What Eventing Riders Want Farriers To Know

Educating clients about mechanics of the distal limb and appropriate hoof care is critical to a successful relationship

By Katie Navarra, Contributing Writer

Every farrier's dream client is likely a lot like eventing competitor Savannah "Woodge" Fulton. As the daughter of farrier Steven Fulton, the 23-year-old rider experienced firsthand the relationship between farriers and clients when she was growing up. On more than one occasion, she witnessed a family meal being interrupted or a holiday celebration being put on hold for an emergency.

"Because of that," she says, "I have the mindset that farriers are good at what they do and I let them do their job."

She knows the difference between a good foot and a bad one, and how to distinguish between a well-done or poorly done job. And she has high expectations. But when it comes to her horses, she leaves the job to the experts.

If only all clients were as hands-off as Fulton. There are some days you have to be a mind reader to know what your client is thinking, a teacher to explain why a specific approach will or will not work and often a servant who is willing to rush out for an emergency. Farrier work in itself is challenging — from correcting foot pathology to convincing an uncooperative horse to be patient. The equine challenges combined with the personalities of their owners/handlers and their "expertise" in hoof care can make for an interesting day.

"Many competitors, especially trainers, fancy themselves as amateur farriers," says Rebecca "Bec" Braitling. The eventing trainer, who currently rides at CIC and CCI level events, is a New Zealand native and has been riding in the United States since 2008.

"Whilst we mean no disrespect, I'm fairly certain we can be fairly disrespectful," says the United States Eventing Association (USEA) Instructors' Certification Program (ICP) level IV certified instructor.

Most clients aren't trying to be disrespectful. The reality is that the adage "no hoof, no horse" can make or break their professional career or stifle their competitive aspirations. So what do eventing riders expect from their farrier? Braitling, Fulton and California farriers Cassidy Robyn and Tony Knust provide insight into this very question.

FARRIER TAKEAWAYS

- Many performance horse riders want a farrier to deliver a tidy foot with accurate pastern alignment.
- Shorter toes and more heel provide the support performance riders want, but have the potential for increasing the occurrence of pulled shoes, especially on cross-country courses.
- Communication and trust are as important in footcare as a well-trimmed and shod hoof.

Soundness Is The Priority

Defining exactly what eventing competitors expect a hoof to look like is difficult. It's as much about the individual horse's needs as the discipline. Knust says that above all else, soundness takes priority. When it comes to appearance, these clients prefer a hoof that is tidy with good nails and a decent wall.

"Most often they're expecting to have the toe shortened and more heel," Knust says. "We all strive for perfect hoof/pastern alignment, so most times we're all working toward that goal."

Braitling says that while foot shape is important, she's more concerned with the horse being shod appropriately. She notes that it's important that the farrier educates her as to why changes are made.

"I've had cases where I would expect the foot to look a certain way, but when it's explained to me why it's not right for that horse, it becomes clear that's not appropriate for the situation," she says. "Sometimes you want to leave a little more heel support, but also have to be careful you're not leaving the shoe out there asking to be ripped off. Bell boots aren't typically very helpful here despite my best efforts."

Knust has some performance clients make specific requests, such as pads or bar shoes. For the most part, he is willing to accommodate the client's request unless it is detrimental to the horse.

"We are all working to keep the people as happy as the horses are comfortable, so I generally do all I can," he says. "If I don't think what they're asking for will work, I go through the mechanics of the limb and foot so they understand."

When the request for a specific trim or shoeing style originates with a veterinarian, Knust works with the veterinarian to understand what he or she is trying to achieve and find some common ground. That provides an opportunity to design an approach that works well for the horse mechanically while achieving the goals of each person on the horse's care team.

Knowing the rider's goals and competition location is part of getting the hoof properly prepared. As a regular performance farrier and a show farrier for 2-day eventing competitions and hunter/jumper shows, Knust knows the footing at a variety of venues.

"Some footings are stickier than others, so I'll make sure the shoes are drilled and tapped ahead of time so they can put studs in," Knust says. "Some facilities have rocky terrain, so I'll put a pour-in pad on the front end to protect the horse's hoof from a stone bruise."

Robyn, who also specializes in high-level performance horses and has accompanied clients' horses to the Kentucky 3-Day Event, emphasizes that once a trimming and shoeing routine is working for a horse, neither he nor the client wants to change it for the sake of changing something. But that doesn't mean he doesn't use different methods on each individual horse.

"Event horses can have a multitude of issues, so I try to come up with two or three different options for each horse," he says. "If the first one doesn't work, then I'll try the next one."

Maintaining a regular trimming schedule is critical for soundness and peak performance in any discipline. It's especially imperative for high-level performance horses that can be derailed by a lost day of training. Ideally, regular trimming and shoeing are scheduled to land about a week before an event.

"Knowing the horse and when it should be done prior to an event is important," Robyn says. "It works out that I'm at the larger barns once a week and I can check on a horse if needed."

Fulton adds, "There are tons of really good farriers. But finding one that works in our program can be hard."

That means if you're contemplating expanding your business to include these types of clients, you have to be prepared for higher expectations, and that includes an agreed-upon schedule. Depending on the size of the stable, it could be once a week, once every 2 weeks or whatever interval works for their program. It also means being responsive to unplanned requests, which takes commitment and follow-through.

"Have a conversation about scheduling before committing," Fulton says. "Everyone has to be on the same page."

Photo: Tony Knust

When a client is concerned about lameness, Tony Knust, right, prefers to watch the horse move with them so everyone is on the same page.

Developing Relationships

Meeting a performance rider's expectations is as much about developing respect and trust as it is about tending to the hoof.

"We're all trying to make and keep horses sound and happy now, and over the long-term," Robyn says. "Having a good relationship with a client achieves that goal, as well as by having open conversations and teaching them as much as possible."

Relationships are a two-way street. As much as you expect respect from a client, that person too appreciates the opportunity to discuss options.

"When you have a good working relationship with a farrier," Braitling says, "it is actually pretty normal to have conversations about the plan for a particular horse."

The conversations are not focused on her ideas about how the trimming and shoeing should be done, she says, but are more of a dialogue with the farrier, who shares his or her beliefs and theories as to why it's being done in a certain way. Then she says they discuss their thoughts on the mechanics of horses galloping and jumping vs. the feet the horses have been given.

"Some of my horses have dream feet, others make me want to take up staring at them standing in a field since it's an uphill battle to do the job on the feet they're given," she says. "Typically, with any of my more difficult horses, the vet would already have been involved and X-rays are taken so we are dealing with some level of facts vs. my opinion by this point."

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Braitling is able to have such frank conversations because she has worked with specific farriers for an extended period of time. Entering a new relationship is somewhat of a testing period. It takes research to understand the client and talk to them to establish a solid footing.

Robyn and Knust agree that when a client doesn't trust or respect your expertise, there are larger issues at play than what is going on with a horse.

"Sometimes it's better to let that client go," Robyn says. "I have given clients the phone number of other farriers that might be a better fit."

It can be hard to let go financially. At times, it's better to stay true to your path and have happy clients and happy horses than to try to force a relationship that isn't a good fit, regardless of the pay.

Lameness And Communication

Lameness is where a good relationship between the rider/trainer, vet and farrier is really important. There are a few ways Braitling interacts with farriers when one of her horses comes up lame.

If the horse was recently shod, she calls the farrier and explains the situation.

If lameness occurs a little more out of the blue, she typically has the vet block the horse first. If it's determined the lameness is coming from the foot, then the issue is investigated further with radiographs, possibly an MRI or bone scan if necessary, and by this point, the farrier certainly would be involved.

"These cases are a little rarer, and honestly a close nail, bruised heel or stone bruise are more typical foot issues we have," she says. "Some of my horses need pads, perhaps just in the summer to protect them from the hard ground, especially my Thoroughbreds."

Knust adds that when he has a client who's concerned about a lameness or gait abnormality, he tries to make it out to the barn as soon as possible to watch the horse move and observe.

"Having them there and showing you what they saw is a lot more informative than them just trying to tell you," he says.

Then he tries to pinpoint the limb or location of the soreness and says that this is often done in conjunction with the veterinarian. He has personally spent a lot of time working with vets and studying gait analysis to assist as best he can.

Performance horse trainers expect honest and frank conversations with their farrier and vet, particularly when lameness issues occur.

"I also encourage clients to do a little homework on lameness terminology so we can communicate more effectively on the grade of lameness and whether there have been improvements since my last visit," Knust says. "If everyone is using the same 'dictionary' there are fewer surprises and you can help the horse more effectively."

Otherwise, Braitling doesn't ask farriers to enhance or de-emphasize how the horse moves with farriery.

"I would consider eventing to be one of the toughest equine disciplines on the horses' feet," she says. "I feel the more you mess with the feet they're given, the more stress you put on soft tissue. If the horse isn't moving right, it's because it's not balanced, but you'd still be looking at lameness or an unevenness at that point."

Knust says that most of the eventing trainers he works with want to minimize knee action. When changes are requested, it's typically when a new horse comes into a farrier's program and he or she says to him "we need to get those knees adjusted."

After watching the horse go both before and after shoeing, he makes adjustments as necessary. Oftentimes, these horses are shod on a shorter schedule for at least a cycle or two.

"They want to minimize any conformation-induced hoof flight issues or gait abnormalities, such as paddling or interfering, so often times we will do these horses on a shorter cycle as well," he says.

Call Me Back

Nowadays, the volume of phone calls can be overwhelming. At times, it might feel like your job description entails talking on the phone and answering emails more than trimming and shoeing horses.

The introduction of the cellphone and unlimited calling plans was a monumental shift for accessibility. In January 2017, the Pew Research Center reported that 95% of Americans own some type of cell phone. The report also indicated that 77% of Americans own a smartphone, more than double the figure reported in the Center's first smartphone ownership survey conducted in 2011.

That means there's a cellphone in just about every person's pocket. For some, it's two cellphones — a personal and a business line. For clients who spend their day at the barn, having a cellphone means he or she can call whenever a break in the workday arises.

Farriers spend those same working hours under a horse and don't necessarily have the downtime to interact throughout the day. With increased access, the expectation is that a reply is issued instantaneously. Whether it's a phone call, a text message or an email, clients expect an immediate response.

The reality is that it's increasingly difficult to handle the volume of daily calls and care for horse's feet. Returning phone calls used to be considered proper business etiquette. Sometime during the exponential growth of information,

returning phone calls has become the exception rather than the rule in many businesses, but it is essential for farriers.

"Many times, we expect the farrier to start responding to a request before we have even sent the message," Braitling says. "Then it's not uncommon to start sending repeated 'mayday' messages until the farrier responds."

As a trainer and rider, she hopes that her farrier returns a call within the same 24 hours when the request relates to emergency situations like lost shoes, sudden lamenesses, abscesses and other emergency situations. For general shoeing schedules, she prefers to set a schedule far in advance so that both parties can plan their respective workflows.

"A dream situation involves the farrier living on site and being available 24/7," Braitling says. "The reality is, in times of need, it's tough to be patient."

Robyn also stresses the importance of being responsive.

"I try to be there within 24 hours to put on a thrown shoe so it doesn't mess up the horse's fitness routine," he says. "Sometimes that ends up costing me money right now, but keeping clients and horses happy keeps the business forging ahead."

The Whole Package

Working with the nation's top performance riders takes commitment. Every farrier has to "pay their dues" by starting at the bottom and working their way up by earning respect and establishing a reputation in the discipline.

"Don't expect to get asked to come into a big barn without having an established reputation," Fulton says. "Start small and work your way up. When you do good work, people will take notice and that's how you end up being the best."

Robyn adds, "It takes a team to keep high-level horses going, so open communication with the trainer, vet, chiropractor, etc. is key. It's essential to be a good team member as the farrier that's part of that team."

Braitling is certain that farriers hate being told what to do by the trainer but she feels that through developing a solid relationship, there can be mutual respect between the two that allows for candid conversations relating to the horse's hoof.

"When a client asks for your opinion on something," Robyn says, "it's pushing you to learn something new."

The importance of continuing education can't be overstated, Knust says. Networking with other farriers, especially on challenging cases, can lead to an innovative approach for keeping a particular horse sound and performing at its best.

Robyn agrees, "I have a multitude of other farriers in my network and we'll bounce ideas off each other to see if something will work or not work. It pushes you to learn something new and have more tools in your toolbox."

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