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No hoof, no horse

Master farrier Andrew Mahon spoke on a recent Teagasc Let's Talk Equine webinar about the importance of nurturing a sound hoof foundation in foals

IN his 30 years working as a farrier, Andrew feels basically everything with farrier work has stayed the same, however, he notes that nowadays farriers must understand modern materials and modern methods.

Speaking to Teagasc Equine Specialist Wendy Conlon for a recent Let's Talk Equine webinar, the third generation farrier, Andrew says: "my father travelled all over the world, he saw a lot of things and taught a lot of things and now I take what he passed on to me and meld it with modern technology to make things better for ourselves, for the horse and to keep things simple and functional."

There have been many modern advancements in farriery over the last 20 years including shoes made of all different types of material, pads, plastic and acrylics to repair the hooves. Farriers are tasked with understanding how everything works and knowing how they can make it work in a safe and healthy way for the horse.

"Everybody wants perfect, but nature doesn't want to give us perfect, it wants to give us an individual. It's how we work with that to get a happy balance for the horse," Andrew says.

Foals

"When you get a newborn foal, it's wobbly and weak. You need to accept that the foal has to mature and let the muscles harden up. Their little hooves are like balls of jelly at the end of the limb at the beginning," Andrew says.

Andrew will look at a foal once it is

about four weeks old, unless there's a major issue early on.

These issues could include walking on its fetlocks or contracted tendons where the foal is walking on the front of its toes. These issues will be worked on with a veterinary surgeon and early intervention is the key to success.

The farrier will then assess the limb for angle deformities. A plan will be made for what treatment is needed and predict the time frame and cost.

"The thing with a young foal is that what you're looking at this week and what you're looking at next week can be two totally different foals. It's amazing how quick they can change and develop.

You need to accept that the foal has to mature and let the muscles harden up. Their little hooves are like balls of jelly

"It could be a simple thing like they're getting too heavy or maybe the mare is running around the field not giving the foal a chance," he says.

The importance of foal growth cannot be underestimated at any time, for the simple reason that it is the foundation of all horses.

"Some people are of the view that we'll let nature take care of nature, so as soon as the foal is born and it gets its injections, the weather turns



Master farrier
Andrew Mahon

and it goes out to grass for a couple of months and they say we'll let it be what it's meant to be and take it back in.

"The trouble is, by the time you bring it back in and you notice you have a limb deformity it could end up that it's too late to do anything about it," Andrew says.

This is why it is so important to assess the foal early on and keep on top of it as the weeks go on.

In foals, bone growth is negatively affected by poor limb conformation, an uneven hoof balance, overweight body and poor diet/malnutrition.

Another factor that can contribute to a bad start in a foals life is poor team co-operation and communication. For example communication between the groom, the stud manager, the vet and the farrier.

All of these people need to work together as a team to ensure no stone is left unturned in the first few months of a foal's life.

Working conditions

Andrew stresses the fact that in order for farriers to do their job well they need to have the proper working conditions to assess the horse properly.

When the farrier comes to visit, you should have your horse relatively clean and if possible on a clean level

surface in an area that is well lit. "We are professionals and we want to see what we're dealing with and take the guess work out of it," Andrew says.

Joints

The joints in the lower limb (from the knee down) are all hinged joints meaning they work best with even weight bearing. Weight distribution should be 50% evenly either side of the joints of the lower limb. This is the best for the horse to allow it to perform to their full ability.

The environment, including the ground surface your horse is on and the type of exercise it gets can have a huge effect on your horse: "The environment is huge. At this time of the year we have very soft ground and t's got its benefits and drawbacks," Andrew says.

"The benefits would be its not giving any type of concussion problem to the limb because it's soft. You couldn't get better shock absorbing ground if you looked for it.

"But, with the same thing in mind, the horse is slipping and sliding and if we're trying to do any type of correction work, by rising one side of the hoof more than another to try and alleviate pressure on the growth plates, by being out in the field, it's having no resistance to the pressure, so therefore you're not getting any correction," he explains.

Mares

"Once a mare is heavy in foal, we're coming into the winter months, the ground is not very friendly, the clay is getting soft and stones are coming up. Mares tend to have flat feet, not all of them but there is a percentage of them out there and that's due to carrying a lot of weight.

"Horses in general will carry 60 to 70% of their weight in front compared to 40% behind. That's why you will see horses shod more so in front than behind. Heavy pregnant mares getting heavier as they get closer to their due date will end up getting plenty of pressure and stone bruises and abscesses because of flat feet.

"Mares tend to have a run around when they get turned out with other mares until the alpha is established. So you can end up with bruises and punctures with the ground.

Andrew puts shoes on many mares to keep them off the ground for protection and to allow them to be more comfortable.

"With mares heavy in foal you can get an abscess and it's not uncommon even in late stages that they can abort because they're in pain, nature is looking after itself and saying okay, we need to look after the mother here," Andrew concludes.

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