

## **A Farrier's Journey - The first two years**

**Valerie Poyer**

What are the chances of a middle aged woman born and raised in Madagascar becoming a successful farrier in the state of Minnesota, USA, after just two years of practice? Maybe not likely but I am doing it! I am realizing a dream of making a living in the equine industry that allows me to support my family doing what I love, pave the way for a sustainable business well into my "old" age and give back to those who supported me and whom I learned from.

After spending over 20 years working as a people and business manager in corporate America, I was not very excited to continue staring at a computer 8 hours a day. Thinking of a way to put horsemanship skills acquired through a life of on and off riding, driving and training to good use, and my kids having grown to more independent teenagers, I decided to take the plunge and start a farrier business.

Thanks to the financial assistance of an amazing friend, I enrolled in farrier school at the Minnesota School of Horseshoeing. Upon graduation, I acquired all necessary equipment and tools, set up an LLC, a website, Facebook page and started my apprenticeship with 5 veteran farriers with a combined experience of over a 100 years. I was around or under horses every day, seven days a week. When I was not apprenticing, I was going to shows to watch horses work, attending clinics and any other opportunities to network and learn. I was also developing my own clientele one trim at a time. I would travel up to 50 miles away from home to trim just one horse. While this doesn't seem to make sense, I knew that that one trim could quickly translate into 2, 3 or more by word of mouth referrals and it did most of the time. I saw those as marketing trips and would not settle for the alternative, staying home waiting for the phone to ring!

By the end of my first full year in business, I peaked at 175 horses under my care. My clientele was mostly comprised of backyard horses but also included a barn of 17 horses, one of 8 and 1 to 8 horses at several boarding barns. I made enough money to pay my bills but felt nervous about the upcoming winter and whether I would be able to sustain my family and myself. I expected to lose half of my business to extended trim cycles due to slower hoof growth and the propensity of the backyard horse owner to go without farrier services all winter long. Thankfully, I had budgeted for that drop in income in my business plan by setting aside some of that original loan money. In addition, I applied for and was awarded the Jamison Albright Foundation for Farrier Scholarship in the spring. I also set those funds aside for the winter. Lastly, I diversified within the industry by cleaning stalls and grooming, giving riding lessons and training. Those "side" jobs allowed me to bring in some money while still promoting my skills in the industry.

I did make it, with no wiggle room to spare! This May will mark the end of my two years in business and spring brought back the backyard horses, shorter trim cycles and more trips to the bank to deposit checks! I have also acquired a new barn of 10 horses, several more backyard clients and a portion of my trims are switching into more lucrative shoeings.

Early this year, I began teaching the lecture portion of the farrier course at the Minnesota School of Horseshoeing. This great opportunity not only fulfills a commitment to the Jamison Albright Foundation to help further the farrier profession, but it is also a great way to keep brushing up my anatomy, physiology and other theoretical skills by teaching them to students.

I also applied for and received a loan from an organization called Women Venture, a nonprofit that provides business and other technical skills as well as loans to women small business entrepreneurs and owners. That allowed me to refinance my original loan to repay my friend and finance the addition of an anvil swing out arm and pull out slide for my farrier truck. Those two pieces of equipment will allow me to be more efficient and most importantly reduce the physical demands of loading and unloading anvil and tools.

I expect to attain my goal of 300 horses under my care by the end of the summer. This will ensure my ability to meet my financial commitments now and in the slower winter month. I am working on achieving a more balanced approach to work and time spent with my family and friends by taking a day off per week and grouping appointments geographically to reduce travel time and efficiency, thereby shortening my work days. I no longer need to drive 50 miles to trim a horse and have no troubles filling my schedule!!!

I believe that my success in starting this business did not hinge so much on my technical skills as a farrier (although I do not want to minimize their importance) but in my business experience. Knowing how to set short and long term goals and follow through, with a keen eye on the long term implications of each daily decision or choice and rigorous bookkeeping practices. Equally as important is a commitment to building relationships with my human clients by always displaying a professional attitude, having clear boundaries and communicating promptly and systematically. I am hired and kept on by humans, not horses, and my ability to retain their services is largely due to my ability to communicate and relate to them. As examples, a commitment to return all phone calls and messages within 8 hours, utilizing a software that sends all clients a text reminder two days before the appointment and being setup to accept credit card payments all have been reported as reasons I was hired from current clients. Of course, I wouldn't retain any said clients if my farrier skills weren't up to par so continuing education is a must.

Hard work does pay but so does smart work, planning and follow through. This job has been everything I expected it to be and more. I hope to be able to practice this amazing trade and serve the equine community for years to come, as well as help groom newer generations of skilled farriers.

One last bit of advice for those considering this trade: taking care of your body by eating a balanced diet, hydrating, getting good sleep, strengthening and stretching your body must be part of your work day, not an optional side activity. Being conscious of your physical abilities and limitations and considering them to determine your workload will determine the length of your career!!!

Cheers!