



This article is the experience of Dawn Willoughby, introducing herself as a natural trimmer from Delaware. It is offered here as the insight and opinion of a fellow hoof care provider.

## Business Tips for Hoof Care Practitioners

I have been trimming my own horse since 2002 and doing other horses since 2004. Becoming a professional trimmer was a development I had never considered in 2002. I have a background with horses but knew nothing about hooves when I started this journey. Helping horses is my retirement passion and my family's secondary income. Along the way I realized that although I enjoy trimming, my limit is about 5 horses per day before parts of my right arm start to break. It wasn't surprising to me (coming from a sales background) that what I also loved was teaching. Teaching owners to trim, writing articles for newbies, maintaining a web site and writing pieces like this is very rewarding. Some of what I have to offer may apply to your practice and aspirations, some not. You be the judge.

### Practical Matters

#### Boots and Padding

At my first Pete Ramey seminar, he encouraged, actually *insisted*, that we professionals carry boots. I followed his advice but not with the insight I now have. If you have \$1,000 or more that you can pay off in six monthly payments without interest, then I would encourage you to take advantage of the EasyCare "Fill Your Truck Program" (FYTP); in my case it's fill your Blue Bug. I recently took advantage of this program and discovered what a savings in shipping it is. Previously each pair cost about \$15 in shipping. When I placed the Truck order, it worked out to be about \$2 per pair. I know from experience, that for my territory, Epics in sized 1-3 and Old Mac's g-2 sizes 4-5 are the most commonly used boots. For my second FYTP I intend to add a pair or two of smaller and larger boots but will not stock the real outliers like pony-sized Epics. I can order those as needed.

To compliment my stock, I coordinate with cross-over farrier Laura Florence who is only 20 minutes away. If either of us is in urgent need of boots, we call the other. Finally, I carry Equicaste. I have only done two horses and neither looked better in Equicaste than in boots but at least it gives the sore horses some comfort, when I don't have their boot size. Since I am on a learning curve, I still need to find the right horses for Equicaste. I consider it a one or two-time deal per sore horse. See Pete Ramey's article on that.

For the record, Dr. Tomas Teskey also demands that trimmers have boots on hand when deshoeing any horse.

All boots should be padded. (Editors note: EasyCare recommends only the 6 mm pads for Easyboot Gloves, and Equi-pak CS for Glue-Ons.) In the beginning, I think it's fine to carry flat black pads on hand and forego the comfort system. I use more of the smalls than larges; on the other hand if you order all larges they will fit any boot and are the same cost. But in the comfort system, I have come to really love the red sole with red frog support pad for most horses. They are twice as expensive but last twice as long for most horses. They like the concussion. (Note: Flat comfort pads now come in 12 mm and 6 mm firm, medium and soft densities.) I have only used a *pressure* frog pad once.



One day I sat down and cut apart pads for all the boots, creating a template for the largest size, then cutting down to the next size and cutting for template two, etc. I keep them in a sack so that I don't have to order pads for the all boots. I order Epic pads and trace my templates when fitting other boots.

I don't routinely keep all the boots in my Bug as there isn't enough room. I have put one size of each Epic and G2 that I carry, in Easy Care bags and filled a third bag with soaking boots. I pack these for new appointments or when I know I will need them. Three bags are pretty easy to throw in the car. I keep a pad collection in a bag in the trunk as folks routinely need new pads. I also have a bag of used boots which I sell to needy clients or lend to clients who want to try a particular boot for a month. I don't have every size. I will lend soakers and find that at some time or another many people ask me to order them a new one to keep. (I like soaking major cracks so I can grow them out quickly rather than waiting to see if they have bacteria or not.

I am working on a booklet on booting which goes over measuring, fitting, rasping a better break over and customer care. I won't go into details here. It is prudent to check boots before putting them in the car: does cable move easily, are all screws in place, train back the gaiter and clip making it easier to apply. I haven't gotten caught off guard; once is enough.

#### My Tools

I have an extra tall bucket fitted with a material cover that has tons of pockets where I keep everything I need. In addition to the regular tools, I carry green and black markers to draw on the hoof and show clients how to "read the foot". I carry a magnifying glass to show them the laminae too.

My deshoeing tools are in a sack which stays in the car. I found I needed a shoe puller, an old rasp and nail puller. It's best, in my opinion, to pull nail by nail so that you don't bruise the hoof wall in any way; this could sore the horse for up to 5 days.

I keep another sack with odds and ends: templates, duct tape, cotton squares and Betadine to clean thrushy hooves, Lysol for soaking, vet wrap, "Today" for thrush, Today syringes filled with Ramey's Remedy for thrush (Iotramin and antibiotic cream). "Today" is an antibiotic cream for bovine mastitis and is found at most Agways and ag type stores. As always check with your vet before using or recommending. I have some bottles of White Lightening on hand for really bad cases of thrush.

#### The Clients

When I was starting out, I posted cards in obvious places and was completely honest about my skills and background. It would have been nice to have a mentor near by to check my work and answer questions but I didn't.

As I progressed, I learned that I don't want to work with every client who comes my way. Now I have a questionnaire that I send to all clients. I try to avoid clients who stall their horse or who are not open to new ideas. Usually the best clients are novice owners who are open-minded or long time horse people who want to best for their horse in terms of health. "Know-it-all's" get very tiresome. Competitors who put their schedule over their horse's health make me very angry.



Now, I can usually distinguish between someone who wants to give barefoot a try, like a new fad, as opposed to the person who is really committed and understands the barefoot advantage. Some of those "on the fence" read my web site, check out the links and really get with the program. But more commonly, if they don't see major improvement in the first month, they are off to a new shoe. Sometimes I take these folks anyway and give it my best shot, other times I refer them to others trimmers who aren't as fussy. Trimmers who are working full time may accept these clients. If I take them I always keep in the back of my mind that they may not stay with me.

At first it was devastating when someone "fired" me but I have come to realize that the "student must find the teacher". You simply can't brow beat people into going barefoot. It's so much more rewarding to work with people who want *a natural horse*. On the other hand, I have had to fire a client or two for any number of reasons. I just say, "We can't work together," give them a list of alternative trimmers and farriers and leave it at that.

I let my work speak for itself. Most of my clients have come through word-of-mouth. And as Pete said to an interested older farmer, in his video, "I just trim them up every month and use boots for riding if necessary." Keep it simple for the people who approach you. Don't start talking about the damage shoes do. Most people want to do the best for their horse and some might think \$500 orthopedic shoes, stalling and blanketing is top notch care. That's what they see at top show barns after all. Basically, catch them with honey. And of course send them to my web site for some interesting reading!

Never talk negatively about any horse person (owner, vet, farrier and trainer) to any client. It's a small world. I know this is hard when you see hooves two feet in front of the boney column or thrush down into the corium! Tell your best friend, tell your horse, tell your partner (if he will listen!).

The diplomacy of trimming also includes *not* diagnosing problems. "I suspect your horse has laminitis, but only your vet can make that diagnosis," is a good way to handle that. I still will point out laminitic rings, disconnected wall etc.

I want to be known as a teacher, a specialist in rehabilitation (as those horses are very interesting to me) and someone who is top tier in terms of value. Here are some things I do that I find helpful:

- "Read the Hoof" with the client, marking in any color but red to show the healing angle, laminae, etc. Use red and you and your client will keep wondering if you cut the horse! Been there, done that.
- I often photograph (views suggested by the American Hoof Association) one or more hooves at the first visit and as I see healing. Its very rewarding and you will often see things you missed; also you will have your case studies already set up for your application to the AHA.
- I mark the hoof photo in Adobe Elements or Photoshop with lines and arrows to show the healing angle the horse wants, the wall angle he has, contracted heels, shoved up lateral cartilage, etc. I may send some of these to the client so they can really see what we were discussing at the appointment. I may post them on my site or save them for a case study. Better to have too many photos than none. One day I may pull together a collection of photos for a teaching notebook.



- I call or e-mail a new client about a week after our first appointment to see how things are going. I want to know about any problems, concerns or questions. I will also stay in close touch with owners of sore horses.
- If the client wants to learn to trim, I encourage them to photograph their horse's hooves and put the collection in a binder. I have posted an article on [Photographing the Hoof](#) on my site.
- For those interested, I direct them to [Tips for the Owner Trimmer](#) where I suggest other great sites and encourage them to print out articles and give each author a binder.
- Even the least interested client is encouraged to read certain articles on my site because I want them to understand that I am about total horse health.

### My Team

And speaking of *total horse health*, I often talk about my team. I can get most feet right but many horses are still sore in their bodies, have saddles and bridles that don't fit and or a sore mouths. I have posted information about the members of my team online and am thinking about making large postcards to hand out and post.

My team includes three body workers (1 vet and 2 others), a dentist trained by Spencer LaFlure, Balance Saddles International for a distant consultation to check saddle fit (\$50), and I need to add cross-over farrier (who shoes only when the client demands it), Laura Florence as a consultant, alternative trimmer and shoer. If someone insist on shoes, I would rather Laura do it and continue working on the client to go barefoot.

The horses who have had the full works (or as I jokingly call the Equine Trinity: Me trimming, Krystin on teeth, Hoppy on body) with a saddle that fits have blossomed so much I can't even describe it. Years of soreness, gone. Wonky foot with hindquarter hitch, gone. Stifle problem, gone. Horses who once refused one thing or another, now happily do their jobs. Hives gone. Rain rot gone. Good hooves are about good health.

Of course not everyone can afford everything, today. Maybe some of the work is not appropriate for the pasture pal. But over time, I have found that most clients will schedule the necessary work and their horses change in unbelievable ways.

### Getting Started

When I first started I offered my services free-of-charge to any therapeutic riding group or rescue within an hour's drive. Now I think it's best to charge something; I ask for half price. You will see a lot of pathology working at rescues. I am still delighted to "give back" and work at these places when asked. If a really large barn calls, I do what I can and encourage the managers to coordinate other trimmers or farriers.

### Professionalism

Those of us, who are trimmers from the start as well as cross-farriers, have some high standards to uphold. We are the first of a new profession. I came from a sales and marketing background in pharmaceuticals and was pretty *polished* to begin with.

On the weekend, I normally e-mail clients for the week, reminding them of the day and time of our appointment. If there's a change I can handle that *before* I drive to the barn. I am on time for appointments and let the client know that I will call if I am going to be more than 15 minutes late. I take the time to watch the horse walk and ask for updates. I used to make notes each time for



the owner but only do that now if the client would like it. Exceptions are the first visit or when I want the client to follow up with treatment or something like that.

It's nice but not necessary to have professional cards or stationery. I think that depends on each person. I made my own cards and have a paragraph on back about going barefoot. I use them as appointment cards, as well as leave behinds at tack shops.

I could improve in the area of taking a good history, particularly of sore horses. (Examples: when did the horse go lame, was he shod, how long, is he on medications, do you have radiographs, or blood work, what's the lifestyle, feed, work) I don't read x-rays and have decided that can be tricky even for vets, let alone me. If it's a challenging case, I will take the radiographs to a radiologist at New Bolton Center, U. of Pennsylvania to make sure the analysis is correct. I also use Laura, my farrier friend, as a backup as she worked at New Bolton for seven years and has a lot of experience reading them.

I am always honest about what I know and what I don't understand. In fact I tell that to clients up front. I have resources to call upon when I get stuck.

I have posted a complete Equine Resume on my web site. If I didn't have a web site, I would hand that out. I think it's good for the client to know what training, classes and seminars I have taken.

I will close with pricing as most folks are interested in that. I am located in Wilmington, DE only minutes away from Bruce and Buck Davidson, Jessica Ransenhansen, Phillip Dutton and other world class riders. In other words, it's the high rent district but I do want to be accessible to everyone. My trim charge (with 6 years' experience) is \$50, although the first trim could range from \$50 to \$100 depending on the case. I charge \$10 for travel within 1 hour, \$20 over an hour, \$20 for 1 hour but with tolls. At this stage I don't take new clients who live more than an hour away.

Boots are priced at full retail and I have a booting fee of \$25 which I rarely charge unless the client is *challenging*. Equicast is \$75 for two feet. I mark up a bottle of White Lightning.

Since I teach, I also carry rasps and Hoof Jack stands. In the beginning I carried only boots. Over time I have added other items.

I try to be as flexible as humanly possible with wonderful owners who don't have money. I will give them a used rasp, for instance and show them how to apply the mustang roll every week. After a month, I show them how to do the heels. I can turn the horse over to them once all flare is trimmed off or grown out. If they are at a barn with other clients, I check their work for free.

On the other hand, I have had clients who complain about price and then go back into shoes at \$150 a clip. Oh well!

Dawn Willoughby