GRASS AND GRAZING – ONE FARM’S EXPERIENCES
Adapted and condensed from UK site http://www.successful-natural-horsecare.com/
This outlines their experiences with their horses on their land in the UK

The Challenges

There are many natural hoof care specialists who now recommend no grass at all, due to the detrimental effect, lush green pastures can have on the horse's health and subsequently their hooves.

Above is a typical lush green grass field.

- Typical improved grass can be far too rich for horses
- Stressed grass is the worst of all but often looks the least rich
- Grass can provide excessive sugars in body which can lead to things like: stretched white line and sub-clinical laminitis.
- Lush green fields are founder/laminitis traps for all types of horses.

You need to monitor the horses and watch out for any adverse signs, as well checking the horses do not become overweight and creasy.

Solutions

The track solutions outlined below are based on Jaime Jackson's book, Paddock Paradise.

The ideas can help you manage your paddocks and your horse's grazing and horse nutrition as well as giving you your land back.

Intermediate solutions to help with managing your grazing:

- Strip graze
- Use a muzzle which will reduce the amount they are able to graze.
- Reduce the amount of hours they have access to grass.
- Having hay available for them at all times and a good mineral block in a grass field.

This can be helpful if they graze on the hay at least part of the time and thus less on the grass (doesn’t work in all cases, but worth a try).
It may take time to set up a grazing system that will work for you throughout the year. But if you know the ideal you can then start working towards improving your horse nutrition. No one can wave a magic wand and of course, there will be costs that need to be considered - but the long term benefits of doing this will always be there.

You may have to alter what you do in the summer from what you are able to do in the winter depending upon your land layout and whether out board or own your horse’s environment.

Founder, Prevention and Cure is a worthwhile read. Although you may not have a founder horse the basic horse care and horse nutrition outlined in this book is worth consideration.

With the basics of horse nutrition understood, gradually ideas will form and you will find ways to balance and reduce the amount of grass they have.

**Grass Grazing Updated**

However with further study and research I then came across more information on the type of plants that horses grazed on. This research and information that I studied showed me how we could create medieval style pastures within our paddocks, so greatly improving our type of grazing and eliminating the high sugar grasses and problems that come with that, laminitis being the obvious problem.

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**Barefoot Grazing**

**An Introduction to Suitable Solutions**

Here are ideas and solutions to help you maintain barefoot hooves and keep your barefoot horse(s) sound.

Ideas which you can do:-

- irrespective of where you live.
- irrespective of the size of your fields or paddocks.

Ideas which will help you:-

- With their daily living
- And will maintain their hooves in optimum health

Ideas which once set up will help your horses independent of you the owner.
The Ideal Grazing Model

Jaime Jackson says:-

"He uses the wild horse as his model and wild horses live outside in the company of other horses all year long, in all climates, with no rugs and are continuously on the move."

This is by far the healthiest way for our horses to live and the model, for us to attempt to copy, if we wish to try and keep horses in optimum health.

A goal which may not be practical in all cases, but an ideal worthy of working towards.

Challenges of Maintaining Barefoot Hooves

The question is then:-

"How do we best adapt this barefoot grazing model to our domestic situations and so enabling us to keep our horses as close to this model as possible?"

This was the question we struggled with and tried to find practical solutions towards helping us keep and:

• improve our barefoot horses hooves
• and then maintain their improved hoof structure

Even if you remove their shoes, transition them, keep them turned out, work out how you are going to manage your paddocks, as well as work, train and ride them, so they are safe and fit to ride/ compete/hunt/show jump etc. you are still left with the challenge of how to:

• "strengthen and maintain their barefoot hooves."

as they need to be continually on the move, grazing and walking over different surfaces, in order for their hooves and physical bodies to function to the best of their abilities.

By this I mean for their hooves to stay strong and hard, for want of a better word, "roadworthy," so that they can be ridden over different surfaces, rocky/stony paths and they remain sound.

Traditional Grazing

With horses that are just turned out to graze in a field, there is no reason for them to move. They are surrounded by 'food' (grass), so continuous movement which is so important for their health and hooves does not occur. Although you may say, "my horses move," the mileage they cover in a field compared to their wild horse cousins, has no comparison.

So how to provide suitable barefoot grazing is a challenge. Movement is the key. But how does one provide this amount of movement on a daily basis practically?
The Horses Condition/Weight

Apart from their hooves there is also the monitoring of their weight. In the summer months it is important that they don't get too fat whilst grazing on lush green pastures as this can create havoc with the structure of the hooves as well as their weight.

When they move, like humans they maintain their blood sugar and insulin levels and their hunger is less.

So how do we keep them outside without them standing all day grazing on rich grass?

The Solutions

1. Strip Grazing
2. Rotational Grazing
3. Paddock Paradise
4. A Combination of the Above

Paddock Paradise Grazing

Introduction.

While we were trying to work out the best way to keep our horses and how to "incorporate the wild horse hoof model" into the daily living of our domesticated horses, Jaime Jackson published, 'Paddock Paradise,' a guide to Natural Horse Boarding.
The barefoot grazing idea, outlined in his book is very simple, but very clever. He suggests making a track around the perimeter of your field for your horses to live on all year long.

Food, water, shelter etc are positioned around it, in different places, so encouraging the horses to remain on the move all the time. The idea is quite amazing, so simple but yet unique in the horse world today and it not only benefits the horses but it also gives you your land back.

Paddock Paradise is well worth reading in order to gain greater understanding of this barefoot grazing concept. The theory is all there, it is then just a matter of transferring that theory into practice, in your own particular situation.

**CREATING Paddock PARADISE**  
Outlined below are the basics that you will need to set up a Paddock Paradise track:-

**Electric Fencing**

To set up a fence line around the perimeter of your field the easiest thing to use is electric fencing. You may eventually want to use other types of fencing. However the advantage of working with the electric fencing is that you can move it. We have adjusted ours several times now and are still improving it and rearranging it.

It is not until you have done a complete year that you will have a complete overview of how this type of track is going to work.

So for the electric fencing you will need to buy the following:-

- Electric fencing tape
- Electric Fencing Posts
- Electric, Battery or Solar Powered Energizers
- Gates and Handles
- Insulators
- Wooden posts

If you have available a mains supply it is a huge advantage not having to check and buy new batteries for a powered energizer and is worth spending the extra on a mains powered energizer.

![Electric Fencing Around The Track](image)

It does not matter what size your field is.
Wooden Posts

The wooden posts are needed every so often as they create extra support to the electric fencing tape.

They are particularly good if positioned on any corners or bends of the fence line and will make the electric fencing safer much more stable and secure.

Water, Hay, Minerals etc

Within the track place water, hay, and mineral blocks as well as providing a sheltered area. (This may be simply some existing trees which are already there, or a field shelter).

Different Types of Footing

In addition to the above you can add different types of footings, e.g. stones, boulders, dried out areas and stony areas.

Above is a picture of horses on the move, on a barefoot grazing track. You can see the stony surface, which is hardcore (stones) that we added to this track.

The stones on the track enhance and toughen up their hooves.

When setting up the barefoot grazing track, keep in mind that the idea is that the horse is continually on the move, as in the wild, in order for it to meet its daily requirements. So hay, water mineral blocks need to be positioned as far apart from each other, as possible.

The width of the barefoot grazing track needs to vary, to create some interest. The wider parts can be 40 ft wide and then you can have some narrower parts e.g. 20 ft. All this will encourage forward movement. I.e. not too wide and not too narrow. (The above has worked for us.)

Advantages of the Track

This barefoot grazing track creates the following advantages:-

- Continuous movement of the horse outside, independent of the owner.
• Continuous concussion and movement on their feet which is essential for the development and maintenance of the internal structures of the hooves.
• Companionship, as the track is suitable for more than one horse
• Easy grazing management
• The potential to make your own hay from the center of the field.
• Reduced time and maintenance on pooh picking

The above is a very simple explanation of how managing your barefoot grazing paddocks can help you towards maintaining your horses barefoot hooves.

Our Track in the First Year

The Cost

After the initial cost of setting up a barefoot grazing track if you have enough ground in the centre of your field to make your own hay this can then become quite a cost effective way of keeping horses. In reality what you are doing is, "managing your grazing area" productively.

We found that we were able to make enough hay from the center of our fields to become self sufficient.

We were then in a position to cut the hay at the best time of day, when the sugar levels were at their lowest.

You will need to work what the perimeter of your field is and then from that work out how much electric fencing you will need.

Remember to include the cost of the energizers as the electric ones are quite expensive.

Then you need to work out the cost of making hay. The easiest thing to do is to find a local contractor to advise you.

We were not able to estimate how much hay, in fact we had no idea! But it made sense to make hay as if you are making your own hay it has to be cheaper than buying it.

Shelter for Horses

Providing some kind of shelter for your horses in your fields and paddocks needs to be considered. They may need this to protect themselves:-
• In the summer months, from sun and flies,
• In the winter months, from driving rain and snow.

It maybe just some:-

• Trees and overhanging branches
• Or a timber field shelter.

You can buy 'mobile' field shelters which in the UK require no planning permission. You may want to put some rubber mats or scalplings down inside so the ground does not become too poached.

**Our Shelter Experience**

First we did not have any real sheltered area, but the horses survived. Then gradually they showed us where they liked to stand and shelter.

There were some large over hanging branches in several areas around the field and these have provided quite a bit of shelter. Interestingly, they use it much more in the summer than the winter months which surprised us.

The picture below shows one of these areas. The area is quite a bit deeper and more protected than it appears in picture.

![Image of sheltered area](image.jpg)

**Finding Shelter in Your Fields**

It is worth spending time looking at how the ground lies, where the wind comes from and where they tend to stand. From this you will then be able to work out:-

• Whether there is enough shelter already.
• Or whether you need to buy a field shelter.

**More Track Ideas**

Ideally one would like to have them on the paddock paradise track all year round. The track in itself becomes a project. It will depend on your environment and the conditions of the ground as to what you will need to do to make this possible.
You may need to make some ditches to assist drainage if your ground is very wet.

Setting it up in the summer can be quite easy and then you can gradually work on it and add to it, so that long term it can be used throughout the year or for just part of the year. We have now found that we can't use our paddock paradise in the very wet winter months.

The object is to try and get different footings on the track, stones, boulders, pea gravel, hard core, sand etc.

In the above picture you can see a stony surface, which we added to part of our paddock paradise track. We used hardcore, an inexpensive stone that you can get from any builders merchant or quarry. This has been laid down now for well over a year.

Here is a more detailed picture of the stones.

The weeds that have subsequently grown through, have secured the stones further to the soil.

**Natural Horse Track**

Just beyond the stones in the above picture you can see a single worn track. The horses create their own single track within the paddock paradise track.

When this first began to show it was so exciting, as you could actually see evidence of their continuous movement on the track. Which is what we were trying to create - continuous movement as in the wild.....

(Well done Jaime Jackson - it works)
Our Experience to Date

We set up a barefoot grazing track in spring 2006, after Paddock Paradise came out and the horses remained on it through to November of that year.

It was a huge success. The horses and their hooves benefited, and they remained fitter and leaner. It also saved us a great deal of time managing the grazing and there was no worry of them all putting on excess weight during the summer months.

Barefoot Horses in the Uk

We had to close off our paddock paradise track off in the autumn as it became too muddy for us to manage and we realized we needed to work further on the track to make it work all year round. We also needed to incorporate more wooden posts in-between the plastic electric fencing posts, to keep the electric fencing more stable and secure.

During the winter months they were back in the centre of the field.

Then in March 2007 we were able to put them back on our paddock paradise/grazing track. They have remained on the track ever since. The barefoot grazing track has helped us enormously with maintaining their hooves.

Paddock Paradise in 2008

Two years on from first setting up the track.

There have been some tremendous advantages but like anything new there have also been problems. Where we are now is an amalgamation of all that we have experienced and learnt with the track. There are things we have kept and there are things we have had to change.

So although we have had some problems managing the track we have had no problems with the health of all our horses. The track has helped them all enormously and in addition, due to the track this has meant we have been able to make our own hay - a huge cost saving benefit.

One of the biggest problems was due to our climate here the track became very trashed. So I knew we had to think again and go back to the drawing board. This has resulted in more work but I think we have found the best solution for us here in the UK.
Feeding Horses Hay

*How to Feed Hay Easily*

Feeding horses hay is an essential part of horse care, here are ideas and solutions that will help you on a daily basis.

**Hay Feeding Problems**

Feeding hay in paddocks and fields can be a problem to say the least because:-

- It gets bedded down with mud and droppings when fed on the ground

Which then results in:-

- a lot of wastage
- a load of muck
- and it gets eaten all at once and not grazed on throughout the day.

**Traditional Haynets**

Feeding horses hay using traditional round haynets helps prevent waste, but they are not ideal as most of them are:-

- a fiddle and hence slow to fill.
- and they don't hold very much.
- you may well then need several, depending on the number of horses you have.
- Your horses are then not fully grazing at ground level.
- they bounce around, unless secured at the top and bottom on your fence line, which is time consuming when done on a daily basis.

**Haynet Solutions**

We have now found a great solution to be above. Melany Clahsen and Christoph Gehrmann, (barefoot trimmers in Germany) have designed large hay nets, which are called 'ground hay nets'. They are quite superb, by far the best hay nets on the market for outside grazing and feeding horses hay.
They have helped us enormously and they last. We have had them now for several years, we use them all the time and the nets are still in excellent condition.

They are designed in Germany by Barefoot trimmers Melany Claesen and Christoph Gehrmann and can be bought online.

They come in two sizes and are designed to be attached:-

- to a fence line
- or between two trees or posts.

When attaching them to the fence line they are secured permanently at the top.

They are easy to fill on a daily basis due to the way they are secured. You just pull open the top. Depending on the size and number of horses grazing will depend on how often they need to be filled up.

(We fill them everyday but could easily make it possible to fill them every two days just by having more nets.)

Due to their design and the way they are fixed it means that the horses have access to hay but at ground level, so stretching the whole of their topline when grazing - which is essential for their health.

The large hay nets can hold around a bale and a half of hay.

This is especially good if you are feeding several horses.

**How Many Hay Nets?**

Depending on your requirements, you may have several hay nets along a fence line in your paddocks, or you can place them in different areas around your field.

If it rains heavily:-

- the hay remains usable
- and still gets eaten
- and does not get trodden down among mud and manure.
When not to use these Haynets

If horses are shod, these hay nets are not advised due to the possible risk of the horses getting their shoes caught in them.

Ground Haynets Online Shop

The Heunetz Shop supplies these ground haynets.
If the site appears in German click on the translation button to access it in English.

Haynet Screws

It is worth buying these Haynet Screws for fixing the haynets to your post or rails.
(It drove us mad finding suitable fixings for these haynets as they did not originally sell them! You need to make them quite secure, as they are heavy when filled.)

You need to make them secure as when filled they can be quite heavy.

Hard Standing Surface for Hay Area

In your hay feeding areas you can put down some gravel/stones, so the standing area where the hay nets are:

- Remains dry
- The stones/gravel will create good ground drainage

Above is a picture of a hard standing surface by a haynet area.
Without the gravel/stones, the area can become very poached in the winter months. Alternatively you can use some rubber mats. There are now companies that manufacture rubber mats that are suitable for use in fields and gateways.

This is not essential but it makes the area much cleaner and easier to manage. Before putting stones down you may want to remove/scrape off the topsoil first. (note inserted by Cindy Sullivan: In wet regions especially, scrape off topsoil, put down commercial grade landscaping fabric – it allows water to go down through it but limits it coming back up, put a layer of “crusher dust on top of that – it will set up almost like cement after it gets wet a few times, then your stones on top of that. This way your stones won’t disappear to China in the mud every year and you won’t have to keep buying more)

The above solutions make feeding horses hay on a regular basis so much easier.