The Farrier's Corner: by Ray and Michelle Smith

Last month, we wrote an overview article of surveys conducted by the American Farrier's Association. Those of you who read the article will remember one section devoted to stats on work related injuries. Of over 100 farriers surveyed, 52.7% were injured as a direct result of a horse's bad behavior while 6.8% suffered injuries related to falls and malfunctions of barn equipment. This provides a nice lead in to this month's subject - creating a safer working environment.

As the vast majority of farrier injuries were directly related to poor equine behavior, let's start with horse handling. First and foremost, be straightforward with you farrier regarding any bad behaviors or quirky traits your animal might have. Do they kick, bite, strike, rear, pull back when tied, drop suddenly or violently jerk their legs away from handlers? Also inform your farrier if the animal has injuries or pain issues. Some animals misbehave simply due to a sour disposition or lack of proper training. Others will kick, drop suddenly or strike out due to pain from arthritis, injuries or other discomfort.

Although the belligerent horse and the injured or crippled horse act out for different reasons, they all can inflict the same level of injury on the farrier. If the farrier has prior knowledge of potentially hazardous behaviors or issues, they may take extra safety precautions. They may also alter their traditional shoeing or trimming techniques to accommodate an injured or aged animal.

With respect to belligerent animals, seeking proper training to address dangerous behaviors should be a top priority. Although many farriers carry equipment such as stud chains, humane twitches and sidelines, they would prefer not to require their use. These tools will often help in getting around a mild to moderately badly behaved animal. However, none of them should be used by inexperienced individuals and they should never become a permanent substitute for proper training.

What about sedation? This route can sometimes enable a farrier to get around a dangerous animal. As with any medication, there are health risks involved in the use of sedative drugs. There is also the risk of injury to the veterinarian administering the medication. Bear in mind that "sedated" does not mean "paralyzed". Sedated animals can still startle, thrash or kick and require their own special set of handling guidelines.

Who should hold animals for the farrier? Those who are not able or willing to correct a poorly behaved animal should not be holding it. If the owner is not able to hold or effectively handle their animal, someone who is more capable should be holding the lead shank. Young children or those with serious injuries or other impairments (including drug and alcohol use) should not be holding for the farrier. The handler should not be texting or sending and receiving cell phone calls. Your focus should be on the horse and farrier.

At the very least, the handler should do the following: Keep the lead rope clear of the farrier's face and neck, prevent the horse from biting the farrier, stay clear of the farrier while the front hooves are on the hoof stand, stand in a position where they can avoid a front hoof strike and reprimand the animal for bad behavior.

If a well-behaved horse ties quietly, it may be tied for the farrier. Tie animals to a secure location, avoiding T-posts. Always use a break-away hitch or a quick release knot. If using cross-ties, they should also be break-away. Never hard tie an animal, no matter how well behaved they may be.

Many farriers will request that an animal be hand held for the first visit or until they get a feel for the animal. Others prefer having an animal hand held while working on the front feet if the animal is tied to an object (wall, trailer, fence) that would pose a crushing hazard should the horse lurch forward.

How much space do you need to be reasonably safe? Here's a rule of thumb. If you can stand next to the animal, while fully extending your arm, and touch a solid object (stall wall, farm equipment, fence etc.) you are in too tight of a space! Most farriers prefer a wide clear barn aisle or an open space out-of-doors. Never put yourself in a space where you have no quick way out. Always be alert and move away from items that the horse could entangle itself in or knock over.

What spooks horses? Flapping tarps, sudden loud noises, blowing debris, sudden movements, dogs....well, let's just say that there are more things that do spook horses than don't. Let's start with dogs. Simply put, pen them up when the farrier arrives. Few dogs can resist the desire to chew on an extra stinky piece of trimmed hoof. When they begin squabbling over chewy chunks under the horse, there is likely to be trouble. Even horses that are normally tolerant of dogs can lose tolerance in certain situations. In addition to dogs, try to remove items from the work area if they could easily tip over, flutter suddenly in a breeze, cause strange noises or otherwise startle a horse.

Give the farrier room to work. It's great to watch a farrier work and ask them questions. We encourage this. However, don't crowd in so close that you are in their light, in danger of being hit by a kicked out tool or likely to be thrown to the ground should the horse spook. This crowding behavior is common, and particularly dangerous, in children. In general, the fewer folks present in the shoeing area the better. If someone does want to watch, do so at a safe distance and be ready to move quickly if necessary. If you want to move closer, ask the farrier and handler first.

Avoid having other livestock milling around the shoeing area. Pesky horses will often take the opportunity to nip, bite or simply invade the space of the animal being worked upon. This generally leads to a spat, with the farrier caught in the middle. There is one exception to this. Occasionally, an animal is absolutely dependent on a pasture mate as a security blanket. When their buddy is out of sight, they panic. If you own one these Nervous Nellies, it's fine to bring their buddy along to the work area and hold them nearby.

Finally, the physical work area should be well-lit, free from debris and as flat as possible. If a farrier cannot see, they cannot do their best work. Likewise, if there is no level place to stand, or piles of debris, the chances of tripping or falling increase for both the farrier and the animal. Additionally, it is hard to evaluate a trim job when there is no place to set the hoof down on level.

Overall, use common sense and try to see potential accidents before they happen. Have fun, stay safe and see you next month!

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