

# BAREFOOT POLICE HORSES

How the Houston Police Department  
Became a Barefoot Herd of Hard Working Horses



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**Senior Police Officer**

**S C O T T D. B E R R Y**

**Houston Police Mounted Detail**

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# **B A R E F O O T**

# **P O L I C E H O R S E S**

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Warrenton, Missouri

# **B A R E F O O T P O L I C E H O R S E S**

## **HOW THE HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT BECAME A BAREFOOT HERD OF HARD WORKING HORSES**

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

**G**rowing up in the San Joaquin Valley in California with a horse stable located not more than 200 yards away was my undoing. I became instantly curious and captivated by the horse. Those emotions haven't faded away yet.

I have worked for the city of Houston since the summer of 1984 till the present. From 1984 till the fall of 1989, I was employed at the *Houston Zoo* as a zookeeper. At the zoo, I worked with a wide variety of exotics ... and horses. From the fall of 1989 till the present, I have worked for the *Houston Police Department*. The last 14 years have been with the *Mounted Patrol Detail*.

The first horse I owned was purchased about the same time I started with the police department. My herd has slowly increased in size ever since then (horses and

children). I started out doing a lot of riding for pleasure which evolved over the years into an interest in driving horses as well. I have probably learned far more from the horses I've worked with than what I enthusiastically attempted to teach them – which is perhaps a good thing.

I have operated the *Cypress Creek Carriage Company* here in the Houston area for over 10 years—the horses have been barefoot for almost all of those years. While working at the zoo I worked with a Shire filly, and I was hooked. My attraction to draft horses evolved into a carriage business—to supplement my hobby.

I am a natural horse (hoof) care professional and instructor currently working with *Liberated Horsemanship* to develop natural hoof care training and support programs for other interested mounted units.

I have a BAAS (applied arts and sciences) from *Midwestern State University* and a MSSL (science in strategic leadership) degree from *Mountain State University*.







## *Barefoot Police Horses*

**T**he Houston Police Department started its current version of the mounted detail in 1984 with fourteen horses and a small group of committed officers and supervisors. The assignment was a simple one—patrol the downtown streets of Houston on horseback. It was an effective undertaking that had a significant impact on the crime rate in the downtown area.

All of the horses were donated in the beginning. The facility the officers used was an existing older one that met the basic needs of the horses. It also had some space for the officers to make the most of, and not much more than that.

The horses received some limited turnout, but most of their exercise came from being ridden in the downtown area. The department had farriers and veterinarians under contract to care for the horses' needs. The equipment, feed, tack, etc. came from various city contracts.

Over the next twenty plus years more horses arrived and the mounted detail grew to close to forty horses and riders. The operation of the facility didn't change much over the years. The city continued to provide services and supplies for the detail through the contract system that was in place. The diversity of the herd changed

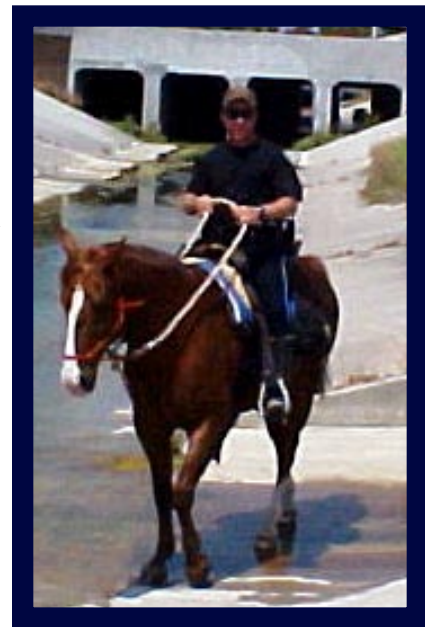


somewhat when the city allowed the detail to start buying horses in the mid-nineties instead of relying solely on the donation of horses.

The horses obtained through purchase had a tendency to be larger in size—warm bloods, drafts, and draft crosses typically. The bigger horses required bigger shoes and a significantly greater amount of effort in putting the shoes on their feet. Hoof pathologies were present and addressed with traditional farrier methodologies. Some horses were cast off because of the pathologies. Then, providence intruded upon the detail and things began to improve for the horses and their human partners when natural hoof care arrived in early 2004.

It started when one of the detail's officers, Greg Sokoloski, attended a two week long hoof trimming training seminar in the spring of 2004. Greg approached the detail's lieutenant prior to taking the class and asked for permission to try out this new natural approach to hoof care on his own 'assigned' mount. When he found being barefoot didn't mean lame and out of service for the horse, other opportunities to try natural hoof care presented themselves.

A quarter horse named Joey became one of the next available candidates for our fledgling barefoot program. Joey had been treated for chronic 'navicular syndrome' for a year and a half by an area veterinarian school. When the vet school said there was nothing else they could do for the horse and he should be retired from service, Greg immediately asked permission to pull the 'corrective' shoes and trim his feet. Short and sweet, within about a two week time frame, the horse was being ridden downtown on the street and was showing no lameness. Greg would be the first to admit, at this point, we were very much in the



Joey and Greg Sokoloski out for a barefoot ride two weeks after Joey was written off by the vet school.

learning phase of the trimming process, but it was quite clear that even a less than ideal natural trim, had changed this horse for the better. Simply trimming his feet and getting him moving had changed his health forever.

Not too long after this, Officer Danny Pryor and I also attended a trimming seminar and added our skills to the effort. Looking back, I think we learned just enough to be dangerous. But at the time we emerged from the seminar quite confident in our abilities and ready to jump in and start helping the horses by pulling shoes and getting them back to work barefoot.



Officer Danny Pryor at a natural trim workshop.

There were some minor frustrations in the early stages, but the horses still benefited from our efforts. In particular, there was a secondary situation that would require more pages than I can write here that drove our choice to transition our herd to barefoot. But we also quickly learned it wasn't as straightforward as we thought it was going to be. One problem was we picked some horses with advanced hoof pathologies that exceeded our existing trimming capabilities. In addition, we were doing some trims that were too aggressive for the street work we were doing. It appeared we needed better boots for these horses to assist with the transition to a life without metal shoes.

Early on, we went through several different types of performance hoof boots, all with different designs and materials, with mixed results. I can honestly say they were all good quality and, in some instances, the designs were very unique. But most of the boots were not ideal for our use. We needed a boot that was durable, easy to apply, and that didn't come with a big price tag. Some of our early test boots just wore out too

quickly, some were OK for short periods but didn't work well after being on our horses' feet for five, six, or seven plus hours. During the evacuation after hurricane Katrina, we were on our horses more than eight hours at a time in intense heat and humidity and some boot styles caused blisters on the horses' heels. Maybe it was the sweat running down the horse's legs causing the boots to slip that caused the problem. Maybe it was the bladder on the back of the boot getting too hot that caused the blisters. Either way, it gave us something else to consider when choosing and fitting boots. In the end though, it all added to our early trimming education database.

After we were given the green light by supervisors to start the transition to barefoot, we made it voluntary for the officers. We told them about the transition period and explained that every horse was going to transition slightly differently. Then, we let them decide if they wanted to try it or not. We did not force the officers to do anything, we left it up to them. If they wanted to keep shoes on their assigned horse, they could.

From the volunteers, we selected horses we felt needed the transition to barefoot the most and pulled shoes according to this status. We also considered the availability of boots for the horse and the amount of possible down time for the horse to get used to feeling the ground again. We watched the horses closely and let them tell us whether they were ready to go back to work on the streets.

If a new horse came in to the herd that wasn't assigned to any officer, it would automatically be barefoot. An interesting development later on was that we actually had horses donated to our unit solely because they would be barefoot!

Sensitivity among the transitioning horses was hard to predict sometimes. Some horses we were pretty sure would be sensitive due to prior pathologies, but others that we thought would have issues transitioned quite fast. It was all very educational.

## ABOUT SOME OF OUR HORSES

Magnum: Magnum was my first ‘victim’ on my journey toward becoming a certified trimmer. He is also my assigned mount. Magnum was one of the horses with some ‘issues.’ His feet were very overgrown and had some pretty unacceptable things going on. He had heel widths of four inches on his fronts and three and a quarter inches on the backs when we pulled his shoes in 2005. He now has five and a quarter inch heel width all around. His overall hoof health has also improved vastly. For an eighteen hundred pound horse, having strong healthy feet is helpful. He is also more than willing to have his feet trimmed now—not the case when I started at all.



Magnum's hooves in 2005 before and immediately after pulling his shoes. The farrier told us this was acceptable growth which we now know is untrue.



Magnum's hooves in March of 2010, after being barefoot for four years.

Joey: I mentioned Joey above. He was one of our early horses that was written off and then saved by natural hoof care. Joey was diagnosed with chronic ‘navicular’ syndrome. Then, after months and months of “rehabilitative” shoeing done under the guidance of a large veterinary institution in our area, it was concluded he should be retired. That’s

when Greg Sokoloski requested we trim him up to see what happened – what did we have to lose? As you can see from the photos below, Joey had some pretty major issues with his overall hoof condition too. He needed help. For example, if you look closely you can see almost his entire sole was covered up by the bars. A simple trim had him back being ridden in two weeks (see picture on page 9).



Joey's hooves before and immediately after the corrective shoes were removed.

Smokey: Smokey was one of our last shod horses to join the barefoot ranks. He had some pretty long misshapen feet from many years of shoes. His feet looked like cans—straight and very round, not at all natural in appearance. I was pretty concerned that his transition would be a tough one because his feet were in an unnatural state for years. Turns out he transitioned beautifully to walking the streets barefoot. He never had to

wear a boot and he didn't miss a day of work after having his shoes pulled. It took several trims to get the feet where they needed to be, but he never had an issue. His feet are now some of the most solid we have in our herd.



Smokey in April 2008 with (left) and immediately after (right) pulling his shoes.



Smokey's right rear trimmed and left rear awaiting attention in April 2008.



Smokey's hooves in March 2010.

## ABOUT THE JOURNEY

I don't want to leave you with the impression that our transition to barefoot horses always went smoothly. It wasn't quite so. Our barefoot police horse program has been no different than life; there have been ups and downs. There were some mistakes—all of which were learning experiences. There were also some frustrations—some we caused and some were caused by outside sources. We were even anonymously reported to the

S.P.C.A., more than once, for being cruel to our horses by making them walk around on the bare soles of their feet. But when the investigator came by to take a look at the horses, they passed inspection with no problems. We were found to be responsibly handling the transition of our animals. I guess I can understand the concerns of the anonymous reporters because I have seen some horses misused and abused by irresponsible individuals. But it still upsets me that someone felt our horses were being mistreated.

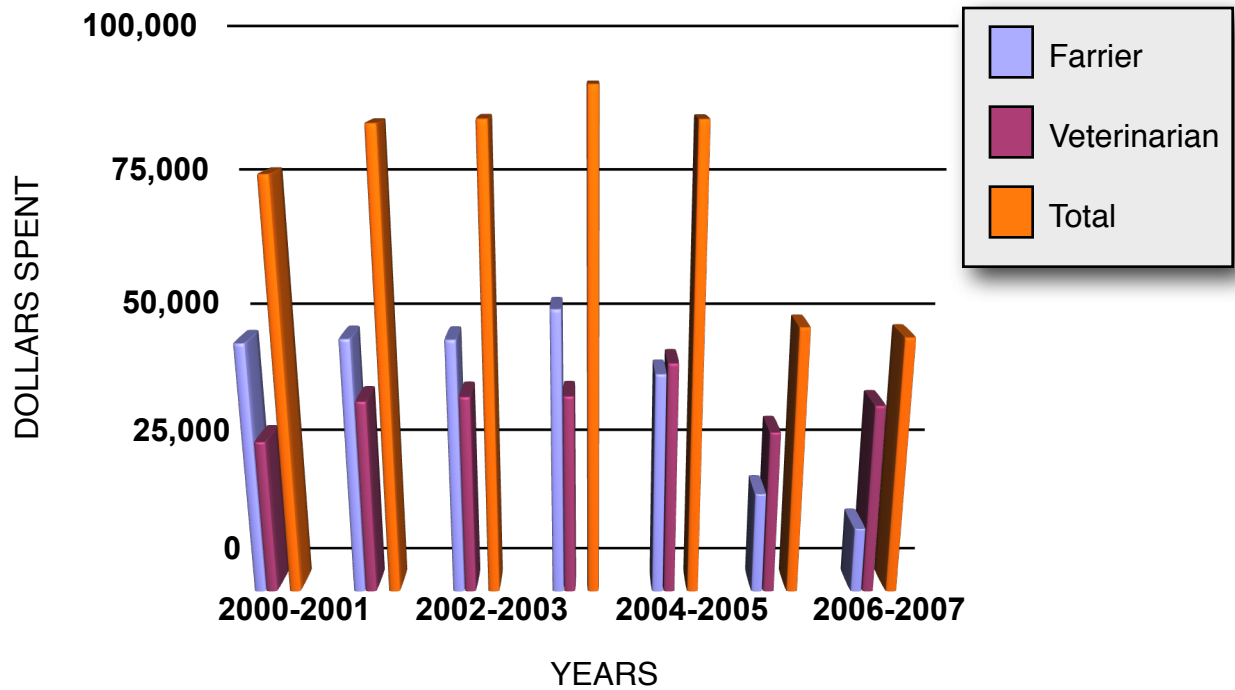
By December 2005 we had come reasonably far in our methods of trimming and booting, but then we got a boost from outside sources—knowledgeable people who knew some things we hadn't figured out yet. We weren't too far off the mark, but new insights about the wild horse model of natural horse care and booting definitely enhanced our program. It was what spurred Danny Pryor and I to follow a formal training program to become certified trimmers.

Slowly but surely we pulled shoes from the horses that had been in the unit since we started the barefoot program. Officers saw the good things that were happening with other horses that had transitioned and made the switch to barefoot themselves. The last four horses with shoes were converted to barefoot in the summer of 2008. I would love to say that the officers had a total change in beliefs, but, to be honest, in this case it was pretty simple – the farrier quit. The farrier just wasn't making any money on us any longer. He had to maintain a huge liability policy just to be at our facility, and it wasn't working out for him financially. It worked out well for the horses though—all four transitioned magnificently, and the officers for the most part were good with the switch. It's amazing how a misshapen hoof can return to its natural state after ten or more years of being shod.

## THE BENEFITS

Along the way, we gathered some interesting information on the horses as we pulled shoes. We took some measurements and photographs spaced out over the weeks/months that followed pulling the shoes. When we looked at what was happening it was pretty impressive. The horses' feet were definitely looking better. They were returning to normal with heels spreading and toes shortening. It was great.

We also saw other developments, some obvious ones we anticipated, like farrier costs dropping, but others surprised us, like a drop in overall veterinary costs. Was the drop in vet costs just a coincidence? Maybe, but it makes you wonder whether we are actually improving the overall health of our horses, not just their feet, by going barefoot?



From my personal observation, we have had an impact on the overall horse. The decline in vet costs are impressive in some cases. We have also seen a decrease in the number of colics, although I can't say for sure whether it is attributable to removing the



shoes. There were 16 colics in 2005, five in 2006 and only one in 2007. Whether this remarkable improvement continues or is just a normal fluctuation remains to be seen.

In other instances it is something more subtle. A horse that used to protest to having shoes nailed on now freely picks up his/her foot to be trimmed. The mental health of a horse is something that can't easily be measured, but it is pretty obvious to those of us who spend time with our horses that there has been improvements there too. Walk around in some constricting, unyielding shoes for twenty four hours a day and see if it makes you a tad grumpy.

Most of the horses go on day to day patrols barefoot ... without boots, and they are thriving that way. We have found that traction improved over shoes in most cases. There are granite and marble sidewalks downtown that were as slick as ice when the horses were shod. It is no longer an issue with barefoot or booted horses. And, there is no longer the damage a borium tipped steel shoe does to exotic stone walkways.

Boots are available for all of the horses—they hardly ever need them. We do make sure they have them on for large demonstrations and assignments where there is the possibility of broken glass and debris on the ground. The boots protect much more of the hoof than shoes.

Everyone asks us about the 'weird' tennis shoes the horses wear, and why one horse has them and the horses standing next to it do not. The boots definitely make a good conversation starter, and it always surprises folks when they hear how our horses have no steel shoes. People always go away with a clear understanding of why it is better for horses to be barefoot, even on downtown streets. They have new knowledge to share, impress and inform more people in the future hopefully. I will never get tired of answering the questions created by my horse's 'funny lookin' shoes. Having people walk away better informed about horse use and care is well worth repeating the same answer thousands of times.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

All the horses in our unit are now barefoot and happy. So, do we just call it a day? I don't think so. We continue to learn. We are also working to improve our horses' environment which is just as important to hoof and horse health as the trim.

By the time this exposé is complete, we will have been in our new facility for over a year (see pictures below). It has been a huge improvement in lifestyle for the horses. In our old facility, the horses were housed in stalls with no attached run-outs. Now, each horse has its own fifty foot run-out attached to its stall. The run-outs are lined with crushed granite which has proven to be an excellent abrasive for stimulating and exfoliating the soles of our horses. We now have several large paddocks for the horses to move around in too, instead of the small paddocks we had previously. It's a huge improvement. Thrush, which is a constant challenge in our wet climate, has also become pretty scarce at our new facility compared with our old location.



At the new Houston Mounted Detail Facility, each horse has its own fifty foot run-out attached to its stall. The run-outs are lined with crushed granite which has proven to be an excellent abrasive for stimulating and exfoliating the hoof sole.



We now have several large paddocks for the horses to move around in.



A closer view of the hay feeders and automatic waters in the paddocks.

The diets are the best we can get. The horses get all the free choice hay they can handle and a good quality pelleted feed. We are still bound, unfortunately, by the city bidding/contract system, but we strive to keep improving on things as we can. We have a veterinarian that is very supportive and very forward thinking, which is a huge plus.

We are also trying to help mounted conservation, park and police officers in

other cities see the benefits and make the transition to barefoot horses. Toward this end, Officer Danny Pryor and I are working with Liberated Horsemanship to establish a training and support program specifically designed for mounted units. Hopefully, we can help lead the way toward a more comfortable and healthy life for horses around the country.



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MY CONVERSION  
A FARRIER'S JOURNEY TO NATURAL HOOF CARE




John Graves, CP

*WILD HORSES*  
THE STRESS OF CAPTIVITY




BRUCE NOCK, PhD

HOOF  
ADAPTATION  
AS I SEE IT



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CHOOSING A HOOF  
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