

How to Find a Good Farrier – and Keep Him

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Getting quality horseshoeing is a matter of recognizing good shoeing work, recognizing a shoer's qualifications, and of being able to keep a good shoer once you've found one.

I. HOW TO RECOGNIZE A GOOD SHOEING JOB

The easiest and most commonly used method for an owner to judge a shoeing job is by whether it looks neat and pretty, and whether the shoes stay on. Veterinarians are typically more concerned with hoof balance, and may measure for equal heel lengths. Trainers typically look for performance results, even at the expense of soundness.

Unfortunately, each one of those criteria may be misleading – and even all of those criteria put together are not sufficient to indicate a good shoeing job. A shoeing job that allows the horse to function well, and that helps maintain soundness is a quality shoeing job. The function of a shoeing job is not determined by beauty; shoes are usually lost because of factors other than the quality of the shoeing job; balance is not determined by equal height of the heels; and future soundness does not have to be (should not be!) sacrificed for temporary performance. The following criteria are related to how the shoeing job helps or hinders the horse (though must be evaluated within a couple weeks of being shod):

A. Breakover

The point of breakover is the part of the toe of the hoof (or shoe) that the hoof pivots around when the heel of the hoof starts to lift off the ground during locomotion. The position of the point of breakover affects the strain on the flexor apparatus during locomotion. Duckett's Dot is a point on the frog about 3/8 of an inch farther back from the toe of the horse's hoof than the true point of the frog. It is near the center of pressure of the hoof; directly under the extensor process; and it is the center of mass of the coffin bone. The distance from that point to the outside edge of the wall should be very nearly the same to the right and to the left. That same distance (from the dot to the right or left outside edge of the wall) gives you an excellent rule of thumb for the proper position of the wall at the toe. From Duckett's Dot measure that distance forward, and the breakover point should be no farther forward than that. If the shoe must go any farther forward than that, it should be beveled so as not to touch the ground or impede the breakover. That is the maximum point of breakover. The optimum point of breakover is usually about 3/4 inch closer to the tip of the frog. Rockering the toe is one method to bring the point of breakover back. Another method is to simply set the shoe back from the front edge of the toe.

B. Support

Normally, the heels of shoe should extend back 1/8 to 1/2 inch or more past the ends of the heels of the hoof. The further back the shoe comes, the more support it gives to the flexor tendons and suspensory ligament. To shoe a horse without extending the heels of the shoes behind the heels of the hoof increases the strain compared to an unshod hoof (because of increased lever arm – the angle and distance from the fetlock to the point where the heel meets the ground). Contrary to popular belief, most hunter/jumpers, barrel horses, racehorses, etc. will keep shoes like this on without a problem. In fact, many horses lose shoes less frequently when they have the heels slightly extended than they do when the shoe heels are flush with the heel of the hoof. The heels of the shoe should be at least as far behind Duckett's Dot as the breakover point is in front of Duckett's Dot.

C. Shoe fit & shape

The shoe should follow the shape of the coronet (i.e. the wall should be straight, without flares, from the coronet to the shoe). However, the shoe should be slightly wider than the heels of the foot, and the toe of the shoe may be backed up behind the toe of the hoof in order to facilitate breakover.

D. Toe length & toe angle

Toe length should be as short as possible while still leaving adequate sole protection from bruising on rocks, etc. The sole should not yield to strong thumb pressure, and the hoof wall should be slightly longer than the sole, allowing for some cup to the foot. A typical 1000 pound horse has about a 3 & 1/4" toe length for the front foot and slightly longer for the hind feet.

As a rule of thumb, the toe angle should match the pastern angle. However, angles lower than 54 degrees put increased strain on the heels of the hoof, cause run-under heels, navicular disease, and increase the strain on the flexor tendons – leading to bowed tendons. Angles higher than 60 degrees are either indicative of clubfoot, or cause the pastern to drop too far, and put excessive strain on the suspensory ligament.

E. Medial-lateral balance

Both sides of the shoe should wear equally. The toe may wear slightly more, but side-to-side the wear should appear even. (Some lame horses, chronic or acute, will be an exception to this, as will some toed-out horses.) When viewed from the front of the hoof, the tubules, or grain of the horse's hoof should be straight and perpendicular to the ground. If the grain is at an angle it indicates the hoof is out of balance now. If the grain is curved, it indicates previous, and probably longstanding, balance problems.

F. Attitude, posture, gaits & movement

If your eye is keen, you should be able to see the horse should move as well, or better, after being shod than he did just before being shod. The horse should also stand as well, or more comfortably and squarely, with improved posture. The horse's overall attitude, and especially his attitude as he works should also be as good as before, or better.

II. HOW TO RECOGNIZE A GOOD SHOER

The non-performance horse, pasture pet, or broodmare owner may not require as expert a shoer as does the owner of a performance horse, or horse with a lameness problem.

A. Criteria for a basic shoer:

1) HORSES THAT HE HAS BEEN SHOEING LIKE HIM – Watch him shoe several horses that he has been doing regularly. Horses know when they are being helped or hindered. The horse's attitude toward the shoer will tell you a great deal. If the horse is happy to see him coming you can be sure he is helping him. If the horse is anxious and uncooperative with him (especially if consistently after a year of using the same shoer) it may indicate that he is not helping him.

2) FOUR (4) YEARS OF EXPERIENCE – Consider 4 years of full-time shoeing experience a minimum before you let someone work on your horse – unless he is an apprentice under the supervision of a master. Shoeing cannot be learned from a book. It takes years for a shoer to begin to truly see the effects of what he is doing. If a shoer has less than 4 years of experience, let him learn on someone else's horses. This is the practice throughout Europe – one must complete not only a course of study, but also a 4-year apprenticeship before being allowed to shoe on one's own.

3) HE IS A HORSEMAN, HANDLES HORSES WELL, OBVIOUSLY LIKES HIS WORK & HORSES – A good shoer needs to be able to tell the difference between a horse that is misbehaving because of pain or just lack of discipline. (It is usually pain, or fear... or flies, or insecurity.)

4) HONESTY – Driving a nail into the quick happens rarely, but it does happen – because of faulty nails, inconsistent hoof walls, the horse suddenly moving, or mistake. If your shoer tells you about it, you can treat the puncture wound, get a tetanus booster for the horse, and keep his hoof clean and dry for a few days. If he doesn't tell you, it could turn into a big problem. Your shoer should also be willing to say "I don't know" and seek help, or refer you to a specialist if necessary.

Above are the basic requirements for any shoer. However, if you have a performance horse, or a horse with any lameness problems, you will need more:

B. Criteria for a shoer of performance horses and/or horses with lameness:

1) TAKES AN INTEREST IN YOUR HORSE, HOW HE MOVES AND IF HE HAS ANY PROBLEMS – A good shoer cares about how the horse functions with the shoes. If he sees any unusual wear on the shoe, or signs of disease or deformity in the hoof he will want to ask you about possible reasons. (For example, unusual wear at the toe of a front foot may be due to a knee problem, developing navicular, or it may be due to pawing on concrete, etc.) Your shoer can't make these determinations unless you are there to walk or jog the horse, answer questions, and ask questions.

2) MORE EXPERIENCE – 10 years experience or more, the more the better. If he's had 10 years experience he has had the opportunity to see the effects of shoeing on the athletic career of some horses. One cannot begin to understand treatment and prevention for those diseases without having seen years of their course. One can't know much about trimming for limb deformities without having watched the results of several crops of foals growing up. He has had the opportunity to watch the longer progression of chronic diseases like founder and navicular. He has probably seen 8 crops of foals mature. However, even 10 years is only half the life of a horse.

Experience cannot be overemphasized as a necessary part of gaining knowledge. However, experience is just an opportunity – it doesn't mean much unless it is combined with continuing study.

3) CONTINUING EDUCATION – A performance and/or therapeutic shoer should read the professional journals, and attend clinics and seminars. He should be a member of state and national farrier associations. One can never know it all. Similarly, education does not mean much without the chance to experience it first-hand.

4) TEACHING AND/OR RESEARCHING – A still higher level would include those who write, research, lecture or teach shoeing – in addition to all the above.

C. Criteria important to some owners, but not to the horse

The following, while they may be of great importance to you personally, have no bearing at all on your shoer's ability, and may mislead you – they don't matter to the horse:

1) ON TIME – It's nice if he is. However, it is hard to predict what care individual horses need, or how cooperative they will be, so it becomes impossible to schedule precisely. On the other hand, if he is continually late without calling, maybe you should try someone else.

2) WHO HE SHOES FOR – If he shoes for top names and horses that are winning, certainly he must be good? Well, probably, but not necessarily. And if he doesn't shoe for top names he can still be excellent. It just doesn't mean much.

3) NO LOST SHOES – Well, that's nice, but that has more to do with the horse, the horse's condition, the condition of his hoofs, and the condition of the stable and grounds, than it does with the shoeing. Also, despite the best shoeing and care, missteps occasionally occur that will bend or pull shoes.

4) PRICE – Better shoers tend to charge more, but there are exceptions.

5) SPEED – The horse is generally more cooperative if he doesn't have to stand all day for shoeing. Better shoers are usually faster, though not in a hurry. To do an uncomplicated shoeing of all four feet on a horse in more than 3 hours or less than 40

minutes is suspicious. However, fast work does not necessarily mean competence, or carelessness; and slow work does not necessarily mean incompetence, or carefulness.

6) PRETTY WORK – One can do a pretty job that doesn't function well for the horse, and one can do an ugly looking job which functions very well. Generally speaking, better shoers do attractive work that also functions well, but you can't judge function just by its attractiveness.

7) EQUIPMENT – A fancy truck and lots of tools don't mean much. A good shoer could probably do a good job with not much more than a couple of rocks. However, better shoers will have well-used and well cared for equipment.

8) METHOD – A better shoer is likely to work in the forge, or at least be able to. However, the method is not important at all. The results are what count, and they can be reached in many different ways. One does not have to have handmade shoes or hot-fitting (or any other method) to have quality shoeing.

9) EXPLAINS WELL – You may want to hire only someone who is willing and able to explain what he is doing, and what your options are. However, some excellent shoers are not good at explaining, and some who are not good shoers may be very good at telling you what you want to hear.

10) WILL TAKE DIRECTIONS FROM YOUR VET – It can be wonderful for the horse and everyone concerned if the vet and farrier can work in harmony. However, that only happens when they can communicate directly, and each shows respect for the other's expertise. Most vets have little training, experience, or knowledge of shoeing, yet some insist on giving instructions to the farrier. This is like having your physician tell your dentist how to fill cavities. In vet school, the average vet gets a total of only 4 hours instruction on the horse's hoof – including anatomy, surgery, diseases and shoeing. If your farrier is not more of an expert in shoeing than your vet, you need a better farrier. Follow your vet's advice on medicine and surgery. Follow your farrier's advice on shoeing. If the two of them can work together, so much the better – but don't expect it. The only way they can work together is if they communicate directly with each other. If your vet wants to ask your farrier to do something in particular then be sure to have your vet call your farrier and speak directly with him about that. If you relay veterinary instructions to your farrier you may not relay them completely or accurately, but more importantly, it prevents your shoer from making suggestions, asking questions, getting clarifications, and giving feedback to your vet. For the best interest of your horse make sure any veterinary suggestions are made directly to your shoer by the vet.

11) WILL TAKE DIRECTIONS FROM YOUR TRAINER – Communication between the trainer and farrier can be very beneficial. However, problems develop when one or another oversteps their area of expertise. You'll find your horse, and relationships, will benefit if you do not allow your trainer or vet to direct or prescribe shoeing, and you do not allow your shoer to prescribe training methods, surgery or medications. Each person has their area of expertise – see that they don't step on each other's toes. And by all means, do not allow yourself to become the mouthpiece for one expert to step on the expertise of another.

III. HOW TO KEEP A GOOD FARRIER

Keeping a good farrier is every bit as important as finding one. There are a limited number of good farriers – you don't want to run out. More importantly, any farrier can do a better job for you and your horses if he is familiar with them and their history, and doesn't have to go through the same trial and error all over again. Once you've found a good farrier, work to keep him – provide the following:

A. Respect for the farrier's time

Have your horses caught and ready, with clean dry legs and picked out hoofs.

B. Respect for the farrier's expertise

You are wise to have a shoer who is more expert in shoeing than you are, and more expert than your veterinarian, trainer or friends. If your farrier is more knowledgeable than you are, then you should follow his or her advice. Do not tell him how to do his job and do not be the mouthpiece for others to tell him how to do his job. You are paying for his expertise, if you can't trust his expertise, then stop wasting your money and his time – get a better farrier – one you respect and trust.

C. Communication

Be there to ask and answer questions, and discuss any problems with him. Pay him immediately when he's done, and make arrangements for the next appointment. Let him know whenever there is a problem that might be related to shoeing – but don't tell him how to fix it.

D. Good place to work

The shoeing area should be clean, accessible by truck, level, protected from the weather, well-lit (preferably lit from the sides and behind – not lit from directly above the horse), roomy, safe, away from horse traffic, and free from obstructions & distractions. Dogs and children should not be playing under foot.

E. Cooperative horses to work on

Your farrier may not be able to do quality work on an un-cooperative horse. If, to obtain the necessary cooperation, your farrier recommends having your horse trained professionally, or having your vet tranquilize the horse, then have that done.

F. Regular schedule

Have your horses done on a 4 to 8 week schedule, as your farrier recommends. Make appointments well in advance, and keep them.

*"The good ones [farriers] do not have to boast, demand or complain.
If it's not worth their time... they can just quietly slip away."*

– Horse Illustrated, Dec. 1991