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Difficult Situations for Farriers: From Hoof Cracks to Politics

By Monique Craig
www.Epona-Institute.org



Figure 1: A seriously cracked hoof.

These past few months I have been helping quite a few horses with hoof cracks (often “quarter cracks”). I managed to help some of these horses while others were beyond real help because either the horse owner truly did not understand the gravity of the situation and/or a trainer was involved and managed to convince the owner that such cracks are nothing out of the ordinary.

Serious quarter cracks need special attention ranging from veterinarian involvement to corrective shoeing by a skilled farrier. In general, most reasonable professionals would lay off the horse till there is sign of new hoof growth below the coronary band (above the crack). The length of the lay-off

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really depends on the gravity of the cracks. Most of my clients realize this and don't ride their horses for a while.

Often quarter cracks are blamed on a particular farrier and his/her trimming and shoeing skills. Personally, I think that it is unfair and rather simplistic to assign blame like this. While its true that the trim is frequently at the root of a quarter crack problem, training and riding methods play an important role in whether a hoof stays healthy or not.



Figure 2: The lower “After” images are after 2 months of a trimming and shoeing regimen to address this serious quarter crack. We still have several months to go – serious cracks take time to heal. This horse is laid-off for many months during the healing process as it should be.

Unfortunately, there is also a more troubling truth about hoof care problems and general lameness problems; namely the relationship between some successful trainers and their veterinarians. In the following paragraphs, I'll recount three stories that recently occurred.

I. A young wealthy rider was losing to another rider. The mother and trainer of the young wealthy rider decided to buy a better horse for her. Off they went on their jet and bought a new mount for a mere \$150,000. The horse was shipped to the trainer's barn and paraded in the arena for everyone to admire. After a couple of jumps the horse became lame. The trainer's veterinarian was called to check on the horse. After thorough examination (digital radiographs and an ultra-sound exam) the veterinarian told the trainer that the horse had a tear in a ligament. As soon as the trainer heard this, she told the vet to step aside into her office so that they could talk privately. Everyone at the barn was told by the trainer that the problem was a minor soft tissue inflammation. A week later the horse was competed still having 'slight' gait unevenness. The horse was competed but never amounted to anything. The horse was eventually sold off. The trainer then went and bought a new and improved mount for their client, this time the price was \$300,000.

II. I was at a veterinary clinic where a trainer brought one of her clients' horse for a soundness evaluation prior to going to a horse show. The horse seemed not quite himself. After examination the veterinarian found some minor inflammation of soft tissues --- nothing that would stop a horse from working but he also found a small spiral fracture in the first phalanx. He advised the trainer not to compete the horse and rest the animal. This was obviously not what that trainer wanted to hear. She quipped that her client's horse was only a gelding and it would be retired after this last competition. It became obvious that the sole purpose of her visit was to assess the odds of having a serious injury during the show. The trainer probably knew already about the problem. The horse left the clinic and we never heard what happened to it.

III. An acquaintance of mine who is a well-known vascular surgeon had a bad experience with her trainer. One day she got a vet bill from her trainer's veterinarian. Her six year old Hanoverian stallion that was sent to Florida for the show season, had his hocks injected. She inquired about this with the veterinarian. She was quite concerned that her young horse would need such treatment after only 3 months of intensive training. She had had a complete check-up on her very valuable stallion prior to sending it in full training. The veterinarian answered her that her trainer knows exactly what he is doing and that the injections are just simple preventative routine. He proceeded to tell her that she was neither a trainer nor a veterinarian and that if the trainer or he felt that the horse needed help it was absolutely warranted. I was not

privity to the full conversation but I know it did not end up very nicely. My acquaintance finally informed the veterinarian that she is reasonably versed in the basics of medicine, such as knowing the difference between true joint disease and bad training. She is completely on board with medicating horses when necessary, however young horses don't develop degenerative joint disease 3 months into training. The stallion was pulled from training. This acquaintance of mine was so put off by the whole experience that she no longer show horses and declines to sell any of her horses to trainers. She also gelded her stallion and decided to not breed horses.

These three short stories exemplify the hidden reality about horses' health and welfare. The choice made --- to help or not to help a horse in need --- is often put in the balance against financial gains. I work with many ethical veterinarians and trainers who often cannot say anything publicly since there is so much politics involved. It is not always simple for ethical professionals to file concrete complaints. For instance, no one knew who was the owner of the horse with the spiral fracture, neither where or whether the horse was indeed being shown. How do you prevent such a horse from being injured? Often veterinarians are told small lies by trainers and these trainers leave their clients completely in the dark about hoof problems or other problems. In the worst situation, the trainer and veterinarian work together to conceal the full truth from the owner. Caring horse owners end up taking the matter into their own hands and start to educate themselves; while others really could not care less what is done to their horses as long as their horses win. These types of owners often choose the least ethical trainers and veterinarians. Unethical professionals and owners are truly hurting the equine industry. The last story is an example of how a bad experience can put off some people from showing or even owning horses.

The public is getting more sensitive to animal welfare as whole. Horse shows and race tracks are under pressure for changes. In 2050, the world population will reach 9 billion people, who knows – perhaps pleasure horses may not be allowed for lack of space and food. Poor ethical treatment of horses will be the first excuse cited to stop people owning horses. In the meantime, one can always blame the farriers!