

Hot or Cold Shoeing: What is your Farrier Doing?

"Farrier-Friendly"[™] series By [Bryan S. Farcus, BS, CF](#) and [Clyde H. Alloway, JR. DVM](#)

Attitudes--Past & Present

One of the hottest issues in today's horseshoeing industry is the concept of shoe fitting. If you were to gather a group of farriers and initiate a round table discussion on this topic, you would find yourself in the middle of a heated debate. This debate, however, is not a new one. As early as 1890 a book, entitled *The Practical Horseshoer*, clearly illustrated opposition among many prominent farriers and with a bit of poignancy, M.T. Richardson summarized it best:

"The advocates of each system of fitting are numerous, but the weight of evidence seems to be in favor of cold fitting, in theory, and more or less hot, in practice."

He later states:

"There are many who think differently from me on the points I touch upon, but my experience has proven my views--to my satisfaction... A horseshoer must understand the anatomy of the horse's foot; he must understand the position and composition of those parts..."

Modern day attitudes seem to deviate a bit from Richardson's viewpoint. Too often, I witness a more narrow-minded interpretation of shoe fitting. Whether it be horse owners or even some horseshoers, The common approach to fitting a horseshoe to any particular horse seems to be an arbitrary decision at best. Some horse owners tend to follow fashionable, rather than factual advice. For instance, if a horse experiences a round of lost shoes, the search for an easy solution leads to a choice based on existing "popular-practices". Popular, in most cases, because of the ease in which they are applied and not necessarily because of their effectiveness. If a farrier insists on only one shoe fitting approach, whether it be hot or cold, some questioning may be in order. Not every horse can tolerate constant hot fitting and, conversely, there are those that will not benefit from a simple cold fit. So, as you can see, the decision of hot or cold fitting should not be based on a mere "fashion statement". A good farrier should choose a shoe fitting approach that is completely supported by sound anatomical observation of the horse's foot, just as Richardson advised in his 1890 writings.

It's Better To Analyze, Rather Than Generalize

By now, you may be thinking that this topic is not only immensely important, but also somewhat confusing. Perhaps you're right. However, sorting out the facts will give you the ammunition to enhance your understanding. First, lets start by deciphering the terms and examine a few concepts that you maybe apt to overhear during an everyday casual conversation between two farriers. Even if you consider yourself an astute listener, a discussion of shoeing philosophy can still be overwhelming. Irregardless, the terms do have separate connotations and distinction between each is helpful. In a text written by Dr. Doug Butler, [The Principles of Horseshoeing,II](#), I found the clearest definitions. Butler begins his discussion regarding the application of horseshoes with this simplified and straight-forth statement:

"The aim of "physiological horseshoeing" is to minimize the harmful effects of the horseshoe, and to take advantage of its useful effects."

He then continues by specifying: "The horseshoe is a beneficial tool (For the reasons listed below, it will...)

1. Protect the horse's foot from excessive wear and resulting tenderness when its continuous use is necessary.
2. Provide traction when necessary for safety and/or speed on slippery surfaces.

3. Correct or influence the stance and/or gait of the horse.
4. Correct or improve "abnormal" and pathological conditions of the feet and legs."

Upon reviewing the information Butler offers, the following terms become less obscure:

1. **Hot shaping** refers to shoe bending or cutting procedures with the use of heat (forge).
2. **Cold shaping** involves shoe bending or cutting without the use of heat.
3. **Cold fitting** is best described as the process of "hammer-leveling" a horseshoe and "rasp-leveling" a horse's hoof to create a union between each with the majority of this union being one of friction, rather than relying heavily on compression of the hoof and shoe from it's nails. Proper cold fitting can be time consuming. However, if mastered, it can benefit the horse, especially in situations where hot fitting can not be tolerated.
4. **Hot Fitting** or often times referred to as "scorching" is a result of using the heat of the shoe to create a union by directly imprinting it on the hoof, immediately after removing it from the fire. For the unskilled farrier this procedure , however, can be injurious to the horse. It takes a working knowledge of each individual horse's hoof to determine if hot fitting can be tolerated. Over-burning a thin, sensitive sole could cause severe pain and may require several weeks or even months of stall rest. Most competent farriers will be conservative in their hot fitting practices and rely on the theory that heat should be used to "seat", rather than to "cheat". In this context, the word seat is used to signify a marking technique for shoe placement, rather than an actual impression or deep burning of the bottom surface of the horse's hoof.

The Ultimate Decision

A master farrier, one who is considered an expert of the craft, will always choose a shoeing approach that results in a "friction-related" contact between the hoof and the shoe; quite similar to that of a nice, "clean-cut" a carpenter performs on the adjoining ends of a handcrafted, wood framed project. With a "clean-cut" of a hoof to a "hammered-leveled" horseshoe, the friction created between the hoof and shoe will result in less stress from the shoeing nails. In cases where the hoof and shoe connection is not "clean", but "sloppy", friction will not be present and the hoof wall will inadvertently obtain more stress due to the "compression-related" forces of the shoe and its nails. This, undoubtedly, can be the greatest fault in horseshoeing. Good shoeing decisions are a result of a constant pursuit of accuracy. No farrier is perfect, but he or she should continually aspire towards perfection. If your farrier is concerned about maximizing your horse's hoof health, rather than continually compromising it, then you can be relieved and trust in what he or she is doing.

Resources:

[The Practical Horseshoer](#), M.T. Richardson, Johnson Publishing, Boulder, Co. [The Principles of Horseshoeing II](#), Doug Butler, Butler Publishing, La Porte, Co.