

# In Defense Of Tradition And Common Sense

**It's important to master the traditional shoeing techniques before using "new" methods, materials.**

*By Doug Butler*

I HAVE WORKED in the farrier field for nearly four decades. During that time, I have seen lots of things come and go. I have observed my own evolution as a scientist and craftsman and that of many other farriers in my capacity as a teacher of the craft.

As we mature in the craft, however, we change our vantage point and view things differently than we did before.

## Tradition Has Evolved

I have concluded that the more skilled and experienced a farrier becomes, the less he or she depends on "modern, state-of-the-art" materials and methods.

Traditional methods, when understood, are very effective. Tradition that started as a fad and doesn't work should be discarded.

Tradition that is based on sound principles should be retained and mastered. It is the foundation for everything else we do.

Traditional horseshoeing principles have been developed and tested over time. The first farrier literature came out of Italy with Fiaschi's book in 1539.

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In his book, front and hind as well as left and right pattern shoes were shown. Hinged shoes also were illustrated. Shoes at that time were symmetrical with three or four nail holes on a side.

Goodwin (1820) was the first to advocate the use of four holes on the outside and three on the inside, a traditional style that is still followed in the British Isles.

The basics of sound hoof preparation were developed over time, and many result from the debates of Clark (1829) and Coleman (1796). Some advocated close trimming and thinning of the sole to thumb pressure; others argued for frog pressure or lack of it.

Over-preparation of the hoof became a trend that reached its peak in the late 1880s, especially in Europe. In 1869, Goodenough advocated a five-point shoe in order to promote the natural function of the sole and frog. This method was revived in 1879 without achieving any noteworthy success either time, according to Dollar (1897).

Soon, conflicting schools of thought emerged and then persisted in various parts of the world. History, it seems, often shows us where we are going as well as where we have been.

Henry Heymering did farriers a great service when he catalogued and summarized the material in most of the old horseshoeing texts in his book, *On The Horse's Foot* (1990).

I fear most farriers have ignored his great work and have not read his list of traditional "mistakes," many of which are still not recognized as such and continue to be made in daily practice throughout the world.

## Natural Horse Interest Rises

There has been a resurgence of natural horse interest in America ever since the passage of the Mustang bill in 1959 and the Wild Horse National Heritage Species Act in 1971.

Today, there are many views, including those of animal liberationists, who have the extreme view that horses shouldn't be fenced in or used for work or recreational purposes. All of us in the animal-care field want better conditions for horses, but we often differ in our ideas of ideal care.

Jamie Jackson was the first in our generation to study the hooves of wild horses in 1984 and published his conclusions in 1992 in the book, *The Natural Horse*. Gene Ovnicek made



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similar observations in 1986 and 1987 in a different horse herd and has recently presented them at the Laminitis Symposium and American Association of Equine Practitioners meetings. (See pages 15 to 18 of the March/April, 1996, issue of *American Farriers Journal*.)

### Old Themes Resurrected

Both made some very interesting and valid observations. However, many of these same points were made by early 19th century farriers and veterinarians. Over time, many shoe designs have taken these features into account.

It seems that variations of old themes are being resurrected again.

I recently reviewed a book that described hundreds of patented horse-shoes designed from 1855 to 1930. The most common features included:

- 1) Roughing the shoes for traction;
- 2) Shock absorption devices, including pads and shoes of all types and composition;
- 3) Attachment of shoes without nails;

4) Hinged or multi-piece shoes (which, by the way, were illustrated by Fiaschi in 1539 and advocated by Clark in 1829) to allow expansion of the foot;

5) Frog support techniques, including pads, and;

6) Shoes with pitched nail holes to improve nail height.

According to Bruce Daniels in his book, *Sunday on the Farm*, "Every year, several 'new' things come along."

### Must Examine "New Ideas"

I agree with Daniel's statement later in his book that we would be foolish not to use new products that flood the market each year when our clients insist upon it and we don't think it will hurt the horse. Yet I want to position myself as a traditional farrier and blacksmith who knows the craft well enough to apply it to any situation.

Upon close examination, I've found that most "new ideas" have their origin in the classic texts and techniques.

I had the opportunity to do much of the early work on hoof repair with syn-

thetic materials and studied extensively the nutrition, structure, growth and function of the hoof in graduate degree studies. Yet I continue to maintain my stance as a traditionalist. Mastery of time-tested principles is my goal.

### Master The Basics First

I feel that not enough attention is paid to mastering the basics. Leaving out the basics has the same effect in our work as leaving out ethics and values has had on our culture. It has been disastrous, to say the least!

The most important basic sciences of horseshoeing are anatomy and biomechanics. How are the leg and foot made? How does the leg work? What is its job? How can we help it do its job and at the same time interfere least with its operations? How can we complement it by how we treat the end of the limb?

Of course, an understanding of load, breakover and gait is important, but most of all we must understand the anatomy of the foot and how it relates to the shoe. The solution to problems is

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often self-evident.

How to trim to achieve geometric alignment support of the leg should be considered first. Then, if dealing with a speed horse, dynamic balance should be considered. We must learn to read the horse's reaction to changes in balance.

The most important basic craft of horseshoeing is blacksmithing. An understanding of shoemaking is necessary to understand the foot. Tool control and visualization can only be developed by creating shoes and applying them.

### One Size Doesn't Fit All

As I present clinics to horseshoers and veterinarians, I am frequently asked questions regarding the application of the so-called four point trim.

The principles seem to be sound as they follow old themes advocated by David Roberge or Robert Bonner (1894) and William Russell (1907). David Duckett (1990) has made the best case in our time for some of the most important ideas.

It is the way I see the principles applied that causes me concern.

For example, I have viewed Gene Ovniczek's tape promoting his EDSS (Equine Digital Support System) shoe. It was presented as a solution to all serious foot problems—some of which have opposite biomechanical causes and effects.

The reasoning appeared to be that wild horse foot shape is the answer to every problem.

Today's horses are not wild! Our horses live in and must fit into a domestic environment to be useful to us. They don't graze at will or move at their own chosen speed over carefully chosen ground. They carry a saddle and rider and perform complicated maneuvers.

Horses examined in dry desert climates can't be used as a model for all horses, especially those in wet environments.

One size does not fit all. The shoe and its accessories appear to be what the traditional craftsmen in Great Britain would call a "gimmick." It may have some good application to a person who has mastered the basics, but it could be dangerous in the hands of those who are looking for a quick fix.

In addition, applying full pads to the feet of foundered horses can have very negative results by constricting the circumflex artery and covering a perforated sole.

### Look At Shoe Wear

Shoe wear gives us great insight, perhaps better than we can see, into a horse's movement and how it uses its

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feet. Wear changes according to the way the horse moves. We must learn to blend all elements when shoeing, for no one method is a solution for every problem.

Bruce Daniels had a great article—one of the classics of farriery—on reading shoe wear in the Winter 1995 issue of *Horse Hoofcare and Lameness*. My experience has verified the conclusions which he drew regarding the implications of shoe wear and its application to therapeutic shoeing.

### Four Point Trim Concerns

Recently, I viewed *The Four Point Trim* video by Dr. Ric Redden. A person with solid foundation training can get some good tips from this video on the efficiency of trimming techniques and learn how to do the so-called cross-legged trim on hind feet, a method that works well on well-schooled horses but can be dangerous on less frequently

handled stock.

Doing 20 horses per hour, as Redden states he does, is my idea of efficiency! I like the idea of not taking the foot forward to dress off the wall dishes and flares on less-than-gentle horses.

However, this video left me with some real concerns and lots of questions. The purpose of this video was stated to help farriers understand the four point trim. The origin of the method of the trim and the theory behind it could have been explained better at the beginning of the tape. The demonstrated technique appears different from what I previously understood were Dave Duckett's and Gene Ovniczek's original ideas.

The concept of weight bearing on the heel and toe pillars appears to be sound, though it hasn't been proven other than by limited critical observation. Duckett says they correspond to acupuncture points. Redden says they are the load sensors of the foot. Jackson and Ovniczek say they are callouses.

### Application Causes Problems

These varying themes explaining its function aren't the problem. It's the application of the four point trim that gets people in trouble.

As discussed in the video, trimming the flares back and lowering or "gutting" the quarters is a good idea on neglected broodmares.

Cutting the wall back to the white line (or "yellow line," as Redden rightly calls it) will prevent further flaring. I have found it is a good idea in some



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cases to cut the wall back all the way to the white line at the edge of where complete cracks occur.

However, trimming the wall to the level of the exfoliated sole is deep enough. We must remember that people want us to trim their horses so they will stay sound, not just to see how much hoof we can cut off.

It is best to leave hoof rather than trim the foot short and then add a pad or shoe that wouldn't be needed except for our error.

Redden's video raises other questions, also. For example, hemorrhaging in the white line of the broodmares in the video was not adequately explained. Besides being due to an excessively loaded and stretched toe, this condition can also be caused by foal founder, grass founder, heel pain or snow bruising.

What is the difference between a flare and a wing? What caused the bridge to go in front of the frog? (What is the bridge?) Does the shininess on

the hoof indicate a sign of health as stated or repeated coatings of a desiccating type of hoof sealant?

### Align Breakover with Wear

Two principles of the four point trim consistent with traditional balance principles are 1) the dorsal surface of the distal phalanx should be parallel to the dressed toe and 2) the line of new growth at the coronary band shows the true toe-heel balance of the third phalanx.

Redden says the horse shows you the breakover point when you extend a line to the ground from the angle of the new growth from the coronary band. This is not always true because the breakover point is not the same for all horses.

Breakover point is determined by leg conformation and use as much or more than foot conformation. This confirms the idea of reading the hoof and the wear on it or the shoe before deciding how much to rock the toe.

It is also important to remember the horses used in the video were not working animals nor were they stabled on rough, abrasive surfaces.

The principle of moving the breakover back is a valid one. However, the method advocated is not always applicable.

I prefer to do it with a rocker toe (called a "set toe" in the United Kingdom) on the horseshoe itself because it protects the wall and sole in the rocky desert country where I live.

### Sole Pressure Is Disastrous

In some parts of the video, the trimming of the sole seemed excessive, especially if horses are going barefoot on dry, rocky ground. In soft ground or mud or wet grass, this idea may not be harmful.

However, varying conditions and applications were not emphasized. Removing as much sole as was shown in the video could be disastrous.

I have received many reports of people crippling horses by the misapplication of this method. Trimming the sole at the toe as was demonstrated can be problematic if the hoof is trimmed short.

I believe the main reason horses are made lame using the four point trim method is an error in the use of the knife and a lack of understanding of foot anatomy.

The sole grows and exfoliates at a uniform distance from the solar surface of the distal phalanx. To prevent sole soreness, the knife blade should be held parallel to the bottom of the bone, and the sole should be trimmed minimally. Excessive trimming must be protected by a shoe with no sole pressure.

As Fran Jurga stated in *Hoofcare and Lameness* (No. 66), this technique should be "prefaced with the warning that sole pressure is disastrous to a horse. Proceed with caution!"

### Subtle and Radical Trim

The *subtle* four point trim is not new. It has been called the "mustang trim" and is effective for regular trimming of pastured horses.

The *radical* four point trim (which Hank McEwan says looks similar to



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what new students do when first learning how to trim horses) must be used with great judgment, especially in dry, abrasive surface environments.

The idea that every foot should be "trimmed to the widest point of the frog" doesn't make sense for every foot. Does this refer to a trimmed or untrimmed frog—the ground surface or the portion that joins the periople? Granted, such a rule makes a long foot that shows well in a horseshoeing contest, but is it physiologically sound? Any time the heels are trimmed as indicated, the rocker toe must be applied to compensate for this change in angle.

(Perhaps a statement that every foot should be supported by a shoe fit to the widest part of the frog would be more correct.)

### Dress Hooves Sensibly

I have the seen the result of people interpreting these statements and crippling horses because of it.

What about the position of the distal phalanx in relation to the limb? My experiences indicates there must be some judgment applied to allow for modern straight-pasterned horses.

I have been consulted on too many horses that were not trimmed and shod according to good geometric principles and the horses had become lame using what another farrier thought was the four point technique.

I'm not convinced that all healthy, sound feet are or should be square as implied in the video.

I'm convinced from our radiograph research (reported in *Footnotes*, November, 1993) and many years of observation that feet have several different inherited shapes like those described by Scott Simpson. The hoof should be dressed to conform to the shape of the coffin bone.

Shoes should be fit to wear as uniformly as possible, taking into account leg as well as foot conformation.

### Fads Substitute For Skill

Redden states at the end of the video that everyone should "do their own little music to this song." Apparently, my taste in music is different. I prefer the traditional classics.

Unfortunately, many farriers with less than an adequate foundation quickly adopt the latest fad to substitute for their lack of skill development.

Nearly 100 years ago, Dollar stated in his 1897 *Handbook of Horseshoeing*: "The methods of shoeing have thus become so numerous that the ordinary

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***"Most 'new' things have  
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or rediscovered..."***

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farrier and even the veterinary surgeon can scarcely keep himself informed as to what is or is not of value... Many of these discoveries are absolutely worthless; many more are exceedingly questionable. Very few are really valuable!"

There is little, if anything, new in the ancient craft of horseshoeing. Most "new" things have just been reinvented or rediscovered. Every few years someone shows us what may seem new, but further inquiry usually documents it as an old design or invention.

### Don't Skip The Fundamentals

An observer at an American Farrier Association convention marketplace called it a "fantasy fairyland." There are so many choices! Thousands of perfect rigs and shoes made up with every toy imaginable give the impression that there is no need for craftsmanship development and problem-solving skill.

An obsession for these "new" methods and products has taken over the con-

sciousness of many beginning farriers, as well as inexperienced horse persons. It almost seems that many modern farriers are looking for an excuse *not* to learn the fundamental principles well.

If principles were understood well, perhaps these farriers wouldn't be so quick to grab at "new ideas."

Some of these methods and products are great *after* one learns and understands the trade. A good analogy for comparison is that calculators are great after a person understands how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. (Other modern examples that may inhibit learning include using Velcro shoe ties before learning to tie our shoes and digital clocks before learning to tell time.)

Although it's tempting to skip the foundation fundamentals, it catches up with people who choose to do so.

When farriers master the fundamentals, they are better prepared to distinguish between those materials and methods that are valuable and those that are not. Q



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