

A photograph of a rider on a brown horse galloping in a field. The rider is wearing a green and yellow jacket, black pants, and a white cap with a red stripe. The horse is in full flight, with its front legs tucked and its tail flowing. The background is a dry, open field under a clear sky.

Laura and Timarie Rumba in full flight

R. Star  
1999

# Going barefoot

by Laura Seegers

**Why do you want to ride your horses barefoot in endurance rides, is the question often asked by riders interested in our reasons for doing something so eccentric. Nailing shoes on the horse is a much easier and more acceptable option.**

In an age when competitive riders are looking for the feed supplement or saddle that will help them ride faster, it is difficult to understand an approach that would apparently slow the horse down.

My husband Bob and I are competitive riders. We have both ridden for South Africa and have a respectable number of wins and Best Conditioned awards behind us. We enjoy doing well in competition and riding fast when we can. But our goals extend far beyond that. Bringing on a young endurance horse through several years of gradual building and to then start winning rides is very satisfying.

An endurance horse should only start reaching its full potential around the age of twelve. After spending so many years building up your horse, you want to keep it there for

another ten good years. There are endurance horses over the age of 20 still competing.

We rode Timarie Rumba for ten seasons of endurance. He suffered a severe suspensory ligament injury in his third season, but made a complete recovery after a year off. He went on to a brilliant endurance career, most often being first or second in his category. He completed Fauresmith twice, in 8:30 and 8:32. I know what it is like to ride fast, and I enjoy it. So why am I riding barefoot now?

In 2001 Rumba developed intermittent lameness that was not cured by rest. It was diagnosed as sidebone, a calcification of the lateral cartilages inside the hoof. It is a progressive condition and supposed to be incurable. My horse was 17 years old, still in his prime. We retired him from endurance. My husband had always shod him very carefully and he was barefoot for six months of every year, but even so, problems had developed.

### Looking for answers

Pauline du Plessis gave me a book called *A Lifetime of Soundness* by German veterinarian, Dr Hiltrud Strasser. It was what we had been looking for. So much of her philosophy of keeping horses in a natural environment, was exactly the same as ours. But we had never properly understood the functions of the hoof. We raised our horses barefoot and kept them unshod for as long as possible, but always needed to shoe them before their first 80 km ride because they became footsore in training on the hard gravel roads.

Using what we learned from Dr Strasser's first and then second book, *Shoeing, A Necessary Evil?* as well as the websites of various barefoot trimmers, we started experimenting with our own horses. We made some progress, but were not getting the trim exactly right. Bob went on a seminar in KwaZulu-Natal when Dr Strasser visited South Africa for the first time. He applied his new knowledge to our horses and their hooves rapidly improved. We soon had a little group of friends and clients riding their horses barefoot.

### Trial test

By this time we felt confident and were given permission by the Endurance Ride Association of South Africa (Erasa) to run a barefoot endurance trial. We put it to the test for three years. We gained experience and with the help and support of other



Bob and Laura Seegers

barefoot enthusiasts from Limpopo to Cape Town, we were able to have the rules changed to allow barefoot endurance riding from April 2006. Council ruled that endurance riders would be permitted to ride their horses barefoot, provided they joined the Erasa Barefoot Group and had their horse included in the list of approved horses. As always, the vets have the final say over the fitness of horses to compete.

We proved that you can ride 80 km barefoot even on our hard Karoo roads. We showed you can ride 120 km barefoot. You don't have to be last either – barefoot times have started to improve. Penny Winter won an 80 km ride in Natal barefoot this year. Most of the Barefoot Group, however, are on novice horses and are taking it as slowly as one ought to with a young horse. There are 78 horses already approved to ride barefoot.

Our goal is to keep our horses in good health indefinitely. Imagine if you could continue riding your favourite endurance horse to the age of 20, 25 or even 30? Hoof problems such as sidebone, ringbone and navicular syndrome, are only some reasons that horses have to be retired from competitive careers, but chronic hoof problems are a very frequent reason for retirement or euthanasia in older horses. If we can prevent those conditions we have a better chance of riding our horses into a healthy old age.

*(Laura Seegers is the chairperson of the Erasa Barefoot Group and of the Ride Masters Association. Bob and Laura ride and breed endurance horses at their Perseverance Stud near Graaff-Reinet. You can contact them at [www.endurancehorse.co.za](http://www.endurancehorse.co.za) or e-mail [webmaster@endurancehorse.co.za](mailto:webmaster@endurancehorse.co.za). For queries about boots, call Bob on 084 588 0662.) SAH*