



# A career in hoofcare?

by Andrew Bowe, Master Farrier

Images courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre

Have you ever considered equine hoofcare as a career?

Why not? A good, honest living can be made by caring professionally for equine hooves (so long as you are willing to put in the hours). There is and will always be plenty of work available. Just ask anyone with horses how hard it is to find a professional hoofcare practitioner when they need one. It seems there's always more horses than there are farriers or trimmers.

There has been much talk lately of job security and how many of today's occupations will no longer exist in the years to come. With technological advances, many lines of work are being replaced by robots and computers, but there will never be such a threat to those working with horses' hooves. This is one job that could never be automated.

Outsiders to the trade probably wonder why anyone in their right mind would actually choose to care for equine hooves as a career. To the average horse owner, there's probably nothing remotely appealing about the thought of bending down under other peoples' horses all day, every day. Surely, such dirty and smelly work is best left to that sweating farrier chap to deal with. It must be bad when frugal horse owners regularly part with large sums of their hard earned cash, so someone else can look after their horse's hooves for them (although, a quick note to any horse owners reading this, whatever you are paying your hoofcare professional, it is still not enough!).

Insiders know different. They know that working as a professional hoofcarer leads to high job satisfaction. The author just happens to know this because he has been in the job for about 25 years, ever since 'escaping' from university, and has actually enjoyed each and every day in the job, firstly as a traditional farrier and, more recently, as an equine podiotherapist. Despite the long hours, there have not been many times that it has felt like a chore.







However, it's not all cheese and wine and desert sunsets, so when hoofcare is proffered as a potential career, the rose-coloured glasses should be taken off just long enough to illuminate a couple of potential downsides to life as a hoof person. That way, if you are already shuddering at the mere thought of joining the army of blue singlets, you may skip straight to the next story in this fine magazine.

First up, working 'down under' horses holding their legs up, holding their hooves steady and driving the farrier tools is, undoubtedly, hard work. There is nowhere to hide. In fact, working as a professional hoofcarer is surely one of the most honest jobs there is because you must earn every dollar you make. There are no short cuts. You only get paid for work you do. You do not get paid for work not done. If you don't work, you don't get paid and, if you do take short cuts, it shows up in your work for all the world to see.

Adding to the toil, you have to work outside in the weather - all sorts of weather, all of the time. That takes some getting used to, especially if you live in an air-conditioned existence. Up north, the working weather goes from hot to very hot and humid, whereas down south, we do get a couple of days in between the rote swing from freezing cold to burning hot, and back again.

But, worst part of the job is, undoubtedly, the smell. No, it won't be offensive to you once you get used to it and, after a while, you won't even notice the smell of horses' hooves. The problem is how you will smell to the rest of the world. The number of times that the author has been told by his children after returning from a big day out with hooves (especially seedy toe, that will do it) to go straight to the shower room without delay. If you want to smell like flowers, go and work as a florist!

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If you're not put off the job yet, you'll be pleased to know that the upsides far outweigh the negatives.

What other job dishes up such a constant flow of instant gratification (that is both ethical and legal)? In effect, you are employed to groom hooves and quickly turn a tatty, overgrown eyesore into a neat and pleasing work of art. Everytime. Is this the actual source of addiction to the job?

You are also your own boss (apart from several hundred clients who will try to boss you around, but that's another story) and the harder you work, the more you get paid. What's more, you are in control of where and when you work, and who you work for and you get to work with horses all day, everyday. That sure takes some beating.





You get to work outside in all sorts of weather, all of the time. That actually also takes some beating once you've got used to the vagaries and extremes.

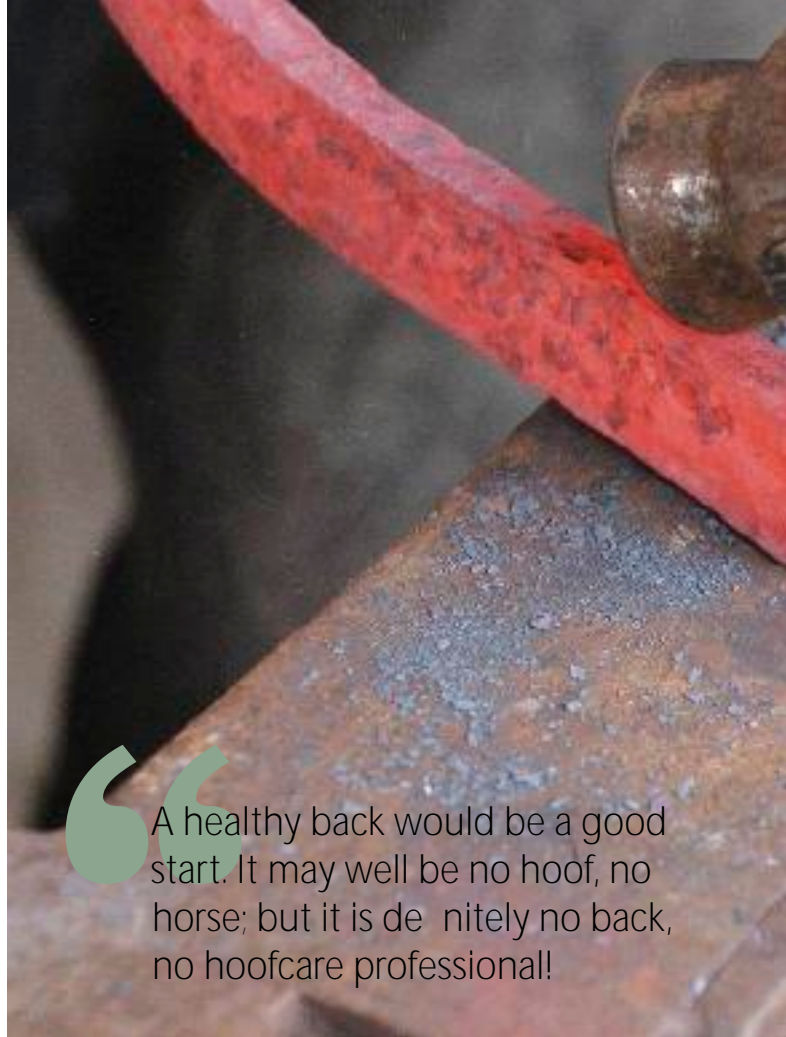
Anyway, who says hard work is a bad thing? Not only will you become more resilient and self-disciplined, but once you get conditioned and develop your core strength, you can remain fit and strong your whole working life; long years past when your office working friends are power walking to the gym after a session of yoga in the sauna whilst chewing celery like a rabbit to ward off the middle age outcome of a sedentary lifestyle.

## Any pre-reqs?

If you are planning to spend your working days bent over at the hips, a healthy back would be a good start. Whilst a weak human back will undoubtedly get stronger, a damaged back will only get worse. It may well be no hoof, no horse; but it is definitely no back, no hoofcare professional!

Agility is also important. Horses are moving targets, which means you need to be able to take an occasional side step, whilst holding up a leg. More importantly, you need to be agile enough to get out of harm's way just in case you become the moving target.

You need also to have the right temperament. Horses will do the damndest things to test your patience when you are holding a hoof off the ground. You need a calm and resilient nature to endure their party tricks. Short tempers and violence towards horses are, thankfully, not tolerated these days.



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## Farrier or trimmer?

Nowadays, there are two quite distinct career streams within the equine hoofcare industry.

There are traditional farriers who specialise in shoeing or there are trimmers who specialise in keeping horses barefoot and are not trained to shoe, but rather they use functional hoof protection devices, such as hoof boots.

Although having just distinguished between these two streams, the continual evolution of functional hoof protection materials and methods (there are tips and poly shoes and glues and screws and casting materials) means the two camps are no longer very clearly defined. There are farriers who embrace the use of alternative, removable hoof protection products (such as hoof boots) and there are trimmers who will attach permanent hoof protection devices (such as tips and poly shoes). It's becoming one big happy family (yeah, right).

Still, there is a big decision up front that potential hoof care students need to make: farrier or trimmer? There are pro's and con's to each modality.


If you train as a traditional farrier, you can potentially service a greater range of horses because you can trim, as well as shoe. You will also be able to work on more of the top level competitive horses, which are still mostly shod.

For trimmers to become mainstream and be able to service a broader range of horses, they need to be open-minded and willing to try the alternative, permanently attached, hoof protection devices that horse owners are increasingly turning to for practical purposes. This may require some compromising of standards. Trimmers with a hard-core 'barefoot or bust' mindset seem to struggle with the concept of compromise and are ultimately limited in the scope of their business.

The employment ledger does seem to balance in favour of trimmers nowadays because an increasing number of owners with barefoot horses are becoming quite discerning as to how their horses' hooves are trimmed. Those who are trained as specialist 'barefoot' trimmers and apply a physiologically-correct trim have a competitive edge that sees them chosen before farriers who apply a traditional flat trim (as taught at farrier school).

The task of shoeing is also far more physically demanding and potentially damaging to the human body than trimming is. Trouble between a farrier and a horse arises the moment nails start getting driven, because (strangely enough) horses don't seem to enjoy having their hooves struck sharply with a hammer. Not only does a hoof need to be held quite still and in a position that favours the comfort and confidence of the horse instead of the farrier's ergonomics, but the sharp ends of the nails have a propensity to enter human flesh. Ouch alright! The author never said that farriery is a job for the faint-hearted.

Furthermore, if a trimmer's back is twinging and screaming for time-out, the hoof can immediately be returned to the ground and the offending back can be straightened out for a rest. No such luck for a farrier midway through nailing a shoe on because it can't be let go until the task is complete. Trimmers really don't know how easy they have got it compared to farriers.



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to each modality.





## Training

Unfortunately, the equine hoofcare industry in Australia is still quite colonial. Anyone can put up a shingle and call themselves a farrier or a trimmer, even if they have done no official training whatsoever. What the...?! It is hard to believe in our over-governed society there is still no industry regulation, especially when horse welfare is on the line. Potential disaster is only ever one imbalanced hoof or one mis-directed nail away.

Fortunately, the market place tends to sort the oats from the fluffy chaff. Especially nowadays with the internet, which really is a worldwide water trough of gossip, and everyone soon knows who has made a boo boo with a horse (even though the occasional innocent fly does get caught in the web).

If you are setting out with the ultimate aim of becoming a professional, you should aim to be the best you can. If you don't get trained properly, you are likely to mess things up and don't worry, that damn internet will know, even if you don't.

Nothing sets a student up better for their career than the appropriate, accredited course. Such courses are now available in both hemispheres of the industry - farriery and trimming - and both are relatively easy to access, especially with cheap travel that brings such a large country as Australia closer together.

There will surely come the day when the equine hoofcare industry will be regulated, even in this colonial outpost. When that day arrives, it would be wise to already be working as a qualified practitioner.

### Farrier training - ACM30510 Certificate III in Farriery

Farriery has long been classed as a trade and training was traditionally based on the apprentice system, whereby apprentices would be indentured to a master for about four years of on-the-job training, during which time there would be regular blocks of study at trade school.



Trade schools have morphed into RTO's (Registered Training Organisations) and it is no longer compulsory in all states to be an indentured apprentice to undertake the Cert III in Farriery (although, it is recommended that at least part-time work experience is undertaken during the duration of the course). This has opened up the farrier courses to many more potential students.

The farriery certificate focuses on all aspects of farrier science, particularly the making and fitting of shoes for both normal and remedial situations. All states, except Tasmania, have RTO's that offer this course and information for each state's relevant RTO is easily accessible online.

## Trimmer training - 22290VIC Diploma of Equine Podiotherapy

This is a two-year diploma level course that has recently been granted official government accreditation. It aims to produce therapeutic trimmers who specialise in barefoot rehabilitation to overcome equine lameness and performance issues. This course is much lighter on the mechanical training than the Farriery Certificate (there is no need to spend many hours at the forge and anvil making and altering shoes), but it is more focused on functional anatomy, orthopaedics, biomechanics and hoof development to build thorough observational and management skills.

The diploma involves two years of part-time study and is based at a private college in Victoria (for more details, refer to [www.equinepodiotherapy.com.au](http://www.equinepodiotherapy.com.au)).

Both of these accredited courses have common ground of teaching horse handling skills, occupational health and safety, first aid for both horses and people, and business principles.



## What about other courses?

There are other, shorter courses in both farriery and trimming, and whilst there may be some merit in these, none are nationally accredited. With any course you will be making a huge investment in time, effort and money to train, so you should be rewarded with a certificate that is both tangible and officially recognised.

Unfortunately, business is business, and sometimes marketing gets a bit exuberant and overstates the status of products being sold. Be guarded against misleading advertising and be sure to check that a course claiming to be delivering nationally accredited training, really is doing so before handing over your hard earned. Accredited courses always have an identifying code that you can check for legitimacy.

There are also numerous (unofficial) courses in hoofcare that can be taken online. The author is not sure how someone can learn to get under a horse and handle its legs safely whilst sitting at a keyboard. Ah, the wonders of our modern world! Unfortunately, working under horses is not the safest place for human ribs, which is why such internet-based hoofcare training would not get past first base of an occupational health and safety audit. Both the Cert III in Farriery and the Diploma of Equine Podiotherapy courses are hands on and are heavily slanted towards workplace safety. They need to be.

Finally, be wary of anyone who offers to show you a 'secret' way of trimming or shoeing horses in exchange for large amounts of money. There are no secret cure-all's or methods when it comes to equine hooves. What there is, is the learning of underlying scientific principles that need to be customised for each and every horse, and repetitive practice under supervision to develop observation skills and hone hand to eye coordination.

## Getting started

Okay, now that this persuasive piece of journalism has got your back muscles twitching in anticipation of spending your working hours bent over equine hooves, what is the best way to make a start?

Before signing up for such a large undertaking as an accredited course, wouldn't it be a good idea to try before buying, just in case the job is in fact harder than it looks from the outside?

You could try to gain some work experience with a professional who might take you along for a few days, so you can get an inside look at the trials and tribulations of the daily grind.

Better still, there are short courses in both shoeing and trimming that are designed to teach horse owners how to look after their own horses. Nowadays, most professionals seem to start out their careers this way. This is a good way for beginners to fumble through the initial awkwardness and lack of body conditioning at their own pace, and out of the glare of the industry workplace. If you make it through this anti-honeymoon period with an intact sense of humour and a desire to learn more, you may well be suited to life 'down under' horses.

In the meantime, it's been a big day out, working down under horses with muddy hooves and the kids are pointing me towards the shower...

*Postscript: The author always endeavours to remain objective and for this reason must declare a slight, but double conflict of interest with this article. Not only did he co-write the Diploma of Equine Podiotherapy, but he has also completed the Cert III (Farriery).*