

**A Dozen Things that Have Improved the Life of the American Farrier
Since 1974 – *American Farriers Journal* 35th Anniversary – 2010
By Doug Butler**

Since I began shoeing horses in 1957 and teaching farriers in 1964, I have observed many positive things in the way of innovations and products that have improved the life of the American farrier. Most of the significant changes have occurred since 1974.

Here are, in my opinion, the Top 12 improvements in the farrier industry in the last 35 years, ranked in importance according to my perspective.

1. ***The American Farriers Journal***. Having been involved with the *AFJ* since its inception in 1974, as a reader, field editor and contributor, I would say the *AFJ* has made the biggest positive difference in the farrier industry in the last 35 years. It has provided a means of communication, continuing education, and advertising of resources for its readers.

2. ***The Principles of Horseshoeing***. The first edition of this book was published in 1974 when I was a graduate student at Cornell University. No major publishers were interested in books on horseshoeing at that time, so at great expense and risk, I published it myself. Fortunately, it was well received. As I continued to learn more about horseshoeing, I revised the book and published it again in 1985, and again in 2004. It has become the number one modern text in the world for training farriers. Recognizing that most farriers are visual learners, the book includes lots of illustrations, photographs and detailed step-by-step instructions. I have also produced numerous videos on the subject that have been widely used by schools and practicing farriers.

3. **Improved tools**. Thirty-five years ago most forging tools had to be made by farriers and farrier students, and most were quite crude. Then in the late 70's a few expert farriers, like Jay Sharp and others, began to make superior tools. The original tools were followed by numerous knock offs until now nearly everything can be bought ready-made. The quality of these manufactured tools varies tremendously. GE Nippers are still the best. Without experience, newbie's have a difficult time sorting out the quality from the junk, that is, until they go to use them. Anvil design has greatly improved and turning cams have made it easier to fit cold shoes. The hoof

tool that has improved the most is the hoof knife. NC Tool makes the best knife for the money, Frank Ringel makes my favorite knife.

4. **The atmospheric gas forge** has made fitting machine-made shoes much faster and easier. I obtained my first gas forge in 1974. It required electricity to run the blower. Today's atmospheric gas forges without blowers are hotter, quieter and cleaner than the first ones. Coal and coke are still my preference for heavy forging, but they are not as practical and convenient as gas-fired forges for most farrier applications.

5. **Ready-made horseshoes.** There was little choice of ready-to-nail shoes in America thirty-five years ago. Diamond was the strongest American company at that time, as Phoenix, makers of the classic long-heeled shoe, had quit manufacturing. Multi- Products from Japan and Baker from England were the strongest foreign-made shoes. There were a few American manufacturers who had a small part of the market for saddle horse shoes such as Hyatt and Pioneer. Today, there are many choices of shoes made of a variety of materials from all over the world with pitched nail holes, clipped, welded and even bonded to plastic. Some are good, some are not so good.

6. **Plastic hoof repair technology** was in its infant stages in 1974. Forty-three years ago I did my masters degree research at Penn State University on the use of synthetic materials to patch quarter cracks in hooves. Some of the greatest developments in the farrier field have come in this area. Adhesives and curing times have dramatically improved. However, I see a lot of these products misapplied with disastrous consequences when used as a substitute for basic fundamental knowledge of foot anatomy and physiology.

7. **Plastic wedges** were practically unknown in 1974. Prior to that time heavy leather belting was skived and used, mostly by gaited horse shoers. Manufactured wedges have made possible better mechanical treatment of navicular disease, bowed tendons, and limb length disparity. In addition, plastic wedges have been exclusively used for gaited horse build ups. I especially appreciate Curtis Hamilton's leather bonded Double Nail Pad.

8. **Competitions and certifications** have influenced shoe design and trimming technique since 1976, the year I joined the American Farriers Association. Prior to that time there were few competitions in America. The American Farriers Association certification program started in 1979.

Michigan and a few other local state associations had competitions, but they were not well supported or widely attended. The British influence has had a great effect on raising the standard in these events, but has had little effect on the daily shoeing of America's show horses due to the proliferation of ready-made shoes. Only a small percentage of highly motivated farrier/blacksmiths choose to participate in competitions. Unfortunately, more farriers have been affected by the natural and trimming fad than by competitions or certification.

9. **Efficient rigs – trailers, truck bodies, mobile shops, “offices.”** Lee Liles has designed and built many rigs. He maintains that business can be obtained and maintained by a well-designed and stocked mobile shop or office. My first trailer was patterned after his. Farriers no longer have to build a custom outfit; it can now be purchased ready-made. Brent Chidsey has made building rigs into an art form. Portable computers and programs have improved record keeping and tax preparation.

10. **Freeze –dried teaching specimens** have made educating owners much easier. Allie Hayes makes these and markets them at a very reasonable cost so that everyone can have one in their rig. The availability of these has made farriers and vets better educated and better educators of their clients.

11. **Demosedan (Detomidine HCl)** is a great improvement over chemical tranquilizers that were available in 1974. This drug, or some combination of it, administered by a veterinarian, has made the toughest horses much easier to shoe than using traditional restraint techniques. But, it has also made it possible for persons who are not skilled horsemen to shoe horses.

12. **Farriers Formula® feed supplement.** Research on the nutrition of the horse's foot since 1976 by Dr. Frank Gravlee has made it possible to formulate supplements that will aid in the formation of sounder hoof horn, which makes a farrier's job easier. Since that time there have been many knock offs (at least 30), but none have the research behind them that have made his product the favorite of farriers and horse owners worldwide.

Over the years, many new products have made our lives easier – and some have not. Being a farrier is a hard job and requires mastering the skills and obtaining the knowledge that will help us best care for our equine partners – feet first. We have the responsibility, by continually and carefully evaluating new products and techniques, to make sure each is in the best

interest of the horse – not just jump on the “fad wagon” in an effort to avoid extra work. After all, if we wanted an easier job, we wouldn’t be doing this one.