

Boarding your Horse or Pony at EasiHorse Farm

We offer Natural Boarding at our farm.

Natural Boarding – *the way your horse would choose* – means that the horses live in a way that is as close to their natural lives as we can practically achieve. Nature spent 55 million years adapting the body, behavior, and mind of horses to the environment that they lived in. During most of the time that horses lives have been influenced by human behavior, the humans have seen the horse as a tool – the automobile, the tractor, the truck, or the ATV for a few thousand years prior to the internal combustion engine – and humans adapted the life of horses to suit human needs.

Now we have the luxury of treating horses as horses, and not as tools.

Basic Horse Sense

The natural horse is an animal that devotes its life turning grass into more horse and more horses. The natural horse eats “natural” grass, not the high nutritional grass selectively bred by humans as is typically fed to cows for meat and milk production, nor the grass that has bred to become grain producing crops, but the scrappy low nutritional grass that occurs in natural grazing lands. It needs large quantities of this low nutritional grass – about 2 to 3% of its bodyweight per day, and the only way for it to get it is to spend most of its time – perhaps 22 hours a day – wandering 20 to 30 miles through scrappy grassland eating most of the time - wherever grass is found.

A horse that has successfully turned scrappy grass into a 1000 pounds of horseflesh has also created an attractive 1000 pound meal for many predators. Since a horse has nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by engaging with a predator, its defense is to spot predators and run away. They evolved herd behavior to improve this defense, since having another horse spot the predator, and staying together or running away together, is more effective – as long as you know who to believe and who you are hanging out with.

So a natural horse has a body and a mind that:

1. Continuously processes a large bulk on low nutritional food. They aren't designed for “2 square meals a day”, or for a big, quick shot of high nutritional food.
2. Is happy and contented when its head down, its nose is rubbing on the ground, and its mouth is chewing grass, for 22 hours a day.
3. Is happy and contented when they can observe the absence of predators. They are discomforted when predators are present, or when they might be.
4. Is able to run away from predators as fast as possible. This means that they are psychologically uncomfortable when physical barriers appear to trap them.
5. Has long legs to facilitate running away. These long legs present a physical problem that evolution had to contend with: gravity makes it hard to get blood to return up their legs. Nature's solution is a pump. Each foot of a horse is like an extra heart that pumps blood back up the horse's leg. The heart is powered by the horse's walk. Every time the foot falls and takes the horse's weight, the hoof expands, the frog compresses and blood is squirted up the horse's leg. Assuming, of course, that the horse is walking (which it does

in nature 22 hours a day) and that this ‘heart’ doesn’t have a metal bar nailed to it that stops it expanding.

6. Has evolved behavior patterns that enable it to establish ‘trust’ relationships with certain other animals, which includes getting discomfited when it isn’t hanging out with other animals that it trusts.

It is hard to think of a worse treatment for such an animal than the traditional horse stall – with horses spending most of their lives inside a 12x12 box, standing still (in their own waste products), fed 2 square meals a day, and let out for a few hours exercise.

1. They are claustrophobic – they can’t tell that there isn’t a predator in the shadow or behind the wall, and they know they can’t run away if there is one. They want to be in the open, where they can see clearly, and feel they can run away from danger if it presents itself.
2. They are herd animals; they want to be with others.
3. Their hooves get soft – through lack of continuous use, and the damp and chemicals of the waste products that they stand in don’t help, and humans “fix” this by nailing shoes to the hooves, which prevent the “pump” working and deprive the legs of adequate blood circulation.
4. They don’t want, and they don’t need, the “comfort” of an enclosed space. Their hair provides adequate insulation from cold (as long as it hasn’t been clipped off or nullified with a blanket) and they will seek protection from weather under trees and behind natural windbreaks, provided some are accessible.

Our Way

Our horses and ponies live outside all the time – in the largest space we can make available for them. Their open fields have wooded areas where they go for protection from the weather, when they choose to.

They have continuously available food – grass when it is available, hay when it is not. In addition they have free choice minerals, because grass and hay can be deficient in various minerals and trace elements required for a healthy horse. In nature, they seek out such minerals by eating dirt, licking rocks, gnawing trees etc – apparently knowing what they need, a probably searching until they find it by accident. We like to make sure the accident happens, and to monitor what they were deficient in.

Our horses live in herd groups – our own horses and ponies together with boarders. We choose the herd groupings with regard to the trust (and distrust) relationships between the individuals¹.

None of our horses have shoes. We use the minimum of medications and vaccines. Our bias is towards avoiding intervention and letting nature take of itself. That said, we watch the horses in our care very intently with goal of spotting problems that demand intervention as early as

¹ Stallions (as opposed to Geldings) make this especially challenging. We can accommodate only a limited of stallions.

possible, as well as learning as much as possible from the horses so that we know that the things we do for the horse are actually for their benefit.

The Downside

Your horse isn't as available as your car, tractor or ATV. He isn't in the garage, he's in a big field, and you have to go get him when you want him. And if he doesn't want to hang out with you, that's a big problem, because *he* gets to choose who he hangs out with. If you don't want to develop a relationship with your horse where he actually wants to hang out with you, or you need a ride that immediately available, perhaps an ATV would suit you better than a horse.

Your horse doesn't stay clean and shiny like your car. He gets wet and muddy, and will need more cleaning up before you can ride. His coat changes and weathers with the seasons. Your shiny jet black show horse will fade in the summer sun and get shaggy in the winter – which show judges deem unacceptable. He gets scratched and bitten – superficial damage resulting from establishing and testing the herd relationships – especially when a new individual is added to the herd. You might not like the scratches any more than you like scratches on your car, but at least they heal themselves! Natural boarding isn't appropriate for 'show horses', but there's nothing natural about horse shows.

Your horse can feel its feet. We don't consider this to be a downside, but you might. It is most noticeable on a horse that once had shoes and now has bare-feet and is asked to walk on gravel. He may walk on the gravel as if it hurts. He will quite likely try to walk off the gravel. Try taking your shoes off and walking on gravel and you will understand why. You might try walking a half-inch metal bar nailed to your feet to see if that feels better, which it probably won't, because gravel has lots of rocks bigger than the thickness of a horseshoe. A local anesthetic in the feet would fix the problem, which is probably what a horse's foot feels like when deprived of the blood flow nature intended.

Many horses that have always been barefoot show no special reaction when asked to walk on gravel. It's just one of the variety of surfaces that a horse naturally encounters, and a horse that does the amount of walking that a natural horse must do, and walks over the variety of surfaces it would encounter, will have hooves that can handle all those surfaces, hooves that will take care of themselves, and a horse that will take them in his stride. Unfortunately we don't have 30 miles of land for our horses to wander through, so their hooves need trimming about every 6 weeks.

The Upside

Your horse will be comfortable and contented and you have an environment conducive to building the right relationship with your horse.

For us, those are the only upsides that matter. We hope you feel the same.