

3rd February 2012

Sophie Ignarski TDN Blog No. 9

The middle of January found the twelve of us preparing to begin a fortnight-long farriery course at the Kentucky Horseshoeing School. Overseen by Mitch Taylor, the KHS is a unique facility that provides training to students, professional farriers and, fortunately for us - 12 complete beginners. The course was to provide us with a thorough grounding in the theory and practical care of the horse's foot, with an intense but all-encompassing schedule ahead.

The saying 'no foot no horse' has become something of a time-honoured mantra within the racing and breeding industries, but its relevance seemed as important as ever as we were guided through the array of conformational faults and foot conditions that are frequently found in the thoroughbred. We also learned how the evolution of the simple metal shoe has led to the widespread availability of many therapeutic and remedial shoeing options. The clear message was that with the advent of such advanced materials and a greater understanding of the horse's complex biomechanics, horseshoeing has morphed into a highly technical discipline, where expectations are high and time is frequently limited. In the thoroughbred world in particular, the traditional role of the farrier as the sole custodian of the horse's hoof has had to make way for a more holistic approach, whereby farriers, podiatrists, veterinarians and managers regularly work together in order to achieve the optimum result.

With a significant practical component to the course, one of our first tasks was to learn to pull shoes, with cadaver horse limbs acting as our models (thankfully providing few objections to our efforts...). This provided us with a chance to allow our somewhat inexperienced hands to get to grips with nippers, nail pullers and the other essential tools while practicing our 'technique'. Unfortunately it was at this early stage that, (in the midst of some enthusiastic hoof knifing) one trainee found himself on the way to an unscheduled visit to the emergency room for some stitches in his finger, the first of many minor wounds incurred during the course!

The two weeks culminated in a final, ultimate challenge – together with some of KHS resident trainees, we were to trim 46 pasture-kept broodmares. While some members of the group encountered difficulty when trying to catch their subjects (who seemed to develop a sudden aversion to the tool-wielding, apron-wearing figures invading their paddocks), others had more success. With a degree in Mathematics, English trainee Ian Thompson may not have been described as classic 'farrier material', but perhaps it was his natural affinity for angles and lines that had imparted him with great natural talent, gaining an unprecedented score of 100% for his well-executed trim! As the daylight faded, fatigued limbs and stiff backs were plentiful, but our mission was somehow accomplished. The two weeks were a fantastic experience for all of us and we're grateful to Mitch and his staff for all their hard work and guidance during the course, not to mention their terrible jokes that kept us going along the way.

With our time at the horseshoeing school complete, our next week was taken up with several visits. One highlight was a morning outing to Overbrook Farm to see the legendary Storm Cat, defying his more senior years as he cantered around his paddock with relish. We also headed over to the Kentucky Equine Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation Center (KESMARC) to view the facilities and learn about how different therapies such as the hyperbaric chamber and 'Aquatred' are helping to contribute to many horses' rehabilitation. The conformation enthusiasts in the group were well rewarded during a morning at Spendthrift Farm, with Ned Toffey's detailed commentary of each of the farm's stallions giving us the chance to put our own judgement to the test.

Despite our busy work schedule, we've still had some time to discover a few more of Lexington's many distractions. A few of us had the chance to attend the Wildcats vs Arkansas basketball game which was a true spectacle – aside for the moments when the opposition scored and a stony silence ensued! Several trainees headed over to the Altech arena for some slightly alternative equine 'education' in the form of the Lexington Invitational Rodeo, and plans are in the pipeline for a trip to Turfway Park racetrack about an hour away from Lexington.

Next week we will begin our farm work rotations, where we will be based at Darley's Gainsborough and Stonerside farms until the end of April. For several of us it will be our first experience of Kentucky's breeding season – as many have told us here, there are few better places we could hope to be.

.