

Hoof Care Corner

Welcome back to the Hoof Care Corner, a series of short articles written to educate horse enthusiasts about a variety of hoof care topics, ranging in scope from “the benefits of barefoot” to “when wedge pads matter”. Our topic today is the farrier-owner relationship.

April 2015

Your Farrier and You- A Team-Based Approach to Hoof Health

Farriers are a bit like auto mechanics. We’ve all taken our car into the shop when it makes that funny noise. We make fools of ourselves trying to describe it to the mechanic over the phone- “It only happens when I hit 23 mph, and then it goes Whirrrr....kerpluk, kerpluk, buh buh buh buh.” Horses are just the same. Your mare is sound in-hand, but feels “off” somehow when you ride. Explaining this “feel” can be tough, but your farrier only sees your horse once every 6 weeks. You ride every day, and so your observations are critical information for the farrier whose job it is to “look under the hood and tune-her-up”.

In this article we’ll discuss the importance of good communication between you, the farrier and the vet. Then we’ll review some of the ways that horse owners can directly influence the success of their horse’s hoof care program.

Effective Communication

How do we become good communicators? By listening and talking, of course! Begin by describing your observations as best you can. Where lameness is concerned, your farrier should take the time to listen carefully and ask questions. Then you should both watch the horse move. If the horse is sound in hand, saddle her up and ride her. Alternatively, your farrier may notice a potential problem before you do- swelling in a limb, tenderness in the frog, or lameness as the horse walks from his stall to the cross-ties. Look when they point it out to you, and listen to their recommendations for how to proceed if the issue is hoof-related.

Communication is as important for the everyday as it is for addressing lameness concerns. When it comes to routine care, most farriers love explaining their trade. If you have questions, just ask! Bend over the foot and point at the thing on their frog that you noticed last time you picked it out. Ask why she is squirting that rubbery stuff under the pad and shoe. Ask whether those nails hurt, or if Mr. Chips can go barefoot this winter. Teaching you only makes our job easier, because it enables you to make better decisions about hoof care. As a farrier, I can recommend shoes, but it is you, the owner, who ultimately decides whether he will be shod. Your decision should be an informed one.

Effective communication is also knowing when NOT to give advice. Your farrier may notice swelling in the hock, but his role is not to diagnose that swelling. Good farriers never hesitate to recommend bringing in the vet whenever diagnostics are required. The expense of one lameness exam is nothing compared to the expense of treating permanent damage caused by mis-managed pathology.

No where is communication more important than during a formal lameness evaluation. For that reason, I believe it is critically important for the owner, farrier and vet to all be present together at the evaluation. When radiographs are involved, all three should review them. At a minimum, farriers and vets should communicate by phone or email regarding a case and agree together on whatever farrier changes are required.



Photo 1 Caption: Vets and farriers practice good communication during lameness exams at this Maine Farriers Association clinic.

Understanding WHY and HOW a treatment plan will address the pathology allows farriers to make good decisions at every step in the shoeing process- from trimming and shoe selection to nailing and choice of packing material. Similarly, comprehensive understanding of the lameness issues makes for better follow-up care. Is the prescribed wedge pad a temporary measure, or a permanent one? When all members of the team are present, these are the kinds of discussions that can happen.

How can you promote good communication during a lameness exam? Invite your farrier and make sure he or she is included in the evaluation. Ask questions and review the x-rays on-site. Don't be afraid to ask for definitions of technical terms. Ask your farrier to show you and the vet an example of the shoeing package he proposes and to explain how it will work. Ask your vet to send written recommendations to the farrier, and ask the farrier to email photos of the finished shoeing to your vet. In this way, effective communication can continue from the initial evaluation all the way through treatment and recovery.

How can YOU help keep your horse sound?

Effective teamwork is about more than just good communication. Everyone also has to play a role. What is yours when it comes to hoof health?

First, establish a routine of professional care for your horse and stick to it. Every 6-8 weeks is typical. Why so often? Actually, compared to the wild horse, this schedule is hopelessly long. The horse hoof evolved to meet the needs of wild horses traveling up to 30 miles per day over rough terrain, resulting in a daily natural trimming process. It may surprise you to learn that your horse grows a new hoof wall every 6 months to a year! Though a regular schedule of trimming, farriers can trim excess hoof safely and make positive changes to the hoof wall growing down from the coronet band.



Photo 2 Caption: Hind hoof in need of more regular farrier care to control excessive horn growth.

Second, provide a safe and healthy environment for your hoof care appointments. Allow me to paint two pictures. One: A young filly stands outside on



Photo 3 Caption: Rubber stall mats form a clean, dry stall environment.

ground that is pitted and sloped making it hard to evaluate hoof balance or conformation. It's summer and the bugs are out. Every 10 seconds she yanks her foot away and stomps it down into the mud, caking the hoof I've just cleaned and my tools in grime. She does not stand quietly so I must use one hand to hold her hoof and try to work my tools one-handed. Two: A gelding stands quietly inside an open-air run-in shed.

Beneath him is a rubber mat. When I pick up the foot and clean it, it stays clean and I can sight the balance, then tuck it between my legs and trim with efficient precision using both hands. Which horse gets better hoof care?

The answer is obvious but let's review what makes a great hoof care corner. The area is protected from weather, bugs, and other distractions. The ground is level and dry and provides an un-obstructed view of the horse's hooves. The horse is accustomed to having his legs and hooves handled. Your farrier can help teach your horse to stand quietly for his hoof care. Ultimately, though, horses respond best to small requests made often, rather than to large demands made infrequently. This means the long-term lesson of standing quietly is up to you, through daily learning. It's hardly fair to ask a filly to stand quietly for 30 minutes while a complete stranger handles her feet if she has not yet even learned to pick up her feet for you to clean them out.

And speaking of environment, the one you provide for your horse is absolutely critical to long-term hoof health. We all live in New England, and know that mud-season is just part of the joy of owning horses. If your mud-season is 12 months long, though, it might be time to consider changes to your horse's environment. What is ideal? The ideal footing is dry, and similar to the footing where you ride. Stone dust spread in high-traffic areas of your paddock is fabulous for developing a sole callus in the bare foot. Finally, the ideal environment encourages movement as much as possible. Movement stimulates blood flow in the foot, which in turn encourages growth. Limiting stall time and positioning water and feed stations in a way that forces horses to move around are both ways that you can promote motion for your horse.

Nothing, though, beats riding itself as a way to get those legs into locomotion. So my last bit of advice on hoof health for the horse owner is Ride, Ride, Ride!! Nothing gets the blood flowing like a lope across an open field, and the more you ride, the better chance your horse has of growing healthy hooves. So whether you go round about a ring in preparation for a show, or head out on the trail with friends, remember that you owe that ride to your horse. You'll both be healthier because of it. Happy Trails, everyone!

Contributer bio

Liselle Batt is a full-time farrier in western Maine. She attended farrier school in Washington State, is accredited through the American Association of Professional Farriers and the current secretary for the Maine Farriers Association. Liselle advocates an educated, common-sense approach to hoof care and to that end offers barefoot trimming, booting fitting, conventional shoeing and glue-ons to clients. Additional information about Western Maine Horseshoeing and Trimming is available on her website.