

Cast Shoes for Thin Walls Reinforcing the Hoof Wall

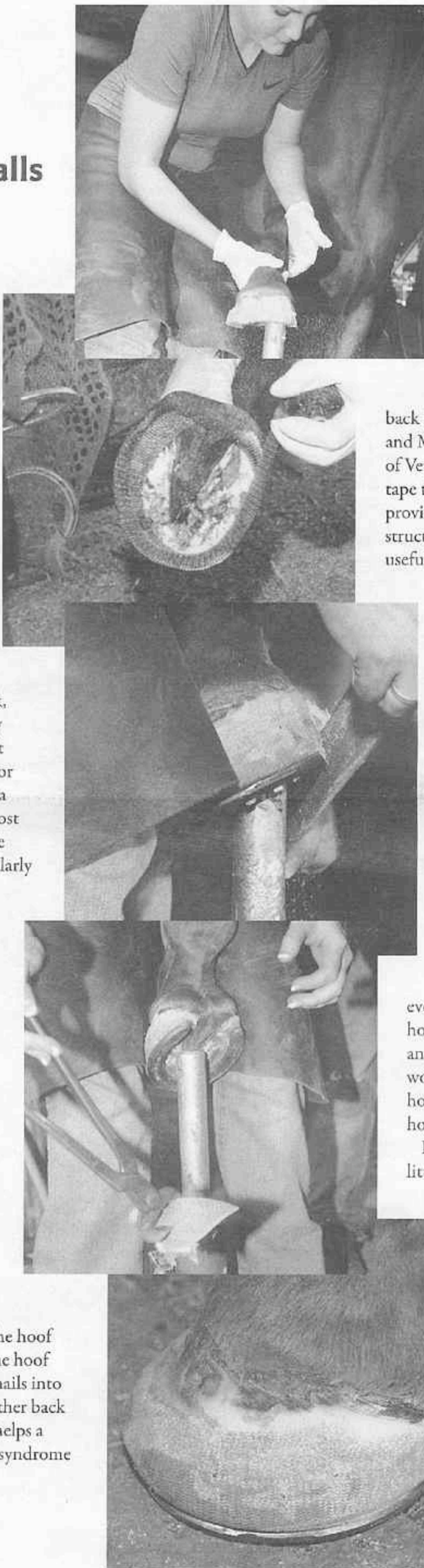
By PAM GLEASON. PHOTOS BY GARY KNOLL

Horseshoes have often been called a necessary evil. They are necessary because when you add extra weight to a horse by riding him and then encourage him to travel over hard surfaces, his hoof walls tend to wear down and his soles can get bruised. They are evil because shoes themselves usually must be nailed to the hoof, which compromises hoof wall integrity. Wearing shoes alters natural hoof balance, adds weight to the leg, and is implicated in a number of different hoof and leg problems

It is certainly true that many horses can do well without shoes, even some that are in regular work. This is especially true in Aiken, which is so famous for its forgiving, sandy soil. In fact, Thomas Hitchcock, one of the founders of Aiken's equestrian colony back at the beginning of the 20th century, didn't put shoes on any of his horses, even his hunters or his steeplechasers. These days, although there is a growing trend toward riding horses barefoot, most people still do believe that their riding horses are sounder when they are well shod. This is particularly true for Thoroughbreds, who have been selectively bred for speed at the racetrack, not for strong, durable hooves.

Sometimes, however, horses have hoof problems that make it difficult to nail a shoe to their foot. These problems could include thin hoof walls, quarter or sand cracks, brittle hooves that won't hold a nail, or hooves that are so worn down that there is nowhere to drive a nail. Farriers have been experimenting with variations of glue-on shoes for decades. Glue-on shoes have many uses, and some have gotten rave reviews for helping horses with a variety of hoof and leg problems.

Hoof casts are another alternative for the problem hoof. To make a hoof cast, the farrier applies some type of casting material to the outside of the hoof, reinforcing the hoof wall. Then the horse can go barefoot, or a shoe can be nailed to the cast, protecting the bottom of the hoof wall from wear, without driving any nails into the hoof itself. Because the farrier is not actually driving nails into the foot, he or she is also able to set the shoe further back on the hoof. This provides heel support, which helps a horse grow out of the "long toe, underrun heel" syndrome that is the bane of shod horses.




Hoof casts are not a particularly new idea, according to Pat Reilly, who is Chief of Farrier Services at the University of Pennsylvania New Bolton Center. He says that back in the 1960s, the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (makers of Vetwrap) made a durable resin hoof tape that could be cast over the hoof to provide support and stabilize compromised structures. Although this tape was quite useful in many circumstances, there was not enough profit in the product for 3M to continue manufacturing it.

Today, Equicast, based in North Carolina, is marketing a new and improved fiberglass/polypropylene resin hoof cast that stabilizes the hoof wall, provides support to the hoof and, theoretically, helps improve hoof biomechanics. The farrier can trim the cast into an ideal hoof shape to aid in the proper distribution of pressure on various parts of the hoof. All of this may stimulate blood flow and hoof wall growth.

"We've used it on hundreds of horses now," says Kate Cantrell, a farrier working in the Aiken area.

"We've used it on hunter/jumpers, event horses, polo ponies, even race horses. You can nail any kind of shoe to it, an aluminum shoe, a steel shoe, whatever works best. We've used it on thin-walled horses, flat-footed horses, navicular horses."

Kate says that the cast shoe costs just a little more than a regular shoe, and that it lasts eight to ten weeks, a bit longer than the normal period between shoeings. Although it may not be the whole answer to taking the "evil" out of horse shoeing, it has helped a number of horses with hoof wall and sole problems.

"We've had a lot of success with it," says Kate. 

For more information, call Kate Cantrell at 803.508.0771