

The Importance Of Horsemanship

Understand the effect of all of your tools and motions in the shoeing process.

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Horsemanship is a necessity for longevity and success as a farrier. It contributes to your safety and is the essence of understanding of horses. Without it, a farrier will have a short, unproductive career.

Horsemanship in its most basic definition is just that: horse-man-relationship. It is a journey rather than a destination. Horsemanship can be difficult to teach, in large part because some people just seem to have "it," while others may work a lifetime with horses and never get "it." There is a close relationship between horsemanship and safety as it pertains to farriers.

Before Going In

Don't think you can man-handle a horse, because even the smallest ones are stronger than you. Avoid backing a horse into a "mental corner" using restraints that it is not accustomed to. They will come out fighting. Your handling skills need to persuade the horse to resist its fight or flight instinct.

It is important though, to know when to say when. While it should not be our job to train the horse to stand or pick up its feet, many such situations fall to us. Generally, when it is time for a restraint, it is time to call it quits. No horse is worth you suffering an injury.

The horse may lack handling or may be in pain and over reactive. The owner may be willing to work with the animal, or circumstances may require tranquilization. For liability reasons, always call a vet for drug administration.

If the owner wants to work with the horse that is unaccustomed to having its feet handled, I prefer a stockman's cane as opposed to roping the legs. Horses often fight the constriction around the leg and can kick violently. A long cane with the hook used around the fetlocks, encourages the horse to shift its weight and buckle the limb in a calm submissive manner. Unlike the rope, the cane's touch can be varied in firmness, and applied and removed more safely..

Farriers often hit horses that aren't standing well because of their own frustration. If hitting horses becomes your habit, word will spread quickly through the horse community and your reputation will be ruined.

The horse needs to be as calm as possible so you can work on it without incident. A stressed horse will certainly never stand much less to have its feet handled. Avoid separating a horse from its friends. Encourage your clients to bring all of the horses in, and not turn them out until they are all done. Some will need to be done in the stabling area, as opposed to a separate shoeing area.

Plan an exit strategy for every shoeing situation. Open, non-obstructed barn aisles are best. Avoid farrier work in wash and grooming bays that are three sided. If a horse pulls back, there is no escape.

Some farriers prefer to work on tied horses rather than having them held. This is a judgment call. Not all horses cross tie and not all horses straight tie. Some walk all over their handlers if held and are better tied. This is where communication between you and the owner is a must.

When working with a handler, I find it safer for him or her to be on the opposite side of me when working on the front feet and on the same side as me on the hind feet. Standing in this manner, allows the horse to be pulled away from you, not on top of you.

The exception is foals. Trim foals in their stalls, where they will be the calmest. Have the handler on the same side as you. Use the walls to your advantage. Point its head in a corner using another wall to “hold” the foal straight. Enter the stall, looking for potential hazards, taking only the tools you need rather than your shoeing box.

Most horses are more used to being approached from the left side. Don't walk toward it too quickly. When working with foals, ponies and donkeys, consider approaching from a crouched position, making yourself smaller and less threatening.

Handling The Hooves

When picking up the feet, ask for the horse to pick it up only as hard as you are willing to receive it. Many people grab legs too hard. Sacrificing the foot makes a horse vulnerable.

This is not a speed contest. Young, green, sore or old horses require more time to adjust their weight and consider picking up their feet. If the horse won't give you the foot, look for the horse to shift its weight. Stand up and praise it. Ask again. Patience. If horses are rushed, they may snatch the legs away and strike or kick.

When placing the hooves in a variety of farrier positions, the farrier needs to go to the limb rather than bring the limb to it. The goal is to abduct (bring away from the midline of the body) the limbs as little as possible. Not every front foot can be put in a traditional farrier stance.



Dean Moshier says some farriers may find this a poor position for the shoer. However, he finds this technique puts the horse at ease and results in less fighting with it.

Encourage the limbs into position in a slow and steady manner. The size of the horse doesn't dictate flexibility.

Don't assume that a taller horse is flexible and that a shorter one is not. Many horses have range-of-motion issues that will not allow them to achieve the position you would like. These horses will stand comfortably in a lesser position, but can react violently if pushed beyond their ability. Learn the range of the front and hind limbs considering age and soundness.

Develop your skill at using your time wisely underneath the horse. How long is it reasonable to ask it to stand? That time is going to be much shorter on a young, old or lame horse. If the horse gets antsy, it is OK to release it and relax for a minute. Stand up, take a break and pet it. You will both benefit.

A hind-toe touch technique on top of a steel-toed boot works well on horses that lack range, are young or green. Place the leg next to the other leg to lock it in place. While one would think of this as a very vulnerable position for the farrier, the opposite is true. If the horse feels insecure, it simply pulls the limb forward. In a traditional farrier stance, it feels more restricted and fights its way out by jerking or kicking.

Lame horses may require switching from limb to limb to maximize comfort. Foundered horses may be more comfortable having the hind feet done first. Depending on the amount of foot to be removed, an unsound limb should be done first. Then it will better bear weight when the supporting foot is requested.

Many situations affect how a horse stands. Not every horse sees well, as some may be completely blind on one or both sides. A horse with poor vision or blindness in one eye may stand well on the side that it sees well on, only to give you a rodeo on the other side. Try to reassure the animal as you make a greater effort to touch and talk to it on the compromised side.

Some horses can be hard to work with because they have mental scars from bad experiences. They are typically calm in other situations. As a distraction, try feeding these horses while working on them. Tense horses have tense jaws. Horses have to relax the jaw to chew. Discontinue this practice as the horse gains confidence from positive reinforcement.

Tools Of The Trade

Even your farrier tools can be used with a greater sense of horsemanship in mind. Roll the shoeing cart behind you as you approach the horse. It makes it less likely to catch the movement and potentially spook.



The left hand should be outstretched toward the muzzle. Let the horse sniff the hand, then scratch the neck and withers with the right. Mutual grooming is a sign of friendship among horses.

Sometimes the hardest part of the shoeing process for the horse is removing the old shoes. If so, leave the dirt pack in a foot before pulling the shoe. This provides a cushion when prying off the shoe making shoe removal easier for thin- or sore-soled horses. Avoid quick, hard movements that torque on the fetlocks and hocks.

Learn to feel the horse's reaction to your knife and nippers. You can misread a foot, but the horse won't misread a pain response. Listening to it can make the difference between a mere gouge out of the foot or a bloody mess.

Hoof stands take weight off of your body when used for the hind feet. They add security for the horse, as the limb is more stable and can be held in a lower position. When rasping the hind feet, try using a backward stroke, toward the heels, rather than a forward stroke. It will push the leg toward you in a more secure position rather than away from you where it is more likely to move. Every time that you move underneath the horse, you invite it to move. If its movement makes you uncomfortable, you move again, and thus the battle ensues.

The hammer strike on the shoe causes vibration that is transferred from the shoe directly to the hoof, causing discomfort. Driving a nail is not about the fewest number of blows, but rather the amount of vibration caused. When nailing first timers, sore horses or in colder climates, try a tap-TAP technique. It increases accuracy and lets the horse get into the rhythm knowing when the second heavier blow will come.

Overdriving the nail can be a problem. The closer the nail head gets to the shoe, the more shock the horse feels. Leave just a bit above the shoe to tap in or block later. Do not over block. Securing a shoe can be accomplished without the use of a clinch block. Smarter nailing can make the difference in getting the shoe on or not.

When clinching, gauge the horse's reaction. If it tenses or pulls back, you may have a close or hot nail. Immediately pulling that nail can save a possible abscess or lameness.

Care should be taken in setting the feet back down. Don't just throw the foot off of the stand. Place it back on the ground with the same care that the horse used in handing it to you.

Hot fitting is another concern for horse and farrier safety. Everything tells the horse to leave quickly. Smoke smells bad, is scary and there is a sizzle. When encountering a new horse, burn a piece of hoof near the untied horse. To reduce the horse's feeling of confinement, have the handler hold the horse in a relaxed manner. Carry on a low steady conversation with you, while you burn a hoof clipping and walk around the horse. Avoid short staccato "whoa"s. It encourages the horse to think that something is wrong and react.



When clinching, read the horse's reaction. If it tenses or jerks back, you may have a hot nail. Removing that nail could prevent a lameness issue down the road.

Occasionally, a horse may pull back in ties. Although it happens quickly, remain calm, move your tools out of the way, while stepping back toward the haunches (but not behind the horse) and encouraging it to move forward.

Generally, face the horse toward the anvil so it can watch your activity and won't be startled by the sounds. The horse will also see you as you approach to check your shoe fit.

It's Just Not You

Consider other strategies to make horses more cooperative. For example, try not to visit the barn when other horses are being fed. Encourage the barn staff to wait until you're done.

Ideally, horses can be turned out and caught prior to your arrival. The horse will tend to be calmer, having burned off some excess energy.

Flies are a pain in warm months. No horse will stand while being eaten by flies. Carry fly spray in your rig. Consider a fly sheet and fly wraps for the legs in extreme conditions.

Horsemanship is very important to a farrier. You may possess all of the horseshoeing talent in the world, but it won't matter if you can't get along with the horse.

Farriers are highly valued for their skills — all of them. Be smart. Be safe. Have fun. It's a great journey.

Farrier Dean Moshier and his wife Jennifer operate The Balanced Hoof And Horse out of Delaware, Ohio.



The horseman farrier will introduce hot fitting to a suitable horse by burning a piece of hoof near the horse. It is unsafe to try this for the first time with the horse tied in any manner.