arthritis diagnosis and soreness in his sacroiliac area, Ben's osteopath suggested hoof X-rays, which showed

negative angles. The vet advised pads with dental-impression material on the hinds and casts on the front. Louise found a farrier who was able to work closely with her vet.

"He did a fantastic job with Ben's feet; we never needed the casts again and his feet looked amazing. He never lost a shoe either. We continue to shoe every five weeks. I also give him dried seaweed and feed a low-starch, low-sugar diet." 



Vet and farrier collaboration fixes Ben's negative angles

**SUPPORT FOR AN EX-RACER'S STOMACH**

Reports indicate that up to 93% of racehorses have gastric ulcers during their racing careers. This susceptibility is rooted in a combination of factors inherent to training and management.

- > Intense exercise increases stomach acid production and pressure, stressing the stomach lining. The stress of racing and travelling further disrupts their digestive system.
- > Energy-dense, high-starch diets are common in performance feeds and prolongs high stomach acidity, which can exacerbate gut issues.

The physical presence of fibre is crucial for digestive health. Chewing fibre stimulates saliva production, which acts as a powerful buffer for stomach acid when swallowed. Fibre also contains soluble pectins, an ingredient abundant in beet pulp, which reduces stomach acidity.

■ British Horse Feed's Fibre-Beet is a conditioning feed with a carefully formulated combination of Speedi-Beet and alfalfa, supplemented with biotin, sodium and calcium. With all the benefits of Speedi-Beet's high level of easily digested, soluble fibre for slow energy release, along with low starch and sugar, Fibre-Beet provides a balanced combination of essential amino acids and minerals for optimal health and muscle support.

Fed wet, it slows eating, increasing the time feed spends buffering acid in the stomach compared to high-starch feeds, reducing stress and promoting healthy gut function. In short, Fibre-Beet, with its blend of alfalfa, pectins and emulsifiers, is an excellent dietary choice for ex-racehorses in retraining and in their new career.

The UnBeetable Conditioning Mash

Superior fibre blend of alfalfa and beet



5% sugar, 3% starch



Condition without the fizz



Suitable for horses & ponies prone to gastric ulcers*

*When fed as part of a balanced diet

