



do you really want?

There is an unofficial rite of passage in a farrier's career that allows for 'selective retirement'.
Photo by Linda Zupanc.

Keeping Your Farrier



WORDS BY Andrew Bowe
www.barehoofcare.com

It happens every year on the day after Boxing Day. I can just about set my clock to it. Like most other 'normal' people, I will be ensconced in the pleasant afterglow of Christmas; mentally and physically luxuriating after the annual rush and madness to get everything finished before 'Santa o'clock'.

For a farrier, that means getting all of the clients' horses ready for their holiday riding activities. Several extra-long days ensures that mission impossible is accomplished and the farrier can have a whole week off the tools. Even the ponies that Santa has just delivered don't need to see the farrier for a while because his little helpers made sure they were right.

It's time to kick back and relax, and find out what the kids have been up to this last year just gone. The only trimming to be done over Christmas will be ham off the bone and the only thing needing shoeing will be flies away from the food by the pool. It is going to be a peaceful week indeed.

But then, the day after Boxing Day, the phone starts ringing. What the?!

It's not regular clients shattering the peace. Rather, these are strangers who are looking for a new farrier because their current farrier has apparently 'retired' and their horses' hooves are desperate.

Whilst some farriers do get old and broken, and really do retire, there is also an unofficial rite of passage in a farrier's career that allows for 'selective retirement'.

How many times have I heard from a horse owner their usual farrier has retired when I know they are still in the job? Truth is the farrier has stopped working on their horse.

There is usually a good reason why.



The annual job review

When you are sitting in the shade by the pool, luxuriating in your Christmas vacation, but wondering how the past year passed so damn quickly - it now seems that all you did was work and didn't have a life; no doubt you are contemplating your work/life balance for the year ahead. Less work and more life.

It turns out your hard-working farrier is likely doing the same, except the unfamiliar feeling of an absence of pain emanating from the farrier's body after a few days by the pool becomes a much stronger catalyst for change.

Coupled with the simple reality of too many horses and not enough farriers in the world, the mind-clearing Summer pool sit often turns into a serious pruning of the client list.

Then, the question arises as to who goes and who stays?

How do you become one of the keepers? What makes a farrier always want to hold on to your business to the very end of their career?

Whilst good coffee - that is the pseudo barista real stuff, not the instant imposter - goes a long way, there is a whole lot more to the story.

The perfect client

Instead of creating for you a dull list of points to guide you on your quest to keep your farrier coming back, allow me instead the indulgence of describing the perfect client. For expediency, we shall call her - or him - 'Goldilocks'.

Each hoofcare job for Goldilocks is organised on time, but well ahead of time, with at least one week's notice, so we can find a mutually beneficial appointment day and time.

The perfect client is flexible enough to be sympathetic to the scheduling demands placed upon the modern day travelling farrier with a busy schedule.

Goldilocks understands it may take a couple of days for messages to be returned. And no, it is not that the farrier is not answering his phone, it is the early starting hours and the late finishing hours that preclude phone communications during civilised hours.



IMAGE A: Each hoofcare for 'Goldilocks' is organised well ahead of time.

IMAGE B: 'Goldilock's' horse is either well tied or well held; whichever suits the horse best.

IMAGE C: 'Goldilocks' takes a genuine interest in what is happening to the hooves and provide feedback.

What's more, the job is organised for when it is due for the benefit of the horse. Not too early, not too late; just right - just like Goldilocks.

And what a fantastic workplace Goldilocks has. A high-roofed, open-sided, light, spacious shelter that is flat and level, and provides protection from the elements. It is dry, but not dusty. Not too wet, not too dry; just right.

If the horse has been out in muddy pasture, it has been brought in some minutes beforehand and cleaned. Wet, muddy and putrid rugs have been removed in advance.

It is either well tied or well held; whatever suits the horse best.

Insect spray is applied without asking. Goldilocks even has polite kids that know how to say hello and dogs that stay a polite distance from the horse until the job is done.

The horse is managed to optimize good behaviour, including bringing its paddock companions in with it and maybe working it before I arrive to soften any nervous energy or to loosen any tight limbs.

What's more, any recommendations that I make to help further improve its behaviour when having its hooves handled are put into practice and if there are any major behavioural issues, there is no hesitation to call in a professional horse trainer.

Goldilocks shows a genuine interest in what is happening to the hooves and will give me useful feedback, both positive and negative. Communication is a wide, two-way street.

Any suggestions I have to further improve the hoofcare operation are taken into consideration. Conversely, if something is not going right, I need to know and I am told.

I am paid as soon as the job is complete (either with old fashioned cash or new fashioned mobile phone bank transfer). There is no questioning of rates, payment is just done.

Driving out the gate, I will be making a mental note that as long as Goldilocks wants me to keep coming back, I will be there. No, it's not about easy money – which is a concept that simply does not correlate with the hard toil of farriery.

Instead, this is a client that provides me with a safe workplace and respects my work and my worth, where horse owner and farrier are on the same page, with a mutual aim that balances athletic endeavour and long-term soundness. This is how it should be.



LEFT: Coupled with the simple reality of too many horses and not enough farriers in the world, the mind-clearing Summer pool sit often turns into a serious pruning of the client list. Photo by Linda Zupanc.

The not so perfect client

It is only fair, in the spirit of balanced journalism, that I describe a farrier's 'worst nightmare' client.

The job is urgent. The job is overdue for its once yearly farrier visit. The job is half a country mile to walk to from the ute - down a steep hill, through a muddy gully and up a slippery slope.

The horse's paddock is feral with a raw sewerage outlet the horse has been standing in, although fortunately some of the sewerage gets replaced by good clean mud as the horse has to be walked through a swampy gate to get out to the workplace. All of this after waiting 'forever' just for the horse to be caught.

The horse is taken out of sight from its paddock mates - putting it on edge from the outset - to the workplace which is feral, with rubbish and 20 years of manure lying around. There are hordes of kids, dogs, cats, chooks and flies that are all barefoot and feral. The coffee is instant.

Straightaway the last farrier to visit this fine equine establishment is getting a potty mouthed character assassination because his shoes 'just fell off' after only six months. About now, I also get told no other farrier has been returning calls. What did they know that I didn't?

The horse is feral, but it must be something I'm doing wrong because "it has never kicked, bitten, struck or lay down right on top of a farrier before. No I haven't handled the legs since the last farrier upset it because you guys get paid enough you can handle them as well. No, it can't have fly spray because that upsets it". Apparently, when the owner is texting on the phone, whilst holding the horse for me, that has nothing to do with its behavioural issues either.

At least there is plenty of communication, but it is a one-way street with the owner proceeding to tell me exactly how I should be doing the job, according to the latest idea doing the rounds on the internet. On the other hand, any hoofcare suggestion I have is dismissed with a dead bat. What would I know?

Then, just to show me there is a slight measure of efficiency in this equine circus that has been unfolding before my eyes, the owner takes the opportunity to drench the horse whilst I have that last back leg in my grasp. One of the owner's new internet friends said a horse won't lift its head out of reach if a back leg is being held up. For real?

Finally, the job is complete with a little bit of skin transferred from farrier to horse and a whole lot of mud transferred from horse to farrier. Then, instead of appreciation and payment, comes a complaint about the exorbitant charge because "the last farrier only cost half that much".

Followed by a dead-pan "I am having trouble making payments on my new four wheel drive and float, so give me a bill and I will put the money in the bank when I've sold one of my Staffy pups".

It's not a question humbly asking me for credit after the fact, after the job has been completed - it's just a statement of how it will be.

Driving out the gate shaking my head I can feel it in my farrier bones that as soon as I'm out of the gate and gone, the owner will be telling all the internet forum friends about how bad I was for calling her horse names when "it didn't really kick you".

Let's return now to the Christmas holidays, when your hardworking farrier is sitting in the mango shade, beside the pool with a cold beer, contemplating a bit of client list management. Who do you think will be culled from the list? It certainly won't be Goldilocks!