

Solving the Mystery of Lost Shoes

Educating your clients about how this happens will enable your business to run more smoothly

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Lost horseshoes are a nightmare for horse owners as well as horseshoers. For the horse owner it never fails to happen at the most inopportune time. He heads out at 4 a.m. to load his horse for a rodeo and finds him missing a shoe. Or she's scheduled at 10:27 a.m. to test for 3rd level dressage and as she's cleaning her horse's feet out, she discovers one shoe is missing.

They start calling their farriers names we can't reprint here. When the farrier shows up to reset or replace the shoe, he's asked why did the shoe "fall off?"

"Didn't you trim enough foot off last time?" "Have you changed your brand of nails?"

And the farrier? Maybe you've just loaded the camping gear in the pickup truck. You haven't taken 4 days off all summer. The kids are excited. Then the telephone rings. Your wife threatens you with death if you answer, but "it might be important."

It is, of course. "I'll only be an hour and we'll be on our way," you promise. You've got questions of your own as you look at a horseshoe twisted into a perfect "S" shape. You know it wasn't that shape when you nailed it on. It's pretty darned obvious this shoe didn't simply "fall off."

As farriers, we've all been through this. But if it's happening to you more than usual, you might be surprised to find that there are definite patterns in losing shoes. Here's some information that should be helpful — and can be shared with your shoeing clients so they can help you minimize this pesky and time-consuming problem.

Here are some statistics I've put together on lost shoes, based on my own experience.

20% of horses lose 80% of the shoes.

Nearly all horseshoes are lost at the horse's home.

The most frequent reasons for shoe loss are the environment where the horse spends most of his time and an unaware owner.

Environment

Let's consider the environment first. What is it in a horse's environment that could make his shoes fall off?

First and most common is wire fencing. Horses lose shoes in wire fencing, often twisting them into that “S” shape I was referring to. You’ll find that they’re usually losing just a front shoe and that it’s usually the same one — either left or right.

You’ll also find that these horses often live in small, grassless areas. But just outside the paddock there is lush green grass, standing several inches high. Owners may notice that the fence that was 5-feet high when they installed it is now a foot shorter thanks to some consistent pawing at its bottom by a horse who wants to reach that tempting forage.

Suggest that when owners install fence wire, they raise it a foot off the ground before nailing it to the post. With a fence that’s already installed, they can cut the fencing off a foot or so from the bottom. It won’t stop horses from wanting to get to the grass on the other side, but at least they won’t be hooking a shoe in the wire as they paw.

Better yet, suggest running an electric wire around the interior of a fence to keep horses away from it.

Shoes are often lost around rock outcroppings or on tree roots by shady trees. Imagine a horse holed up under a shade tree in the summer, stomping flies all the while, amidst the rocks and roots. Before long the edges of the roots and rocks are exposed, creating a perfect environment for the horse to hook a heel and pull a shoe.

Water And Mud

If horses are in larger pastures where there are ponds or creeks, you can be assured they will be in those areas at least three or four times a day — especially if it’s their only source of water. Even if it isn’t, they’ll be in and around the wet area because that’s where the new, succulent grass is growing. At the water’s edge, they’ll sink into mud up to their fetlocks.

Let me make it clear, I don’t believe horses’ shoes get sucked off their feet in the mud, like rubber boots might get pulled from ours. Whenever the owner recovers a shoe from one of these water holes, inevitably, the shoe is sprung downward. I believe what’s actually happening is a horse’s front feet sink into the mud and don’t come out as quickly or cleanly as they should. That delay results in the horse stepping on the heels of that slow front with his hind, thus “stepping off” a front shoe.

If this wasn’t the case, we’d be seeing rear shoes sucked off in the mud, too. And no one has ever handed me a rear shoe that was “sucked off” in the mud.

Even if a horse does not pull a shoe in the creek or around the pond, too much moisture is not healthy for horse’s feet. Tell your clients that if a horse is in and out of a wet environment a half a dozen times a day, or is hosed off every time they work him, their horse’s feet may be getting too soft.

Tell them to think about their own finger nails. Every time they wash dishes or take a bath, their finger-nails soften with the moisture. The same thing happens to soaked horse hooves. They become soft and the horseshoe nails start to loosen. The next thing you know, the horse loses a shoe.

There are a couple of things your clients can do to help in this regard. For wet or humid climates I recommend applying a product called “Crossapol” from Delta-Mustad Hoofcare Center to horses’ hooves. It is a solution that helps bind the protein or keratin of the hoof. These protein molecules are responsible for making the hoof strong.

For horses in a dry or arid environment, I recommend using some other product, such as Hoofmaker from Straight Arrow Product, to moisturize hooves three or four times a week. If a client is washing or hosing off a horse five or six times a week, applying a hoof conditioner just before washing will keep the feet from absorbing too much moisture.

Lost Shoes In The Stable

It is not uncommon for horses to lose a shoe in their stall. How does this happen? Well, take a 12-by-12-foot stall that has a deep hole in the center following months of cleaning and not replacing the dirt that is removed with the waste. When a horse lives in a stall like that and lies down, it is awkward for him to get back to his feet. As he scrambles to get to his feet, he can step on himself and pull a shoe.

Your clients may try to tell you stall mats should prevent this. I cannot tell you how many times I tripped over a stall mat while going in to halter a horse for shoeing. Stall mats that have gotten raised up at the corners and have shavings packed under them won't lay flat anymore. Mats that have moved around because they are not secured to the floor create an edge to hook a shoe on.

The interesting thing about lost shoes in stalls is that as many rear shoes are lost as fronts — in contrast to what happens in ponds and creeks. And if a horse is sharing his living space with surplus items such as lumber, old washing machines or used vehicles, they all become horseshoe magnets.

Other Factors

How else do so many horses lose so many shoes at home? I knew quite a few horses that lost shoes when they had been locked in their stalls for 3 days because of bad weather. A sunny day finally arrives and the horse bolts for open space as soon as the door is open. The owner is thinking they missed a bet by not putting old Dobbin on the race track, then looks down and sees a shoe lying right in front of old Dobbin's stall. Old Dobbin ripped out of that stall so fast, he reached up and stepped on a front shoe with a hind shoe and pulled it off.

The same thing can happen when a horse is turned loose in the arena, especially if they have been locked up for a few days. Tell your clients that booting up properly is a good way of preventing this.

If a client tells you they took Duke out for a ride and Rocki had to stay home, but says it was Rocki who lost two shoes, have them check the paddock. Odds are they'll find a horseshoe lying in the corner at one end of a big rut that runs all the way down to the other end of the paddock. The other shoe will be in the ruts somewhere, or maybe hanging on the fence where Rocki twisted it off while pacing waiting for his paddock mate to come back.

Away From Home

Here are some things to tell your clients whose horses lose shoes while they are away from home.

Footing

If the footing in an arena is too deep, it is just the same as if you are out walking or running on the beach in deep sand. Your foot sinks in a little deeper and you don't have any resistance at the front of your foot to support you during breakover. In the case of a horse, deep footing will cause the front feet

to break over much more slowly, meaning that the hind foot can catch up to and “grab” a front shoe. Remember, horses are heavier on the forehand due to the way they are built. There is an art to setting up an arena properly for each discipline.

Rider Error

An unbalanced rider, one who doesn't aid the horse, or a rider who lets the horse eat or go to sleep while going down the trail will lose shoes.

On the trail there is always a variety of footings, creek crossings, tree roots, washouts, etc. Riders need to stay aware of the trail and keep the horse focused as well. A horse that is going down the trail half-asleep or not paying attention is much more likely to stumble over obstacles in the trail, then reach up and pull a shoe.

Fatigue And Boots

Horses that are not conditioned properly, horses that are tired after long rides and young horses doing more work than they are used to become fatigued.

Alert riders will start to hear them forge, which means their front feet are not breaking over and leaving the ground before the hind feet come up under the horse. The hind will either hit the bottom of the front shoe and make an annoying clicking sound, or step on the front shoes, very possibly springing a heel and pulling the shoe off.

Young horses that are just being started are very likely to be stepping all over themselves as they learn to balance with a rider's weight on them. Lack of conditioning and pushing a young horse are recipes for lost shoes.

Bell boots, splint boots and fetlock boots all have their purposes. You may want to recommend their use to some of your clients if you believe their horses are losing shoes due to causes that boots can prevent. Bell boots, like horseshoes, come in various sizes and are usually used only on fronts. Tell your clients it is important that they have the right size for the horse.

A properly sized bell boot should touch the ground at the rear of a horse's foot when the horse is standing on a flat surface. That way, when the heel lifts off the ground, the boot will drop over the shoe and protect it from the toe of the rear shoe that might otherwise step on the heel. Bell boots also offer some protection to heel bulbs in cases of overreaching.

Overreaching occurs when a horse reaches up with a hind foot and actually strikes the front foot at or above the coronet band. Cuts in the rear portion of a horse's front foot, just at the heel bulb, are a sign of this. Young horses are likely to overreach as they are getting started.

Stumbling on the trail can cause a horse to try and collect itself and it may come up with a hind foot and overreach.

Lameness

Lameness can also cause a horse to lose shoes. Horses with ring bone, pedal osteitis, navicular disease or sore heels will not perform as they should and, if not shod correctly for these issues, are more likely to pull shoes.

Balance And Proper Shoeing

Last but not least, improperly balanced feet — in other words bad shoeing — can cause lost shoes. As a farrier, you need to properly balance a horse's feet to his or her particular conformation, and then fabricate a properly sized and shaped shoe to fit the feet. You need adequate heel length and adequate heel expansion in order to support the limb.

The heels of a horseshoe should extend 1/4 inch beyond the heels of a hoof after the hoof has been trimmed to the widest part of the frog. The horseshoe should extend beyond the hoof wall approximately 1/8 to 3/16 of an inch from the widest part of the foot rearward to allow for expansion.

As shoers, we should be aware of this from Day 1, but because horses pull their shoes in so many ways, we sometimes start using shorter shoes and leaving less and less room for heel expansion. After all, we don't want to come back every couple of weeks and replace a shoe, we don't want to lose a client and we don't want to be called a "lousy horseshoer."

Some clients may think it's great if their horses' shoes stay on for 12 to 14 weeks, but we know that small, tight shoes will eventually cause foot problems.

As farriers, we need to acknowledge that a poor shoeing job can be why a horse loses shoes. If the foot is not balanced correctly, if the shoes are too small, if the nails are not deep enough or come out too low, hoof walls can weaken and crack. If a client's horse has poor quality hoof walls, make the client aware of it and suggest tactics like using clips to help keep shoes on in the short term, and adding feed supplements to improve hoof quality or use of a topical dressing to harden the hoof wall for the longer term.

I feel a farrier's responsibility is to help educate clients. They also need to beware of an old saying among farriers: "If you've never lost a shoe, you haven't shod many horses."

Make sure your clients realize that even the best farrier will have horses that lose shoes once in awhile.