

Put Your Best Foot Forward

Low-stress hoof trimming gives more accuracy to structural soundness.

Story & photos by **Kasey Brown**, associate editor

Have you ever had a pair of shoes that were uncomfortable or had a rock in your shoe? A tiny rock can affect your stance and how you walk. The same can be said for cattle exhibited at a show. If they are uncomfortable because of grown-out hooves, their structural soundness will appear skewed, which can affect an animal's placing. Many people use hoof trimming to fix this.

The most common kind of hoof trimming is on a table, which flips the animal on its side, and a grinder is used to take off overgrown edges. However, being flipped on one's side goes against an animal's natural behavior, says Kevyn Miller, long-time low-stress hoof trimmer and follower of renowned stockman Bud Williams.

Doing it the hard way

Miller started trimming hooves 27 years ago to reduce traveling from being the crew boss at dairy sales so he could spend more time with his young family. Known as a bit hardheaded, he decided to trim hooves in a way he thought was better for the cattle.

He began as a dairyman, and traveled home each weekend to care for his cows while he earned his bachelor's degree in animal science from Purdue University in the early 1970s. He most enjoyed his beef-management classes and was a member of the successful Purdue dairy and livestock judging teams.

"I've always appreciated soundness in animals, and I've learned to judge what needs to change on the hoof to change how the animal walks. It's like a puzzle, and each animal is different," he explains.

Using a rubber hammer, two types of chisels and a custom-made padded-aluminum stool, Miller picks up each individual foot of the animal and specifically chisels away slivers of the hoof that need to come off. He started by trimming herds of dairy cows, and laughs that he got plenty of experience with poor, overgrown hooves.

While he was getting his hoof-trimming business off the ground, he explains, he was also starting a beef herd and was showing to market his cattle. With his knowledge of cattle structure, he knew just how big of an impact trimmed hooves could have in the



► **Above:** Kevyn Miller can trim the length of each hoof specifically with his hammer and chisel.



► **Right:** He uses the rubber hammer and long-handled chisel to trim the length of the hoof. The short-handled chisels are used on the bottom of the hoof when propped on his custom-made padded aluminum stool.

ring. He started gaining showmen as clients, and eventually he was trimming show cattle exclusively.

Based in Thorntown, Ind., Miller says he traveled all over Indiana and to parts of Illinois, Michigan, Kentucky and Ohio, and occasionally to states farther west. He took all of his equipment with him, and even had a trailer on which he pulled his custom-made steel chute.

Scott Foster, of Seldom Rest Farms, Niles, Mich., started working with Miller when his now-grown children were young. He says that Miller used to travel to northern Indiana and a friend of Foster's recommended his style of hoof trimming.

Foster, who had used a table before, says he likes Miller's style better.

"He does a really good job. His style is easy on the cattle, and with pregnant heifers, we don't want to take any chances flipping them on a table," says Foster. "Kevyn's so easy with it, he's even able to get the most difficult heifers done. The benefits are twofold, part psychological and part physical. There is no stress on the cattle, and the way he trims with chisels doesn't get as deep into the hoof, so they get shaped the way they need to be and are back on their feet comfortably faster."

Watch, then craft

Miller explains that he watches an animal walk first before going into the chute so he can diagnose what needs to be done. He always starts on a front foot and says he gets a feel for how tough that calf's hoof is and how much pressure he needs to use.

He starts on the length of the toes of the hoof while the hoof is on the floor. He uses the longer-handled chisel and the hammer for this. He has an easy style around cattle and always lets the calf know where he is with



Animal Care & Well-being

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► By picking up each foot, the hooves can be trimmed and shaped specifically with a chisel and muscle. Griffin Nicholls (left) has been learning this style for two years.



PHOTO BY ANDREW FOSTER

constant contact and soft words, says Foster. His forehead is usually pressed against the animal's shoulder or stifle.

Once the toes are taken care of, he stands up, pulls his stool over and picks up the foot so it rests on the stool. He bends over the foot and uses the shorter-handled chisel and a lot of arm muscle to trim the bottom of the hoof and inside of the cleats. He says he used to joke that body builders must have been hoof trimmers, too.

"Hoof trimming is not easy on the body, by any means, but I'm hardheaded enough to do it," Miller says. "It's easier on the cattle and it works with their natural behavior. ... It would freak you out to get strapped to a table, flipped on your side and have someone grind at your feet, wouldn't it? I try to make it as easy on the cattle as possible."

Foster emphasizes, "We lucked out to find a guy like Kevyn who is willing to take the body abuse from the cattle standing up. Not many people would do that. Watching him work is fun and exciting for us, and he's always good at explaining what he's doing."

The results on the cattle are certainly apparent. Foster explains that they had a calf that wouldn't stand. They thought she had a structural issue in her shoulder. Miller worked on her for several visits, and discovered a problem with her hoof. She is now a functional cow.

Another heifer of a client had hooves that were growing over themselves and she couldn't put weight on them, Miller says. They still grew in that pattern after being trimmed on the table, and eventually several veterinarians thought she would have to be put down. Miller was able to trim away enough of the hoof and found that she had several abscesses in the hoof. After those drained and he correctly shaped the hoof, she hasn't had any issues since.

Next generation of cattlemen

Scott's son Andrew Foster, also of Seldom Rest Farms, Niles, Mich., has taken a larger responsibility of the show cattle since he graduated from Oklahoma State University. Miller is now "retired," which really means he trims fewer head and doesn't travel anymore. Still, Andrew loads up the trailer and drives south for three hours to continue to utilize Miller's style of trimming.

Andrew justifies the trip with many benefits to the cattle.

"The calves are as comfortable as they can be. They get the experience of being away from home before a show, and they get tied into stalls before they go into the chute," he says. "Since they stand the whole time in the

chute, it's a whole lot easier on the cattle, much less stressful."

Andrew says he tells Miller his observations from their stride at home. He enjoys discussing what changes are being made and why, and seeing the benefit right away.

"While he's trimming, he can see changes as soon as that foot goes down. He can make adjustments right away if they're needed," Andrew says.

Andrew tries to get the cattle trimmed a good month before a major show. This gives the calves time to get used to their new hoof shape and for the hooves to harden back up. Trimmed hooves are more than cosmetic, though cosmetics do have benefit in the showing. Andrew adds that judges like to see trained hair, and they also like to see a big solid foot, and Miller promotes a good foot shape. He has trimmed grand champions at the major shows, plus many junior nationals and state fairs from around the country. He even trimmed the 2013 National Junior Angus Show bred-and-owned grand champion heifer.

"It's amazing to see how little adjustments can affect their stride," says Andrew.

His dad, Scott, agrees, adding, "He can get the calves to move truer, freer and easier."



► Miller has been trimming hooves this way for 27 years. Even though it's hard on his body, he prefers that it is easier on the cattle.

Training a protégé

Trimming has taken a toll on Miller's body, and he has scaled back. However, he has a protégé, Griffin Nicholls, 19, who has been learning the low-stress style of hoof trimming for two years.

When Miller scaled back from trimming, he "got a town job" as the livestock manager of the living history museum, Conner Prairie, in Fishers, Ind. Conner Prairie has a youth volunteer program, which Nicholls joined

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when he was 11 years old. Nicholls says he was always interested in animals, but growing up in the city of Noblesville, Ind., he didn't have much exposure to livestock until he started volunteering at Conner Prairie.

As an ag volunteer, he watched Miller trim hooves on Conner Prairie cattle. Nicholls showed a lot of interest. A believer in trial by fire, Miller offered to let him try it.

Nicholls says he was really scared to do it that first time, but he thinks that Miller just wanted to see his reaction and whether he was willing to do it.

"I had seen him do it before at Conner Prairie, and he showed me how little stress was put on the cattle. That was what created the original spark of interest," Nicholls explains.

"His technique is just a little bit different, and I'm sure that comes with experience, too. Whenever we're done — I'm not saying that

mine looks bad — but you can tell that his look cleaner. He just has a different way of trimming," Nicholls emphasizes.

Nicholls had to get some of his own equipment, he says. "Kevyn has these monster hands. I had to get a smaller chisel. It doesn't sound like much, but I'm a lot more comfortable with my chisel. It really affects the stroke."

Being from the city, Nicholls didn't have a lot of contacts in the show cattle industry. Miller told his clients he had retired, but that he was training a protégé. Two or three clients stepped forward to let Nicholls work on their cattle because they wanted the style of trimming to continue. He has been gaining a client base for the past two years.

He says he's never seen trimming on a table besides on video, but he has seen the results of cattle that have been on a table.

"We've had cattle come to us that had

blisters on their feet from the grinder. That gave me even more respect for the way we do it," he says.

Nicholls is starting at Purdue University as a freshman this fall majoring in animal science. He plans to continue trimming during school. Luckily, he says, early fall is generally a slower time for trimming, so he'll have time to get settled at school before business picks up. He says he's thought about taking the business on the road again now that he's gaining a client base.

At this point in Miller's career, teaching has become a byproduct of experience, and he enjoys it. There are a lot of benefits of this style of trimming, and Nicholls is determined to keep it going, because even the smallest bit of growth in the wrong place on the hoof can be just like a rock in your shoe.

