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No foot, no horse – the role of farriery

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Simon Curtis has shod horses for 34 years in Newmarket, England. His family business is O. A. Curtis & Sons and he is attached to the Rosedale Equine Hospital at the Corrective Farriery Department. He was Master of the Worshipful Company of Farriers (2001-2002) and is a Fellow by examination. He is currently Chairman of the Farriers Registration Council and also an Honorary Associate of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Simon is a visiting lecturer to the National Stud, The British Racing School and Cambridge University. He has given workshops and lectured in 17 countries on 4 continents and been published in both veterinary and farriery journals. Simon Curtis is author of Farriery - Foal to Racehorse and Corrective Farriery - A Textbook of Remedial Horseshoeing.

Introduction

Hoof care is essential for the development and maintenance of soundness in the horse. Correct farriery care for the foal allows it to reach its ideal conformation. Good farriery for the mature horse includes good foot balance, the selection of the most suitable shoe and its correct application. Modern materials and technology enable the farrier to overcome injuries to, and conditions, of the equine foot thus enabling longer term soundness than was impossible only a few years ago.

Farriery for the foal

All foals must have their feet trimmed from one month old. This is an opportunity for the farrier and owner to check the foal's conformation so that treatment can be made while still effective. Training the foal to stand for the farrier is also much easier at this age. Foals hooves grow much faster than adults, at about 15 mm per month compared with 9 mm.

Shoeing the mature horse

Most horses in the UK are shod for 2 main reasons;

- 1) To protect the foot from excessive wear, horseshoes are usually made from mild steel, although some are shod with aluminium or plastic. This is tough but not so hard as to be slippery on tarmac or concrete.
- 2) To give grip, horseshoes are designed with a channel (fullering) around the base, which fills with grit and gives very good adhesion on road surfaces. Additionally studs or caulkins can be used to give extra grip. Screw-in studs allow the rider to select the best type for the surface and can be removed when not needed.

There is a third reason; various horseshoes can be used for remedial purposes to overcome injuries and conditions of the limb and foot.

Shoeing periods do vary according to the breed of horse and its use, eg a hunter, during the season, needs shoeing every 4 weeks, whereas a Shire horse may only need re-shoeing after 10 weeks. For most owners a shoeing schedule of 6 weeks will suffice. Any longer than this and the toes become too long causing stress to the tendons and ligaments and the shoe will begin to sink into the hoof causing excessive pressure to the seat of corn and internal soft tissue structures.

Foot trimming

Horses are not born wearing shoes and unless there is a reason (see above), they are more healthy without them. Nevertheless they still require a farrier to trim the feet regularly. This will keep the feet balanced, ie shaped appropriately to suit the conformation of the horse and reduce braking and splitting of the hoof wall.

Facilities

In order to get the best from your farrier you need to provide adequate facilities. If a farrier is expected to shoe out in a field in the rain then he will not give his best. A clean covered surface that is well lit is ideal. The area should also be safe, without tools, machinery, etc getting in the way and risking injury to the horse and farrier. Most farriers have mobile forges and heat their shoes, for hot-shoeing, with gas. Care should be taken as to the siting of the gas fire and children kept safely away. If you supply good facilities for your farrier then you are entitled to demand skilled craftsmanship on your horse's hooves.

Modern materials

For the last 10 years many synthetic materials have been available to farriers. These allow them to repair and protect hooves far easier than was previously possible. There are shoes that can be glued to the foot rather than nailed where this might improve soundness. At this time they are more expensive than traditional shoeing and farriers need special training to use them. There is now a greater variety of hoof-pads than ever before and, although most farriers loathe fitting them unless necessary, there are times when they are effective in treating an unsound horse. Most pads are under-filled with either a polymer urethane or a soft DIM material. Some have a synthetic frog on them which has been found to be effective in many cases.