

**City of Houston Police Horses Go Barefoot, part 1**  
Houston Police Department Mounted Unit—Barefoot Program  
by Greg Sokoloski, Police Officer  
City of Houston, Texas



Above, Officer Sokoloski with his barefoot police horse, Shadow, a 4 yo Dutch Warmblood.

### **History of the Houston Police Mounted Unit**

The Houston Police Department started a full time Mounted Unit in 1983 to patrol the Central Business District in Downtown Houston. The unit started with 14 horses and has since grown to 36 horses, covering not only Downtown Houston, but also Memorial and Hermann Parks. The Mounted Unit is also utilized in crowd management, searches, parades, dignitary protection, and other special events where a mounted officer will be needed.

### **Horses of the Houston Police Mounted Unit**

The Houston Police Department currently utilizes 36 horses. There are 30 geldings and 6 mares, ranging in age from 3 to 22 years. The breeds currently used are: 15 Quarter Horses, 8 Percheron crosses, 3 Appendix Quarter Horses, 2 Percherons, 2 Belgian crosses, 1 Dutch Warmblood, 1 Hanoverian, 1 Hackney, 1 Quarter/Arab, 1 Paint, and 1 Thoroughbred.

## **Barefoot Program**

In December, 2003, Darolyn Butler-Dial, (a leading Endurance competitor), and Martha Olivo, hoof care provider, President and Founder of United Horsemanship, conducted a barefoot demo at the Mounted Patrol stables. Using horse cadaver legs, they demonstrated how correct hoof mechanism could enhance the productivity of our Police Horses.

My assigned horse, a Dutch Warmblood named Shadow, became the first horse to begin with a barefoot trim. At that time, he was a 4-year-old just starting his career as a police horse.

I have been an Officer with the unit since 1983 and have always used horses for police work with borium-tipped metal shoes. After watching Martha Olivo's demo using the cadaver leg, I was stunned and fascinated by the importance of hoof mechanism and how some of the injuries and behavioral problems could be due to the constraints of metal shoes.

However, I had reservations about riding a police horse in downtown Houston without metal shoes. Darolyn Butler-Dial convinced me, through her experience of riding her endurance horses in 100-mile competitions through all types of terrain, how much healthier her horses were. I then went out to evaluate the performance of a barefoot police horse working full-time on the streets of Houston.

Shadow and I began the barefoot journey the week before the Super Bowl, held in our city February 1, 2004. Shadow took two big steps that week; his first time barefoot, and his first time as a police horse. We started work downtown on the Tuesday before the Super Bowl, and worked over all types of different terrain. His traction was excellent, he was confident in every step he took, and there was no wear of his hooves after riding.

We started working long shifts on the Thursday before the Super Bowl, to handle the thousands of people in the downtown area and all the festivities associated with the event. Thursday and Friday nights, we worked 14 hours each night. We started to have to move large crowds, handle disturbances, conduct traffic control, and move through large crowds of festive people. Also, we had been getting rain, which made all the surfaces downtown very slippery, along with all the trash that had now covered most of the streets. We moved from scene to scene, through all the wet, trash-filled streets, barefoot and sometimes at a run. This was the point that convinced me that horses could walk and run on the streets barefoot.

On Saturday morning, Shadow was showing signs of soreness, but not lameness. Martha and Darolyn both explained to me that this could occur, and hoof boots should help. I picked up a set of Old Mac's Boots from Darolyn. Saturday and Sunday were both 14 hour days, and Shadow never showed any more signs of soreness in the Old Mac's. We again worked through thousands of festive people, over all sorts of varying road conditions. The Old Mac's performed flawlessly, and again this convinced me that barefoot was the way to go, even if there was an occasional need for hoof boots.

Throughout the week, Shadow was monitored and evaluated by other Supervisors in the Mounted Unit. Shadow had worked every day of the Super Bowl barefoot, and never had any problems without shoes, or working in hoof boots. This convinced the administration there might be a need to move forward with additional police horses going barefoot.

The City sent me to Martha Olivo's 2 week "Hoof Groom Course" shortly after that. The funding for the school was donated by others wanting the education, and to see additional police horses go barefoot. I spent 2 weeks with Martha and other students, trimming and dissecting cadaver feet, getting schooled on proper hoof mechanism, evaluating and mapping hooves, treating lameness in horses, and proper trimming techniques.

After the 2 week "Hoof Groom Course," I continued with Shadow. My first police horse to take barefoot after Shadow was Barney. He had been chronically lame and abscessing since November, 2003. I evaluated Barney and pulled his shoes in February, 2004. I found excessive bar that had covered the entire bottom of the sole. I trimmed the bar, and started to balance his hooves. He has since not been lame, and continues to be barefoot as a police horse.

Since Shadow and Barney, I have taken an additional 9 horses into the Barefoot Program. Most of the horses in the program are horses that have had physical problems which have now been alleviated with a correct trim. Each additional horse that is taken into the barefoot program will have their hooves photographed and measured. Their progress will be evaluated each week by the Officer assigned to that horse. I am now trimming the horses that have been in the program about every 2 weeks. I am currently working on a Quarter/Arab mare that had very contracted hooves. She is now downtown, barefoot, and doing very well.

The City has since sent another Officer to Martha Olivo's "Hoof Groom Course," and is now also in the process of purchasing the needed tools for our use. We are also going to purchase 10 pairs of the Marquis Hoof Boots. I really like the Old Mac's, but you cannot replace any of the parts on them. With the Marquis, we are able to replace parts, including the soles, instead of replacing the whole boot. I have spoken with Corporal Mike Morrow of the Tampa Police Mounted Unit, who uses the Old Mac's. Their police horses wear hoof boots all the time, and they usually get 9 months of service before the boot soles are worn down. Our department will not use the hoof boots full time, but being able to replace the soles is important to us. The Marquis Boots will be used for transitioning a new horse into barefoot, long assignments, or protection in large disturbances.

Although there is much discussion over horses going barefoot, for the horses we have transitioned, we are very pleased with the results. More horses will continue to be added as the advantages become more apparent. We would like to extend an invitation for anyone wanting to visit our horses to contact me at 713-812-5158.

Greg Sokoloski, Police Officer  
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[Click here to read Part 2 of this article.](#)

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### **City of Houston Police Horses Go Barefoot, part 2** Houston Police Department Mounted Unit—Barefoot Program by Greg Sokoloski, Police Officer City of Houston, Texas



Above, Officer Sokoloski and Shadow, a 4 yo Dutch Warmblood, at the convention center, wearing Marquis Hoof Boots.

The Houston Police Department's Mounted Patrol Unit currently has 34 full time Police Horses, as well as 2 horses in training. Since the winter issue (18) of The Horses Hoof, we have gone from 11 barefoot horses to 21 barefoot horses. We will be adding an additional horse, now shod, to the barefoot program in August.

We have made great strides in not only adding more horses into the Barefoot Program, but have also sent two of the Units' Officers to Martha Olivo's Hoof Groom Course. Officer Danny Pryor attended the Hoof Groom Course held at Darolyn Butler's Ranch in Humble Texas, in December, 2004. Officer Scott Berry just returned from the Hoof Groom Course held at Texas A&M's Cavalry barn. The Texas A&M Parsons Mounted Cavalry Unit, under the direction of Bob Byrns, will now also transition their Unit's horses from being shod to barefoot. The Houston Police Mounted Unit will now have 3 Hoof Grooms to continue the progress of the Unit's barefoot horses.

We have now completed an Access Database, under the direction of Officer Leslie Wills, that will include vital information to track not only all the Department's horses' daily activity, but also all the vital information on the barefoot horses. We are able to track when we pull shoes, to the time the rider and horse are used downtown, along with all events our barefoot horses worked. We will be able to input pictures and measurements of before and after, the condition of the barefoot horses' hooves, track each trim for the barefoot horses, track evaluations from the Officers on daily patrol days and special events, downtime a horse will have, and cost comparisons between shod and barefoot horses.

The current journey for the barefoot horses has not been without roadblocks. As we pulled shoes and began trimming some of the horses, we found very deformed and unbalanced hooves. The horses had compensated for these imbalances for years. The transformation for some begins with relief, and the ability to move without restriction. Shortly after pulling the shoes, the healing process begins. The ability the horse has to heal and reshape its hooves into correct form is amazing. During the process of healing, enormous changes are occurring, not only outside, but also inside. The most important part of this process is to allow the horse to heal by keeping the hoof form correct and providing turnout, so that the horse can move as much as possible.

The healing time for the majority of our horses has been very short. We are now seeing that the badly deformed hooves of a few of our horses will take time. Both Lt. Randy Wallace and Captain Mary Lentschke, Commanders of the Mounted Unit, have sat down with Martha Olivo and viewed one of her dissections of a cadaver leg. They both have an understanding of the importance of a barefoot horse, and what to expect once shoes are pulled and the barefoot process begins. This in itself is instrumental, because we now have an understanding of barefoot horses from the Officers that trim, the Officers and Supervisors that ride barefoot horses, and the managers of the Mounted Unit.

After the healing has finished, the process of the barefoot horse adapting to his environment will take place. The Houston Police Horses will walk, trot and canter over varying types of terrain. In the Downtown area, we have asphalt, concrete, pavers, marble, construction areas, and other types of road and walkway surfaces. The one issue Officers first understand is how much better footing and traction the barefoot horses have. The Officers understand that barefoot horses have better feeling in their hooves, and have the ability to adjust immediately once the hoof is placed on the ground.

Another issue is how much softer the barefoot horse walks. We have a few horses we call "ground pounders," who constantly slam their feet into the ground. Going barefoot has made these horses walk softer, slower, and much more comfortable in all their gaits. We have also found that horses thought to have "training" issues could have been that way due to pain and the constant pounding on hard surfaces with steel shoes.

During times of transition from shoes to barefoot, and in situations that dictate more protection, we will use hoof boots. We currently have in our supply the Marquis, Old Mac's, and Easyboot Epics hoof boots. All have been effective, and offer protection to

the unit's barefoot horses. Some of the pictures demonstrate crowd control situations—we will use hoof boots to protect against any debris or projectiles thrown at us or encountered on the ground.

We have started the barefoot trim on one of our horses with navicular. Joey was donated to the unit in 1998. He first started with lameness in November of 2003. Treatments and stall rest continued until he was finally put back on the streets in January 2005. In April 2005, he was once again lame and unable to continue on the streets. I was given the go ahead by the Unit's Vet and allowed to pull his shoes and trim his hooves.

Within 2 weeks, I was riding him in the arena, then out to the Bush Intercontinental Equestrian Trails, and finally Downtown Houston. I have been working him in the Marquis Hoof Boots downtown with no problems. We will continue with Joey being barefoot and allow more time until we see if he can consistently go downtown and do his job as a police horse.

As I mentioned previously, going barefoot is sometimes a long, tedious endeavor for some horses. Cadence has been one of these. Known for being lame off and on, Cadence was started in the barefoot program in March, 2005. He had seriously underrun heels, long toes, and a lot of sole and heel pressure. Cadence was removed from duty until approximately May. Finally the day to resume duty came, and he was assigned to Hermann Park. He seemed to be adjusting very well until June. It was noted by his Officer that he was becoming sorer every day until we finally removed him once again from duty. He is bruised and sore from trying to transition his body to the correct conformation to go with his more balanced trim. We will continue to allow the healing process to occur, and eventually allow him to return to his position within the Mounted Patrol.

In closing, I want to once again stress that the horse's ability to adapt to the barefoot trim is amazing to witness. Humans must first and foremost remember not all horses are the same. If there are physical problems along with bad hoof conformation, the healing process can be lengthy, but you must not give up. The hoof is an amazing piece of equipment, and the horse's well being—and sometimes their lives—depend on it. Our horses are so much healthier and happier. People have noticed not only better dispositions, but glossier coats, along with much less downtime.

If anyone ever comes to Houston, they are welcome to stop by and visit our facility, at 300 N. Post Oak Lane. You can also contact me, Officer Greg Sokoloski at (713) 812-5158. Come see for yourself what a wonder the barefoot program is.

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[Click here to read Part 1 of this article.](#)

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