

# Workplace Safety:

## Part 2



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**PHOTOS BY** Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre

**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.**

There is more to workplace safety than just the clear and present danger of working beneath a large reactionary animal that can break a human body by simple expression of its flight or fight instincts. It's also about the insidious wear and tear arising from the sheer physicality of the task that can lead to chronic musculoskeletal disorders.

Stand back and look at the big picture, and you'll see the figures simply don't tally. On average, a 70kg human is trying to control a 500kg horse - by the end of its leg - and, all the time, working in an unnatural position. Trimming is hard on a good day, but what about the extra stresses generated if the above mentioned 500kg critter starts to misbehave; pushing and pulling and lifting and dropping? Ergonomics and hoof trimming probably shouldn't even be put in the same sentence.

To overcome this great imbalance of weight and strength, and give the human body some chance of survival, a horse needs to stand compliantly for the whole duration of the trimming task and the trimmer needs to work effectively and efficiently throughout.

In recent years, horse owners have been discovering for themselves that equine hoof trimming is not as easy as their farrier makes it look.

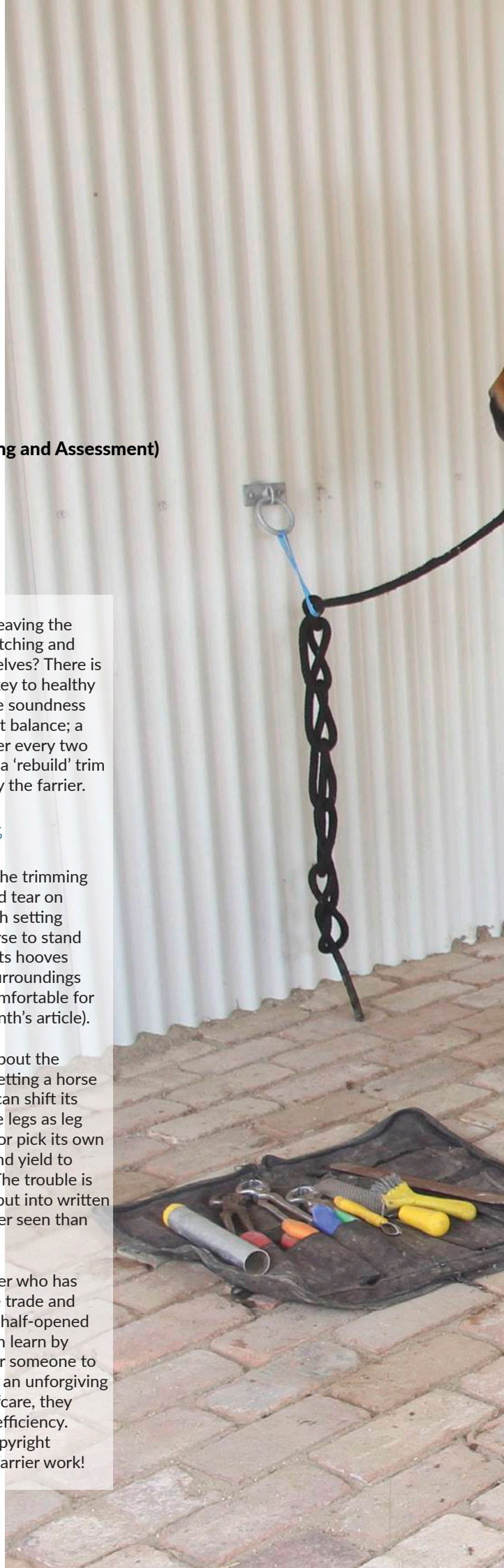
But, why have they been leaving the comfort zone of farrier watching and learning to trim for themselves? There is emerging knowledge the key to healthy hooves and lifelong equine soundness is to keep them in constant balance; a 'touch up' trim by the owner every two or three weeks, instead of a 'rebuild' trim every six to eight weeks by the farrier.

### *Setting up for success*

Successful completion of the trimming task with minimal wear and tear on the human body starts with setting up the workplace for a horse to stand contentedly while having its hooves handled. The workplace surroundings need to be familiar and comfortable for the horse (refer to last month's article).

Workplace set up is also about the intangible subtleties like getting a horse to stand square so that it can shift its weight onto its other three legs as leg number four is picked up, or pick its own hooves up on command and yield to light pressure on its legs. The trouble is subtleties are not easy to put into written words; they are often better seen than simply described.

If you know a vintage farrier who has survived a long time in the trade and doesn't walk around like a half-opened pocket knife, see if you can learn by watching him in action. For someone to work day after day in such an unforgiving occupation as equine hoofcare, they obviously work with high efficiency. Fortunately, there is no copyright protection on watching a farrier work!





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



Any horse can be trained to do this if it is given the same cues every time it is handled for trimming; horses are programmed to pre-empt your intentions. This is why an experienced farrier will repeat the same handling steps every time.

Notice how a horse always seems to be ready at the very moment the farrier wants to pick that hoof up and there is never a struggle to get it off the ground? There's no great secret... He has simply and subtly pushed the horse's body weight off the target leg and timed the pick up to perfection.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, it seems your horse needs reminding it actually has four legs, which means three other legs to stand on when a hoof is picked up. How often does it forget this and think that it needs to put all its body weight, and then some, into the corner that you just picked up? Ease of operation will come with practice but, until it does, don't try and pick up a hoof that is being rammed into the ground, lest your energy is spent before the job has even begun.

Of course, the holy grail of ergonomic hoof trimming is the old horse that slips into doze mode as soon as it is tied up for trimming, quietly shifting its weight, picking its own hoof up and waiting until it sees the farrier coming. Any horse can be trained to do this if it is given the same cues every time it is handled for trimming; horses are programmed to pre-empt your intentions. This is why an experienced farrier will repeat the same handling steps time after time.

What about a horse that leans?

A leaning horse taxes the human body, and can be disconcerting enough for a budding owner trimmer to put the rasp back in its packet and call the farrier. A horse should not be allowed to lean.

If a horse starts leaning, make it instantaneously uncomfortable and vexed with incremental brace. In other words, the more it leans, the more brace is applied to its leg. Most horses get the message fairly quickly.

If a horse is recalcitrant and continues to lean into the brace you are applying, simply drop its leg. A horse's hoof hitting the ground unexpectedly in this fashion usually has the desired effect of it lifting its whole body and shifting its weight back to its other three legs.

Watch again the efficient farrier how, after he picks up a hoof, he holds it upturned in mid-air, just long enough to clean it with the hoof pick before supporting it with his body, ready to trim. If you look at the horse, you will see it shift its weight momentarily into the flexed leg being held up and then back to the other side of its body.

Only then does the farrier get into the trimming stance. If you were to fully support a leg in the trimming stance as soon as it has been picked up, any horse will gladly lean into your very generous hand of support.

### Maintaining a correct working posture when trimming

To reduce the effects of working in an unnatural position, keep your back straight at all times by bending at the ankles, knees and hips (consciously stick your backside out, your chest out and keep your head high).

**IMAGE A:** Big horse, little farrier.

**IMAGE B:** Cleaning the hoof.

**IMAGES C & D:** Examples of good and bad posture.

Images courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

Don't carry any of the horse's weight on your upper body when bent over, because this puts the compounding effect of lever force into your lower back. It is far better to transfer the horse's weight onto your legs. Wherever possible, use your spare arm as a bridge that supports your upper body and transfers weight onto your legs. A lunging stance is a good way to facilitate the arm bridge when working on short horses or even when you are starting off with a cold, unworked back.

A horse will only remain light to trim if its leg is not over-flexed or torqued laterally beyond its comfort zone. For this reason, a trimmer needs to stay quite relaxed to be able to recognise tension in a horse's leg when the edge of its comfort zone is approaching. Correct handling often requires lateral flexion of the trimmer's body instead of the horse's leg and the horse's hoof to be held low enough to not cause any discomfort.

A modern back saving device is a dual purpose hoof stand that can be used as both a cradle and a post. Horses are often more comfortable and more compliant when resting into a hoof stand because there is no lateral torquing of joints to accommodate the trimmer's body and it can be held low enough to avoid any limb over-flexing.

### Be quick about it!

There is a simple equation. The longer you take to trim a horse, the more your back is going to hurt and greater is the chance of developing a chronic musculoskeletal disorder. Fortunately, there are several effective time-saving tips available to help a beginner get in and out quickly:

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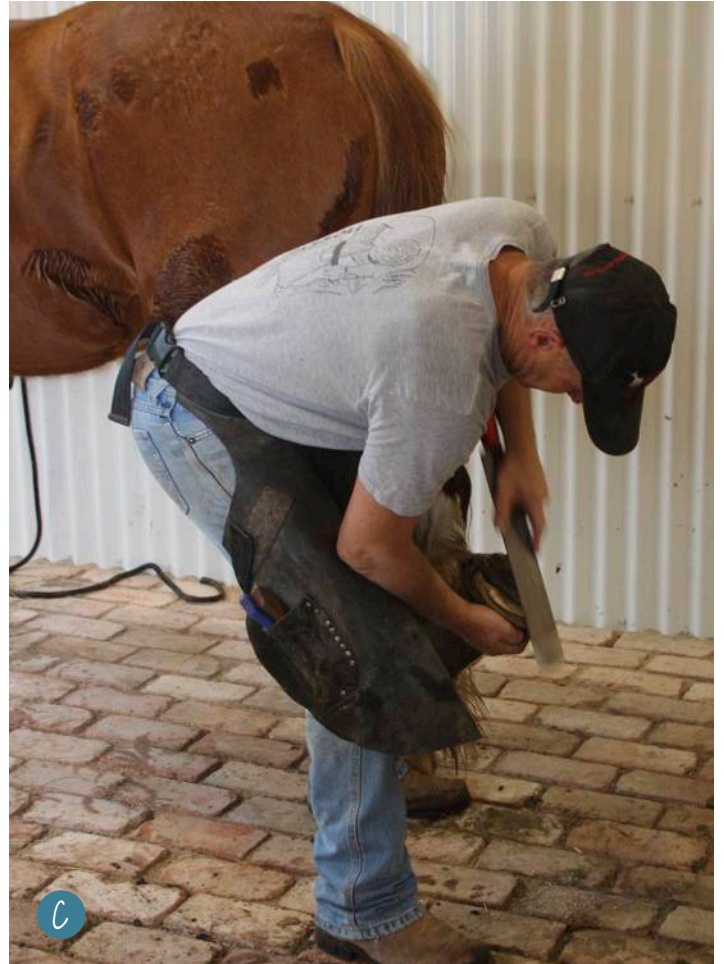


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If you are a horse owner starting out trimming your own horse, you will need to develop your core strength. It will happen, but not overnight. Start with baby steps and don't overdo it... Don't leave it months between trims so the task becomes a total hoof rebuild.

- Pick up and handle each leg only once from start to finish.
- Make your trimming observations while you are cleaning the hoof in auto pilot; that way you can begin trimming the hoof immediately once it is cleaned.
- Don't finesse, especially if you are starting out on your hoof trimming odyssey. As long as the basics are right, your horse won't care if you haven't done the prettiest job ever.

- Speed comes with pushing the rasp faster. A relaxed rasp is a fast rasp.
- Only use a sharp rasp.

### Condition your body

You've read about the benefits of maintaining your horse's hooves. You've seen that same old farrier doing it for years and he never seems to even break a sweat. In fact, he does it so quickly and easily that it doesn't seem right to have to pay him so much. The job can't be that hard, surely?

Well, you've got the gear and away you go on that big adventure of your first trimming job. Everything starts well but, before very long, there is a piercing pain in your lower back that starts spidering in all directions, your thighs start catching fire and the sweat that began pouring out of your head from the outset is now rolling into your eyes and stinging like acid rain. You can feel your very blood pressure beginning to red-line, which is bad, but the really sad thing is that you still haven't got that first hoof off the ground! Let alone trimmed it! Okay, so the farrier does earn his pay after all.

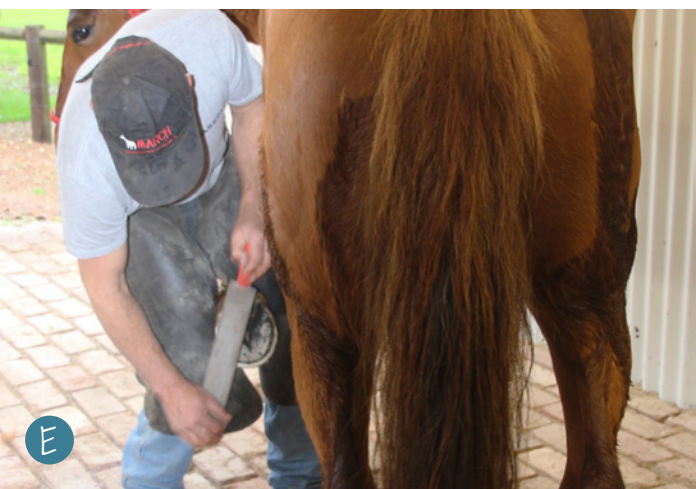
That old farrier has long been conditioned by the rigours of the job. Believe it or not, he once was a normal person that sweated and struggled, and no doubt wondered what the hell he was doing working under horses for a living. But, he stuck at the job until his core strength got wiry and the job got easy.

If you are a horse owner starting out trimming your own horse, you will need to develop your core strength. It will happen, but not overnight:

- Start with baby steps and don't overdo it. Maybe give both front hooves a quick touch up with your rasp around the outer wall and call it quits after that. If you trim very regularly, as per the maintenance model, a trim won't involve much more than a light rasping anyway. Don't leave it months between trims so the task becomes a total hoof rebuild. That's hard work for anyone.
- If you have more than one horse, only do one horse in a day.
- Maybe only do two hooves at a time before you are conditioned.



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- Have a quick stretch before you commence, or better still, go riding before trimming.
- If you do experience back pain, treat it seriously and don't trim if your body is not right. Don't ever try to trim your way out of pain. Pain exists for a reason.

### Keep your back warm

The hard working muscles of the lower back need to be kept warm so, when you are bending over, pull your pants up and be sure to tuck in your shirt. Trimmers are not plumbers; no indecent exposure!

- Consider wearing a 'long tail' shearing singlet that is specifically designed to keep a bending torso well covered, even if the pants are at half mast!

**IMAGES A & B:** Using a hoof stand.

**IMAGE C:** The recommended posture using an arm bridge correctly.

**IMAGES D & E:** Lateral flexion.

Images courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.



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- Don't work with a wet back and take layers off only after you warm up.
- Don't argue with your horse

What is in our human DNA that makes us think we can repetitively hold onto the flailing legs of 500 kg critters without any consequences? If a horse wants to pull its leg away from you or insists that it puts its foot down, just let it. Don't hold on too long. When the wind blows, it is far better to bend like grass than break like a tree.

You may be able to stop an argument before it begins by staying relaxed throughout the trimming task and learning the feel of a horse thinking about moving before it actually does. You will feel its body lift and tighten and, if you are quick enough to send a message to the horse by putting a slight brace through your hold, it can be enough for a horse to change its mind and not move, but remain compliant instead.

This subtle technique is actually the real trade secret of that unstoppable old farrier who never seems to break down or wear out or have any trouble handling those horses that are always naughty for other people.

It can be soul destroying for an owner trimmer when their horse is badly behaved for them to trim, but is like a pussy cat when the grey old farrier does its hooves. But, if you look closely, you will see the whole time the farrier is trimming, he is having a conversation with the horse; nothing verbal, but it's a body language conversation that can best be described as brace versus brace.

Every time the horse puts even the slightest bit of brace into the equation, the farrier is able to change the horse's mind with a strategic brace in return; a brace that is relaxed immediately when the horse yields. Discussions then don't turn into arguments.

Fortunately, there is an effective solution for an owner trimmer who is struggling to get their 'two-faced' horse to behave for them as well as it does for the farrier. It is the quintessential horsemanship tool; the sweaty saddle cloth. In other words, ride first and trim second.

Not only will your body be warmed up and half the trim will already be done, but when you ride first (a solid, lengthy, sweat-producing ride) and then pick a hoof up and start trimming immediately after dismounting, your horse will be saying: "Thank God you're off my back; here, have my hoof"! It works every time.

### Avoid familiarity

When it comes to hoof trimming, familiarity really does breed contempt.



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It's important for owner trimmers to not be too soft with their horse when trimming its hooves.

Horses are simple critters. At the risk of dumbing down the science of horse and human interactions, we must remember they are bottom of the food chain prey animals, and either act boldly (fight) or timidly (flight) in any given situation. To handle a horse successfully, it needs to be 'spoken to' within a tone of equine language appropriate to its demeanour.

For example, when the farrier arrives and gets to work, your horse knows the drill, and is very compliant with this person who is holding onto their leg and conversing in strong body language. This is why your horse is always that little bit timid with your farrier and is why it's so important that a farrier is never too hard on a horse. It is a fine line between a timid horse and a scared horse.

The opposite is unfortunately true for the owner trimmer because your horse knows exactly who you are. You are the chuck wagon that turns up every night after work with dinner and a scratching post. You're not scary. In fact, you are so familiar that your horse gets bold with you and boldness inevitably turns into a lack of respect when you ask hard questions, like holding a hoof up long enough to trim it. This is why it's important for owner trimmers to not be too soft with their horse when trimming its hooves. Save the horse smooching for when you two are watching the sunset!

How can you tell if your horse doesn't respect you when you are trimming?

Horses have a beautiful sense of humour they love to share with us. They know the exact moment when you have just finished cleaning the last of that sticky mud out of that hoof so you can begin trimming it. That is the exact moment when they snatch their hoof away and put it back down in the mud - again!

**IMAGES A, B & C:** Long tail untucked, short singlet and long tail tucked in. A long singlet is the best choice when trimming to save any indecent exposure!

**IMAGE D:** Trimming with the saddle still on after a sweat-producing ride.

**IMAGE E:** The all-too-familiar mud-covered hoof that appears just as the hoof is cleaned and ready for trimming!

Images courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.