

Running a Riding Centre The Natural Way

Barefoot and Bitless at Havana Horses, Indonesia

by Anna Van Rheeden

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 harmonic 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 usually just what they know. It produces a smile on my face when children ask, “Why do some people put an iron thing in the horse’s mouth? What on earth is that for?”

Of course, most of our customers choose to come to Havana Horses because of what we do and how we do it, so most of them have already heard about natural horsemanship. However, riding without a bit is, for many, a completely new experience. Some people ask before riding, “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 only exists in our own mind, not in the horse’s mind. And after the lesson or trail ride out, I ask them, did you feel any difference? 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 to the local nearby race track for a full gallop, of course bitless, and the horses are just as responsive, or maybe even more so, as with a bit. We do jumping and dressage, go trekking for hours, and again: the tack, with or without a bit, is not an issue for the horse – 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?

All photos courtesy Anna Van Rheeden



Creating healthy barefoot horses is not just about the feet! Beautiful hind hooves on one of Anna’s horses.

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 (“will he not take off with me?”), misunderstanding (“I’ll have to pull hard to stop him”), and fear (“he will bolt off with me and I’ll fall!”). To build a relationship that is based on trust, mutual understanding and confidence, all lessons and courses at Havana Horses (and this is essential) start with liberty work, ground work, and grooming, before we even think about riding. The horse and rider need to 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 – and each personality and type of horse, whether it be a lead horse, a submissive horse or a dominant horse, needs something else from us! We need to set the rules of communication based on our leadership, in order to feel comfortable with one another. In this way, fearful riders will become confident and happy leaders to the horse. And this is a necessary condition for a carefree and happy ride!

A bitless and barefoot full gallop on the racetrack!



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.



The happy, healthy herd enjoying their natural paddocks.

A quick brush and hurriedly tacking up, to mount and start riding immediately, 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 the 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 customers, experienced in hunting, 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.

At the basis of all this, though, lies the natural life style that makes our horses trusting and kind, and well-balanced in mind and body.

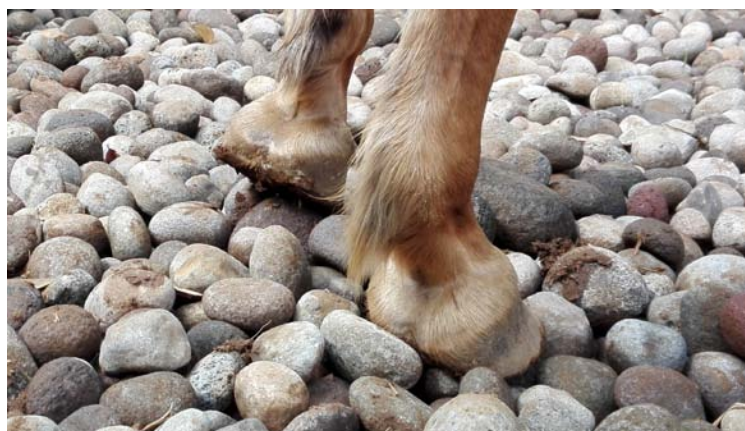
Imitating Nature is the Key to Success: Let the Horse be a Horse!

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 (we never built boxes) in two spacious paddocks of 5000 square meters each for rotational grazing, provided with shelter 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. After all, the surfaces that you want your horse to go on when

you take him out on the trail, is the same footing that the horse should be used to walking on in his paddock on a daily basis! 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 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 cart loads of round stones, each big enough to fill your hand. Stones thrown about in this way strengthen the frogs too.”



Xenophon’s big pebbles, at work on Havana Horses’ hooves.

If you didn’t have a holistic approach yet, the horses will show you that feeding, care, training and the hooves are all closely related, and that a change in one of these will show immediately in their behavior, or in the condition of hooves 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 mix our own organic mixture of rice bran, wheat bran, a bit of corn, together with loads of chaff, to which a



Trail riding at Havana Horses.

“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 have found that it is better not to feed artificially-produced vitamin supplements; in our experience, these contain too much unwanted stuff, and can cause serious problems in hooves and general health.

Natural Hoof Care

All our horses go barefoot, including our Thoroughbreds – notorious for their weak hooves – and the horses that come with a variety of issues from their shod and/or 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 that had been shod and confined for a long time who took almost 2 years to make the transition to going barefoot. With patience, the help of hoof boots (we use Easyboots and Cavallo Treks), and with regular natural trimming, all horses become comfortable in the end.

Unfortunately, we still meet people that have “tried going barefoot, but it didn’t work for my horse, as after 3 months the hooves were completely gone and full of abscesses, so we put the shoes back on.” If they only could have given it another 3 months! The healing process just needs time, but it is so 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 hooves 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 “stall rest,” but leave the horse in the paddock. It will know exactly what to do to heal itself!

Essential for healthy strong hooves is a natural diet and movement – plenty of movement. This is especially provided by herd life.

Herd life and healthy hooves

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 behavior, choose their own lead horses, and be part of dynamic herd life.

We started breeding our horses ourselves when we found that horses that have been kept in a box on soft bedding, even if it’s only been a couple of years, or even just the first couple of months of their life, will never have the hard, healthy, rock-crunching hooves that our horses born at Havana Horses possess. Their excellent hooves are a result of living outside on 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 hooves, body and limbs, it also provides the young (or inexperienced, previously-confined) horse with a horsey education, essential to developing good manners and a healthy mind! “Difficult” or over-confident horses that come to us quickly become friendly and easy-going, just by letting them live the life they are designed for. When we take the time to observe a herd of horses, we learn that all, literally all, behavior 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 behavior with horses accordingly.



The hooves of a 1.5 month old foal at Havana Horses. Providing a good start can determine hoof health for the rest of its life!

The one big complaint of our customers is that they seriously wonder where to go horse riding after their experience at Havana Horses. “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 for all our customers at Havana Horses that the key to happy and calm, healthy and well-behaved horses with strong feet is a natural life in the herd. 🐾

About the author: Anna van Rheeden is a practitioner of natural hoof care and runs Havana Horses, a natural horse riding school, in Central Java. www.havanahorses.co.id

Anna and Havana Horses were also featured in *The Horse’s Hoof Issue 33* (Winter 2008), in Derry McCormick’s article, “Barefoot in Indonesia!”