

## **Discussion with Kenny Bark about Challenges Facing the Next Generation of Professionals**

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Original publication date: 2026

First appearing in:

*I was down in Wellington, Florida for a few days in February (2026) and had an opportunity to grab lunch with Kenny Bark. Kenny has been a farrier for over three decades, is an instructor for the USEF young rider training series, and was the US Team Farrier (Jumping from 2015 to 2021, dressage from 2016 to 2021, and eventing from 2020 to 2021). As Team Farrier, he oversaw hoof care management for the US Team horses at two Olympics, two World Championships, and at many other major competitions. I first met Kenny in 2017 at one of the first Equine High-Performance Sports Medicine Meetings (hosted by Dr. Mark Revenaugh and his clinic (Northwest Equine Performance – Oregon)). We both shared a passion for better quantifying the efficacy of different interventions in sport horses (shoeing interventions for Kenny and training inputs for me). Since then, we have stayed in touch, and I always benefit greatly from our conversations. Kenny has graciously allowed me to share the notes from our last conversation, which I hope are of interest to you.*

### **Theme 1: Taking the time to determine causation and to understand interventions**

When Kenny was starting out as a farrier there was a small number of shoe types and the farrier needed to be creative with the tools he/she had available to solve the various pathologic and performance-related problems they would encounter. Back then, it was critical to have a strong working relationship with the rider, trainer, veterinarian, and other members of the care team and to be able to clearly communicate and justify the preferred shoeing approach.

Conversely, today's farriers have the 'luxury' of a seemingly endless number of unique shoes and supporting products that have been developed to address every pathology and competition challenge that may present. The makers of these products have undertaken detailed marketing and educational initiatives to ensure all farriers know what conditions warrant the use of their products, the best methods to apply them, and how to share this information with clients. Today's communication isn't so much about walking everyone through your thought process and convincing them why your approach is the best – instead it is more about reassuring the owner and trainer that you are current in your knowledge of the available tools and that you have selected the correct method.

While this can be interpreted as a largely positive development, it does create issues if a farrier blindly follows directions when applying a certain shoe or product instead of taking the time to i) fully understand the condition, ii) identify the factors that contributed to its occurrence in each horse (i.e. the cause), and iii) develop a complete plan to address the issue. Of course, many of the new condition-specific products on the market are excellent and 95% or 99% of the time you can apply them with positive results, but there will always be those outlying cases that require a different approach.

Core to the profession of the farrier is a critical mind that seeks to improve hoof mechanics and health through all available means. Kenny advocates for utilizing the new technology when

appropriate but cautions that farriers always need a detailed understanding of the condition and the precise mechanisms the technology impacts before applying the product.

Similar challenges are faced by young riders and trainers, where there is information overload (social media, clinics, master classes, many FEI competitions to observe, and so on). It can be easy for young professionals to gain access to high-level information while skipping the foundational knowledge that supports more complex training approaches. When we talk with leading riders, they always highlight the need for a strong theoretical foundation – without understanding the simple it is impossible to correctly apply more complex training methods.

### **Theme 2: Who is truly making the decisions in the stable?**

A related challenge faced by professional riders/trainers today is communicating with the large and highly skilled care teams surrounding their horses. While it is beneficial to have input from the best veterinarians, farriers, therapists, grooms, etc possible, it can result in information overload for the individual who has the final decision-making control (the trainer). Brief conversations with care teams can occasionally lead to confusion, and if the trainer does not fully understand the rationale for recommendations, it can cause the misinterpretation of information and incorrect application.

We frequently observe, especially with young professionals just starting out, that whoever they speak with last will have the largest impact on the acute training and management decisions being made for their horses. This tends to happen when a strong theoretical foundation and training philosophy are lacking – in the absence of a clear vision for each horse it is easy for brief conversations with the care team to steer training programs and management decisions off track. Further, if members of the care team aren't sharing their recommendations with each other (i.e. therapists, veterinarians and farriers are not comparing notes), it is possible to have conflicting recommendations bombarding trainers.

It is important for young professionals to take the time to fully understand the recommendations from their care teams and to ensure information is shared between everyone so that there can be full alignment. This is easier said than done, with increasingly busy competition schedules, client and sponsor demands, as well as financial constraints facing today's young professionals. However, without studying causation within the stable and appreciating how each minor change will impact a horse, effectiveness can never be optimized.

### **Theme 3: Identifying future 'stars' in the industry**

Kenny discussed attending a few farrier educational meetings as well as speaking at the USEF young rider program. While the next generation often gets a bad reputation in our sport, he sees things differently and is excited for many of the up-and-coming riders, veterinarians, farriers, grooms, etc.

Specifically, he has interacted with many individuals who are curious, motivated to ask questions, and take the time to work through problems and brainstorm solutions. The young people who 'light up' when they discuss their craft, seek out mentors, and have a critical mindset are the ones best equipped to face the challenges they will encounter in the industry.

### **Theme 4: Building a business in 2026**

Whether they admit it or not, young professionals will always model their business off a handful of successful individuals in their field. While this can be helpful in some respects, it does create problems if the individual just starting out attempts to replicate the business of someone who has been practicing for three decades. In their efforts to build their perfect stable or practice immediately they often skip the numerous steps that made their idols successful.

For example, a young rider starting up their own stable after two years of apprenticing under an experienced professional has likely only been exposed to a narrow range of horses (i.e personalities, pathologies, conformational challenges, etc) and students/clients (i.e. personalities, competition goals, strengths and weaknesses, etc). Conversely, a trainer who has been practicing for many years will have been exposed to a larger variety of situations and can rely on these experiences when making decisions. Experienced trainers can take mental shortcuts if they have navigated a similar situation in the past and apply the solution they used previously (assuming it was effective). Young professionals must understand that it will take at least 10% longer to come to solutions for many daily events because they do not have vast experiences to draw from, and in turn their schedules need to allow for more time dedicated to brainstorming and decision-making.

Ideally, those setting up their businesses should identify benchmarks for their journey. If they hope to be like a specific professional in 20 years, they should talk to that professional to understand where that individual was when they were starting out, 5 years later, 10 years later, and so on. Use this information as a blueprint to ensure you continue to develop and grow, without pushing too hard too early or overreaching. Build a foundation of education and knowledge so that you truly can have the business you hope to have.

Young professionals need to structure their lives and businesses in a way that affords them opportunities to continue learning and building their own portfolio of experiences and knowledge. One method is to continue working with a trusted mentor who will share their own experiences so you can learn from their successes and failures. Another approach is to build a network of professionals at a similar career stage and to 'compare notes' in an open and safe environment when challenging situations arise.

### **Theme 5: The Olympic disciplines are lacking data**

Over the years Kenny and I have spent countless hours discussing the need for more data, different opportunities and challenges to collect data, as well as what the future may hold. Over the last five years the thoroughbred racing industry has seen rapid adoption of data collection, which is already paying off. Recent peer-reviewed publications have presented algorithms, informed by inertial measurement unit (IMU) and heart rate data, capable of identifying those horses at risk of significant injury on the track. Of course, the enthusiasm by the industry to produce this research was largely driven by questions surrounding social license.

For the Olympic disciplines, we need more data and information sharing to truly advance the industry. For farriers, there are lingering questions surrounding the efficacy of interventions, the relationship between shoeing (and studs) and how that impacts hoof mechanics on different surfaces, how certain conformations impact hoof function, and so on. No single farrier works on enough horses to collect the sample sizes required to adequately answer these questions, so

multiple farriers will need to work together and standardize data collection in real world environments to answer these questions.

For trainers, we still lack data on the exact energy systems active during many different workouts, optimal recovery times between workouts, the impact of certain management practices on wellness, etc. The goal should be to evolve equestrian sports to the level we currently have in human-centric sports, where workouts can be prescribed to cause adaptation with relative precision.

### **Theme 6: Developing an eye for what is normal**

When Kenny started out as a farrier he worked on horses performing at lower levels. He reflected that, back then, his perception of normal gait and movement was informed by the types of horses he was working on. It was only when he began to spend time around famed veterinarian Dr. John Steele, and many international-level sport horses, that he realized almost all the horses he had been working on previously moved atypically (often due to pathology, poor musculoskeletal development, or poor training). The lesson is that our perception of 'normal' or 'optimal' is largely driven by past experiences and the population of horses we surround ourselves with. If you want to shoe Olympic level horses one day, you need to find opportunities ASAP to spend time around these horses and to learn what is normal and acceptable for them. Alternatively, if you want to build a business around shoeing horses competing at lower levels or companion horses, then look for opportunities to learn as much as you can about this specific population and the issues that they will face, how they typically move when they live long and comfortable lives, etc.