

# Workplace Safety: Part 1



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[www.barehoofcare.com](http://www.barehoofcare.com)

**In recent years, many horse owners have been learning for themselves how to maintain their horses' hooves with regular trimming. Which is great. With such constant trimming, their horses' hooves have never been better.**

Trouble is, down under a horse is not the safest place in the world to park a human body. Bent over, whilst holding on to the leg of a large and reactionary flight or fight animal is inherently risky. In fact, the only way to totally guarantee that you won't get hurt when your horse is getting its hooves trimmed, is to pay someone else to do it and stand about twenty feet out of the way!

This author realises the great benefits of horses owners doing their own hoof maintenance and does not want to scare them away, but he is a battle-weary farrier and knows that workplace safety is a constant requirement in the world of flailing hooves and gnashing teeth.

If you are 'playing' in an inherently dangerous workplace, in which risk cannot be totally eliminated, risk must be managed. The aim is to minimise both the likelihood of a damaging incident occurring and the fall out if something does go wrong.

Even though this article is targeted at horse owners setting up the home trimming workplace for themselves, it also aims to educate horse owners how to keep the trimming experience safe for their visiting professionals. Any discussion of workplace safety is just as important for the most experienced of operators as it is for beginners. A career can be finished – all over Red Rover – in the blink of an eye.

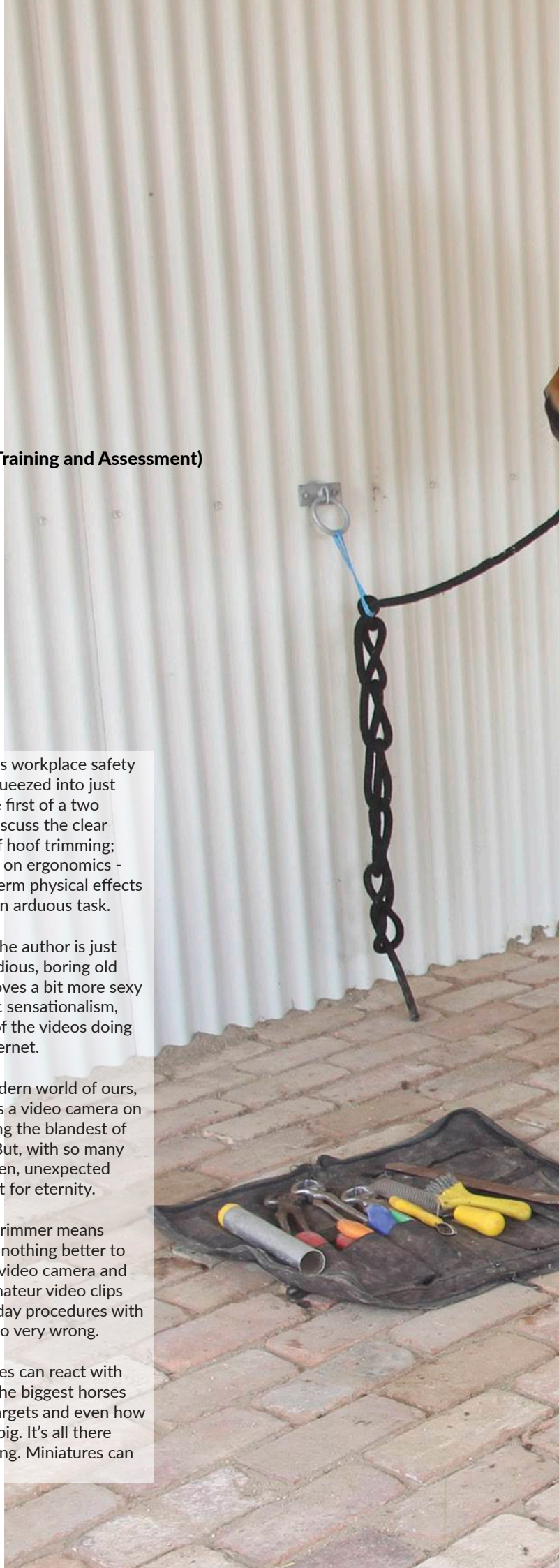
Such a huge subject as workplace safety cannot possibly be squeezed into just one article. This is the first of a two part series, and will discuss the clear and present danger of hoof trimming; followed by an article on ergonomics – minimising the long-term physical effects of undertaking such an arduous task.

If anyone is thinking the author is just trying to make the tedious, boring old subject of horses' hooves a bit more sexy with some journalistic sensationalism, have a look at some of the videos doing the rounds on the internet.

In this marvellous modern world of ours, it seems everyone has a video camera on record mode, capturing the blandest of life's little moments. But, with so many cameras rolling so often, unexpected events also get caught for eternity.

Holding horses for a trimmer means standing around with nothing better to do than crank up the video camera and there are plenty of amateur video clips that show how everyday procedures with handling horses can go very wrong.

You will see how horses can react with blinding speed, how the biggest horses can hit the smallest targets and even how little horses can hurt big. It's all there and it's all very sobering. Miniatures can break ribs!

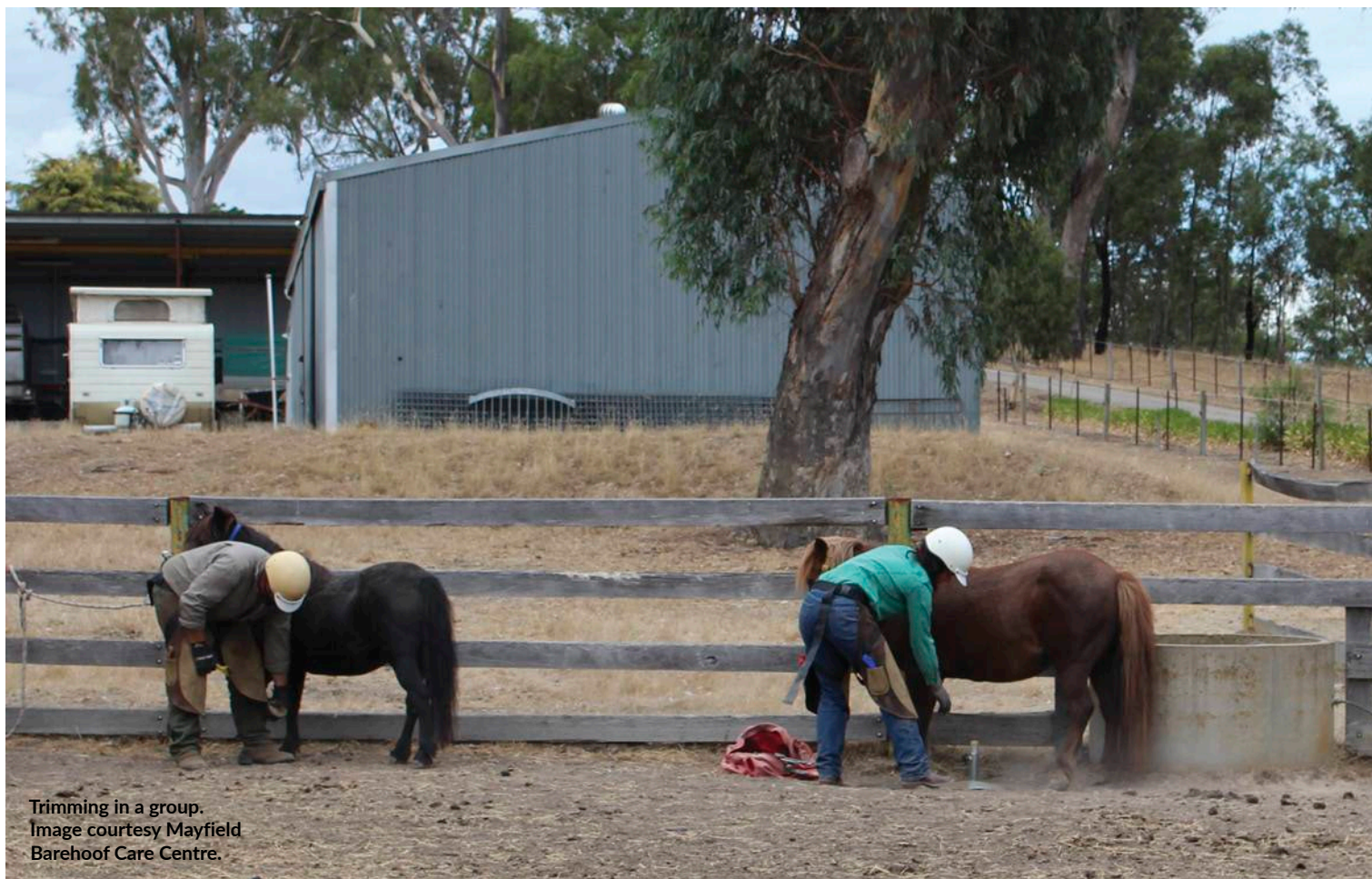






Owner trimming in a safe, familiar environment.  
Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.





Trimming in a group.  
Image courtesy Mayfield  
Barehoof Care Centre.

With the luxury of playback from the safety of a computer screen, the oh so obvious mistakes that collectively lead up to these cringe-worthy events can be analysed. The major and repetitive theme that can be gleaned from such viewing is that accidents don't just happen; the workplace is badly set up to begin with.

### Setting up the workplace

Horses have been prey animals on the café menu of predators since the dawn of their time, but they survived the perilous journey by developing the ability to move first and think second. Modern horses are still survivors; look how they can jump ten foot sideways, knocking over the trimmer and spinning on whatever hoof is planted in the trimmer's midriff to eyeball that scary... Little leaf falling from a tree. Survivors, indeed.

The main focus of equine safety must be to stop that primitive flight mechanism waking from hibernation. Horses need to feel unthreatened in the workplace and this arises from familiarity; trimming them in the same place they have been tied up for hours, for years and nothing has ever eaten them.

Instead of being braced and zoned out, focusing on external threats, they can relax and zone into the person holding onto their hoof. This is where it is safest to trim your horses.

If it's raining and you want to trim hooves, but the normal tie up place has no shelter, instead of taking them to a place they are not familiar with, wait until the rain stops and trim them in that familiar place.

Horses are gregarious animals. which is why they are always more relaxed when in the company of other horses. There is safety in numbers. If you are surrounded by your brethren, surely the carnivores will eat one of them first?! Trim a horse in the presence of its paddock mates. Don't lead a horse away from its mates, around the corner out of sight and expect it to stand relaxed from trimming.

Horses are also prairie animals. They are at home in open space where they can see danger coming from afar. The safest workplaces have less walls and more open space.

The workplace should also have enough ground space so a horse is able to move away from you if it does get a fright and swings around to visualise the perceived threat. A horse will only knock you down if it doesn't have a better escape route. Likewise, there needs to be enough space so you can get right out of harm's way if needed.

The ground surface needs to be flat with no tripping or slipping hazards, so keep control of all the extras that can clog up the workplace, such as tool boxes, hoofstands, buckets etc.

Hoof trimming is a workplace, not a play place, so keep away equine distractions, such as kids, dogs, cats... And chooks! Horses just don't get the random flapping of chooks.

Don't put yourself in a bad position that won't end well if the horse gets upset. If you have a horse holder, make sure they are on the same side that you are working on, especially when you're on a back hoof and remind them not to stand directly in front of the horse, which is where it is likely to run if scared or strike if naughty.





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The author has seen more horse holders hurt than trimmers, especially nowadays when horse holders cannot stand for five minutes without needing to use their little screen thing and, when doing so, drop out of the real world around them into a device zone!

If you are tying up a horse to trim its hooves, never tie it solid. If a horse pulls back when a person is underneath trimming and it can't break off, it will reactively leap forward and that's not going to end well. The best tying up device for hoof trimming is a custom-made polypropylene quick release (i.e. baling twine!).

Whether you have the horse tied up or being held, or maybe you are doing it at liberty in a thousand-acre paddock, shut the gate. Put simply, cars and runaway horses don't mix.

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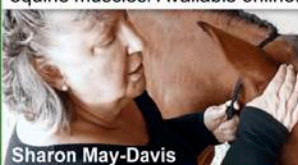
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**IMAGE A:** Trimming correctly with a horse holder that is tuned into the horse. Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

**IMAGE B:** Trimming using protective gear. Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

**IMAGE C:** Trimming correctly, keeping your back straight and your head up. Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

**IMAGE D:** Using a haynet to keep your horse occupied during trimming. Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

**IMAGE E:** Trimming the hindleg in a manner that's as safe as possible. Images courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.



## Personal protective equipment (PPE)

There are certain items of PPE that should be worn to protect yourself from sharp tools and hard edges of the horse you're working on.

An apron that protects your legs from stray hoof knives and solid boots that protect your toes from falling hooves wrap up the relevant PPE, but care is still needed. Keep the sharp side of your knife under control and keep your feet away from where hooves might fall.

Gloves should be a no-brainer, especially as the quickest way to check how sharp your rasp is, is by seeing how many layers of skin are removed in one pass. Gloves are good. The author would use gloves, but they just don't fit over all the band-aids on my hands!

## Horse behaviour

Modern horses are often overfed and underworked, and pent-up energy manifests as nervous energy. Such horses are likely to react to all the little things they shouldn't react to, but this problem can always be circumvented by a sweaty saddle cloth. In other words, ride first and trim second.

That way a horse will have used up that store of energy and will be quite content to stand there resting, whilst being trimmed.

If you get a new horse and you are not sure of its disposition when being trimmed, get a professional to do the first trim and assess its behaviour for you.

## An evolving workplace

The trimming workplace is constantly evolving. Just because you checked at the start and made sure it was safe, doesn't mean it stays safe. It is vital to keep a weather eye out for changes that the horse may react to, so keep your back straight and your head up, and you can maintain peripheral vision. If you put your head too close to the hoof you are working on, you will get tunnel vision.

Stay in tune with your horse. If you stay relaxed throughout the trimming procedure, you should be able to feel if it is lifting its energy levels in response to external stimuli. Then, you can hopefully get out of harm's way before harm actually happens.



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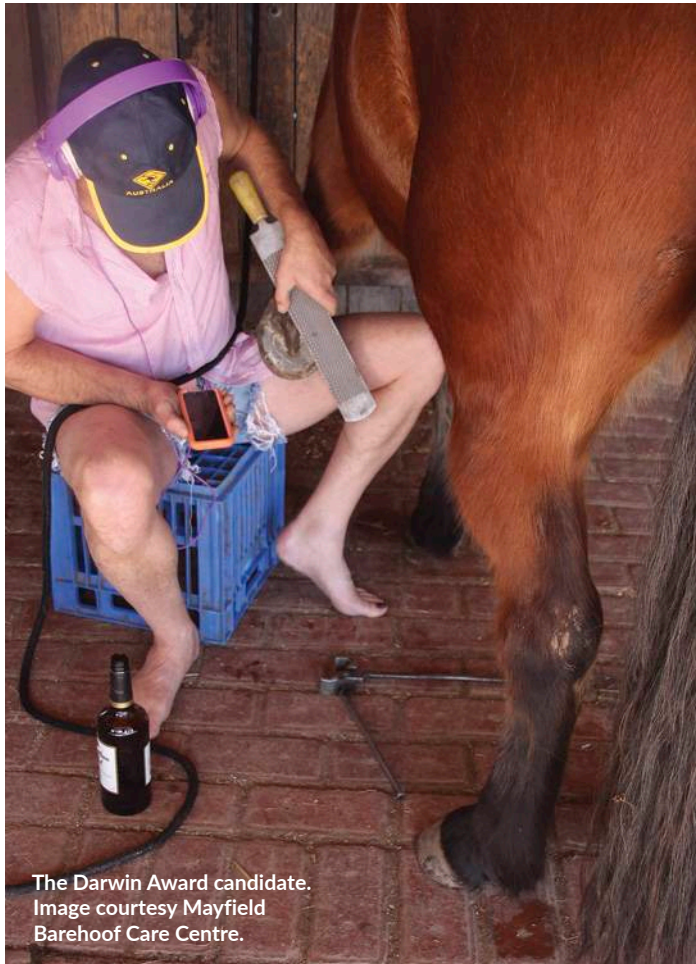
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magazine 





The Darwin Award candidate.  
Image courtesy Mayfield  
Barehoof Care Centre.



Owner trimmer workshop.  
Image courtesy Mayfield  
Barehoof Care Centre.

Just in case, be mindful of the likely direction the leg that you're holding will move if the horse reacts unexpectedly.

### Don't annoy your horse

It doesn't matter how well the workplace has been set up if your horse simply gets annoyed during your great self-trimming odyssey. A horse needs to be 'happily' compliant with the trimming procedure.

### What could possibly upset a horse?

It seems every corner of Australia has its own special mix of biting insects, all of which seem to know when a horse is distracted by having its hooves trimmed. Seriously, if two horses are tied up, the one that is getting trimmed will attract the biting insects.

Don't expect a horse to stand quietly with you holding a leg up if there is something biting it. You won't win the fight; break out the repellent and take insects out of the equation.

Then, there is the small matter of equine patience. Whilst a horse will stand statuesque for hours beneath its favourite tree and only move to swat those aforementioned insects, don't expect it to do the same when you are trimming it.

When you are starting out and you haven't yet got your land legs, and instead of taking ten minutes to trim the whole horse, it takes an hour to trim one hoof, hurry up and push that rasp a bit faster. And, don't finesse; as long as the basics are right and the hoof is functional, leave it at that. As the owner, you are not getting paid to make the job look nice and you don't want your horse to start growling whenever you walk towards it with your trimming tools.

Besides, when was the last time you saw a horse pick its freshly trimmed hoof up and closely inspect it for the quality of workmanship?

If you are struggling to get through the job before it becomes open warfare, maybe trim just two hooves today and the other two another day? Maybe break out some sweet food bribery if the horse's behaviour is heading south? Just like bribing your favourite farrier.

### Hind leg safety

The handling of hind legs for trimming rates a particular mention because that is the kicking end. To start safely, make sure the horse knows it is you touching its leg, don't just reach down and grab hold of a hind leg. Then, once a hind leg is picked up and under your control, keep your body close to the horse and keep your backside to the kickside, so if things turn pear shaped and a kick has your name on it, any fall out is minimised; a bruise rather than a break.

When you have finished trimming a hind hoof, be sure to keep one hand on the horse's rump as you let go of the leg and retreat to a safe distance.

### Avoiding complacency

Complacency is a human frailty. A good way to avoid becoming complacent as your confidence grows over time is to get into a solid habit; something that you do every time you begin trimming a horse. Before bending down to pick up the first hoof, stand tall (which stretches your back), have a good look around and ask yourself a most important question - "Is the workplace safe?"





## The Darwin Awards

Workplace safety is a serious subject, but no such discussion is complete without making reference to some of the award-winning brain fades that lead to disaster. The Darwin Awards are named in honour of that great scientist of evolution and no, it is not good to win a Darwin Award.

Anyone who has experienced a Darwin moment will know that time travels very slowly and, despite seeing it all unfolding right in front of you, your body does not change its course of action.

Maybe one day you will be about to have a Darwin moment and the recollection of what you have read here may stop you in your tracks, before the event runs to completion. There have been plenty of Darwin nominees in the history of hoof trimming:

The author is old enough and grey enough to 'fess up that he once tied a horse to a barb wire fence. What happens if the horse pulls back and the lead rope gets snagged on a barb and the (young, much younger) farrier is working in a singlet. Barbed wire and bare arms; not a good mix. Fortunately, those scars have been covered over by other scars.

What about trimming a horse next to an electric fence? Why on earth would a horse reach out its nose and touch a hot wire that it knows is there and knows that it bites? And then lash out at whoever is holding its hoof? It's hard to argue with such logic.

Then, there is the modern scourge of texting whilst on the job. Whilst under a horse. The message is obviously so important that you can't spare the time to put the hoof down and get out of the horse's way first. Texting equals total tunnel vision.

Another modern day peculiarity is trimming a horse whilst sitting on a milk crate underneath half a ton of potentially explosive equine. Seriously?! Riding bulls would be safer and a lot more fun.

The only horses suitable to sit down under when trimming are those small enough that you can still see over their wither when you are down there. Use a hoof stand or go to the gym and pump up your core strength; anything but sitting down under a big horse.

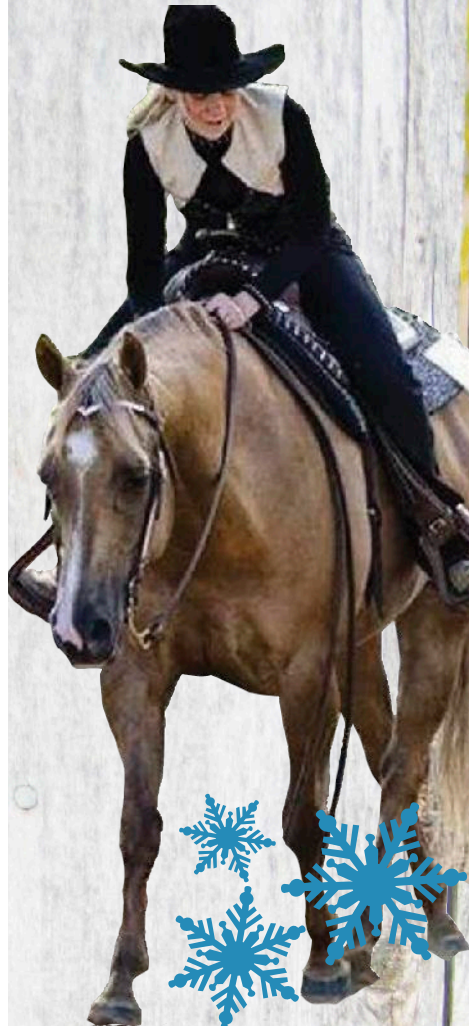
Then, there are those people who prefer to work whilst under the influence of mind-altering substances (legal or illegal, it doesn't seem to bother some). This is just so unsafe on so many levels, for both horse and trimmer. Don't go there.

But, the Gold Darwin Award surely goes to anyone who has tied the horse's lead rope around their waist so the horse doesn't pull back. Believe it or not, this has been done... Not by the author.

If you are going to learn how to trim your own horse's hooves, be sure to choose a workshop that includes trimming your own horse under supervision. You need more than just watching a demonstration. Dexterity doesn't happen by osmosis alone. Proper workshops might cost a bit more (no doubt to pay for insurance), but have you considered the alternative? Hospital stays aren't cheap either.

Enough safety talk, the author is now going to rub some arnica cream into that bruise on his gluteus maximus that looks suspiciously like a hind hoof.

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