

Shoe business

Getting a Thoroughbred to perform at his best starts with proper shoes

By Liane Crossley

Anyone who has suffered with sore feet after attending the races in uncomfortable shoes can appreciate the importance that proper shoes have for the Thoroughbreds racing at Keeneland. These finely tuned athletes wear lightweight aluminum shoes for protection, to grip the track surface and to maximize their speed and agility so they can be at their best.

A horse's foot—or hoof—is similar to the human fingernail. The top circular portion of the outer hoof (called the coronet or coronary band) just below the hair line and the inner triangular-shaped portion (the frog) are akin to the human cuticle with nerve endings. While the hoof itself can withstand scratches and cracks without causing discomfort, even a minor injury to the coronet or frog can make a horse lame—just as a hangnail will cause you trouble.

Horseshoes have a long, but sketchy history. References to horseshoes date as far back as biblical times;



Photo by Z

Thoroughbreds wear lightweight aluminum shoes for protection, to grip the track surface and to maximize their speed and agility.

Romans in the first century are credited with making horseshoes of leather and metal. Widespread manufacturing of horseshoes began around the 13th century, and the first United States patent for a machine to mass produce horseshoes was granted in 1835.

Regular visits

A Thoroughbred generally goes barefoot until he is a year old, but his introduction to the blacksmith begins much sooner. When his mother is scheduled for a hoof trimming and shoeing, a foal also will receive a quick pedicure. These early sessions prepare the youngster for later visits at the track by the blacksmith, who will trim

and file the horse's hooves and fit him with shoes about every four weeks.

Blacksmiths are independent contractors who are employed by individual trainers and generally charge \$150 for a standard shoeing. Each day, the blacksmith will visit his trainers' barns to check on the needs of his four-legged clients and will generally shoe about six to 10 horses per day. Because he works for many trainers, the blacksmith might be responsible for the footwork of more than 100 horses.

Many blacksmiths also will follow their horses during the racing year. When a stable vacates Keeneland at the end of the spring meeting

continued on page 22



Good luck!

The origin of the horseshoe as a symbol of good luck is unclear. One belief is that the sparks created by the shoes of the Ancient Romans' horses hitting rocks caused an association of magic and power. Some say horseshoes are lucky because iron shoes were crafted by fire, two basic elements of ancient times. Other legends relate the shape of the shoe to the power of a crescent moon.

Variations of the belief abound in other ways. Some say a horseshoe is only good fortune if it has actually been on a horse and not purchased. Americans prefer their horseshoes hung with the open end facing up, so the luck is held in instead of running out the bottom. Other cultures hang shoes in the opposite direction.

Regardless of the origin, horseshoes are unquestionably considered good-luck charms by horse lovers and horse-players and are popular as jewelry and other accessories.—
Liane Crossley



Photo by Z

The shoes that racehorses wear on Keeneland's Polytrack surface are basically the same as those worn by horses racing on dirt tracks.

Shoe business

continued from page 21

and heads to another racetrack, such as Churchill Downs in Louisville, the blacksmith will migrate as well. As a result, he will become well acquainted with his four-legged clients.

Proper fit

To begin a shoeing session, a groom or another stable worker will walk a horse while the blacksmith watches the horse travel so he can determine how to trim the horse's feet so the animal moves evenly. The groom then will stand the horse, and the blacksmith will encourage the horse to raise a hoof, which he cradles between his legs, and begins his work. Because of the horse's early schooling, the animal will stand calmly to be shod.

The blacksmith first will remove the horse's shoes and painlessly trim the outer edges of the hooves using an industrial-strength nail clipper that resembles a pair of pliers.

"To have a basic comfort zone, the blacksmith must find balance within the horse's conformation and that is done by trimming," said blacksmith Steve Norman, whose Keeneland clients include trainers Todd Pletcher, Steve Asmussen and Ronny Werner. "Then the right size shoe must be used to protect and support the foot."

The blacksmith will estimate a horse's shoe size by sight and tailor a readymade aluminum shoe to the hoof simply by hammering the shoe against an anvil to bend it. He then hammers nails through the holes of the shoe into the base of the horse's hoof and out the sides of the



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hoof. Next, he clips any protruding nails and files the surface of the hoof smooth with a rasp or file similar to the tool used for sanding woodwork.

When the blacksmith's work is finished, the horse is ready to go. However, a few Thoroughbreds require extra attention. Like people with bunions or fallen arches, some horses have imperfect hooves and the blacksmith must compensate for these shortcomings. He might have to trim the hooves to a certain angle or apply a special goo to strengthen them.

Occasionally, a new shoe or shoes might make the horse uncomfortable, and the blacksmith must return to reset the shoes. If a horse trips, he could step on another hoof and pull a shoe off, also leading to a return trip by the blacksmith. In case a horse loses a shoe or a shoe becomes loose just before a race, Keeneland employs a blacksmith to be on standby. The track will delay the race while the blacksmith makes a quick repair in the paddock.

Styles of shoes

Wearing a shoe that provides sufficient traction is important for a racehorse. A board at the Keeneland grandstand's main level near the paddock shows the slight differences in shoes. Some have calks for a better grip, especially on conventional dirt tracks that become muddy, while others are slightly raised at the tip for better traction. Some shoes are designed to offer extra protection for tender feet.

At Keeneland, the shoes that racehorses wear on the synthetic Polytrack surface are basically the same as those worn by horses racing on dirt tracks. Horses racing on the Keeneland turf course must wear shoes with no traction devices that will damage the grass.

In many ways, racehorses are just like human athletes who wear shoes specifically designed for their sport and for their feet.

"Proper shoeing is very important," said Darrin Miller, trainer of 2007 Toyota Blue Grass Stakes (G1) winner Dominican. "That is where you start—from the ground up. There are different shoes for different surfaces and situations. It is best to go with what your horse needs and what is most beneficial to him. You must consider your horse as an individual and consider the conformation of his foot and the surface he will be racing on and go from there." 🐾

Freelance writer Liane Crossley, who spent years as an exercise rider and assistant trainer, never strays too far from the Keeneland barn area.



Photo by Z

The blacksmith will trim and file a racehorse's hooves and fit him with shoes about every four weeks.

Learn the lingo

Farrier or blacksmith?

The professional caretaker of a Thoroughbred and his shoes is called a blacksmith or farrier. Although the words can be interchanged, there is a subtle difference. A blacksmith forges metal. During the horse-drawn era, the blacksmith molded shoes and put them on horses and did other metal work. Farrier is a modern term for a specialist in shoeing horses with related blacksmith skills.

Many blacksmiths are members of the American Farrier's Association, a national organization based at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington. Founded in 1971, the group provides direction and growth for the profession by acting as an advocate for farriers in relations with government agencies, veterinarians and equine-related associations. The association's mission includes improving the welfare of horses through education.

Hoof or foot?

A hoof is the horny covering of a horse's foot. In racetrack slang, the hoof is called the foot.

Frog on a horse?

The triangle-shaped portion on the hoof sole is called the frog. Parts have nerve endings, like a human cuticle, while the outer edge is dry and can be pulled or cut off.

Coronet and cuticle?

The ring at the very top of the hoof where the hoof meets the leg is the coronet or coronary band. The area is the source of growth, just like a human cuticle.—Liane Crossley