

REGULATION RUMORS IN THE FARRIER PROFESSION

A report to all farriers and the farrier industry from HOOF CARE & LAMENESS JOURNAL

Editor's note: since this document was written, new developments have shaped the debate. In late May, the AFA released new information and documents related to its Task Force report at the February AFA Convention. According to the AFA's web site, the Task Force has been dissolved and a new body will be formed to investigate farriery education standards. The AFA has posted all these documents on its website, <http://www.americanfarriers.org>. All farriers should read these documents. However, the principles of the article you are about to read are still valid. I hope you will read this carefully and decide what you can and should do.

Hoofcare & Lameness is following this important story and reports on some of the little-known facts behind farrier regulation and status of the different professions involved with the care of horses' feet, both in the USA and Europe, in our upcoming issue #79. This report has been in the works for some time and is not directly related to the AFA's recent actions.

--Fran Jurga, Publisher

It's official: at the 2005 American Farrier's Association Convention, the AFA set a course designed to ultimately result in standardization of farrier education and practice. The AFA hopes to ultimately establish standards and govern the way that farriers are trained and who is allowed to practice. According to documents from the AFA, the industry is in a crisis, and intervention or a takeover from "outside" is a threat. This is certainly news to practicing farriers and industry figures.

The facts: The AFA's Executive Committee created a task force in mid-2004 to investigate farrier regulation and/or industry standards, particularly related to education. The task force reported to the AFA Board of Directors at their annual meeting in February 2005 and presented a

manifesto predicting the inevitability of government regulation of the trade as an animal welfare issue and urging the AFA Board of Directors to step forward and clean up what it describes as “the crisis” in American farriery, and the way that farriers are educated, in general. The Board voted to empower the task force to proceed with their work under a broad scope of powers with little or no accountability, defined in language much like the role of a special prosecutor in 1990s Washington politics.

With about 3300 members, the AFA represents a small percentage of US farriers but is widely regarded as the *de facto* voice of the profession in the US.

The AFA did not publicize the task force’s existence or the Board’s vote endorsing its report, although AFA President Craig Trnka openly mentioned licensing and the controversy recent AFA actions had sparked in both his president’s report at the general membership meeting and his awards banquet speech, acknowledging that licensing of farriers, in both speeches, was the “Roe v Wade issue of the farrier profession”.

On both occasions, Trnka stressed that the AFA had taken a stand and would pursue regulation. He compared the AFA’s move in this new direction to the power of a speeding train, as depicted in the association’s convention logo of a Chattanooga choo-choo. “You can get aboard the train,” Trnka enthusiastically stated from the awards banquet podium, “or get out of the way, we’re laying tracks and we’ll run you down.”

It is only now, three months after the convention, that most individual AFA members are learning that their association has this new directive. They learned about it not because the AFA informed them but because an independent publication, the *American Farriers Journal*, broke the story in its post-convention issue and in a national press release sent to

the media. Post-convention issues of the official publications of the AFA did not mention the task force, the vote, or the crisis that the task force was empowered to avert.

Dumbfounded farriers, both AFA members and non-members, are asking how their individual regional and state board representatives and officers voted on such a key issue, without any public forums so that rank-and-file farriers could voice their opinions. The vote passed by a large margin of the AFA Board of Directors.

Under a more open architecture, an industry-wide report on how farriers are educated could be extremely helpful to the future of farriery in the United States. Words like “survey” and “inspection” suggest something else. The opening of two new brick-and-mortar natural hoofcare or “alternative” farrier schools in the US in 2005 is evidence of a shift in demand for farrier education that is different from the traditional “anvil and forge” course of instruction at most farrier schools. In addition, several schools in the US now have curricula based on the natural balance shoeing paradigm as taught and promoted by farrier Gene Ovnicek. At this point, it is not known if the AFA plans to investigate or survey non-traditional farrier schools or barefoot trimming programs.

As word of impending regulation (which is certainly far off in the future) circulates, existing farrier schools may be affected and the stability of farriery as a professional option may be questioned by many who were planning to attend farrier schools. Prospective students may opt to not go to school at all, which in turn results in a less qualified, less educated new farrier.

Also at stake is the financial viability of a manufacturing and retail industry that supplies an unregulated profession, where shoes, nails, and

tools can openly be bought by or sold to any person wishing to purchase them.

Ultimately at risk are the privileges of American horse owners who currently can choose or avoid farriers and trimmers with different skills, styles, prices, philosophies, shoes, vehicles, and experience levels. The risk and responsibility is all theirs under the current system.

American farriers believe that they have made progress as a profession in the past 30 years, and many credit the AFA and its education-oriented ideals with a large part of that success. Many nay-sayers were proven wrong when thousands of farriers voluntarily took AFA certification tests in the past 20 years.

Others criticize the AFA, charging that it is a partisan or even elitist organization that is out of touch with—or even in denial about—the amazing variation in ways to ply the trade and even ways to trim or shoe a foot. As a result, there are farrier and hoof trimming organizations, special interest groups, Internet forums, and schools that represent and unite otherwise isolated philosophies of practice or regulation.

Traditionally, farriers are too busy in the summer to pay much attention to what goes on outside their appointment books and tool boxes. Those interested in the future of their profession may wish to keep an ear to the ground this summer, to make their voices heard, and to step forward to be leaders in local and regional farrier organizations at this critical time.

The best possible course of action is to trust that the AFA has the best intentions but needs to consider input from the field, from its members, and from the industry at large.

Let's petition the AFA to dissolve the task force and call for the creation of a new body. Call it a commission, or a congress: an industry-wide

alliance made up of the AFA plus all regional or national farrier organizations and industry and education representatives, with all parties on an equal footing.

The goal of this commission should be to support the farrier profession and work together to define and support the role of the farrier in all 50 states (and perhaps Canadian provinces as well) in a legal way so that farriery is recognized as a necessary service (not treatment) needed by horses, and once and for all establish the legitimacy of the person who trims and/or shoes a horse under this umbrella.

Another goal should be to present a unified front when and if the rumored threat of outside intervention ever does materialize. If there is a threat from outside, certainly they know that the best way to succeed is to divide, and then conquer.

Dividing the farriers in the USA into partisan camps, alienating them from national organizations, or scaring people from entering the profession could handicap the profession much more than any perceived threat from the outside.

Leaders in any field will succeed when they lead by example, not by intimidation. The profession will continue to improve when it attracts the best and brightest young people, and they must see farriery as a stable, lucrative, stimulating, and viable career. Don't scare them away—let's seek them out and guide them to the best schools and apprenticeships we each know about. Mentoring and encouraging a new generation of farriers should be our first priority, and anyone who is driving around alone should at least offer to take a novice farrier one day a week, and share what you know and what you think.

News of the AFA's actions (as well as many unfounded rumors) are reverberating around the USA, and many farriers feel shocked and hurt and alienated and threatened. Others feel buoyed and affirmed by the AFA's actions and declare, "It's about time!" Whichever reaction you have, look way down the road to what farriery can and should be five or ten years from now, and try to imagine how we can all get there, together.

The metaphor of the AFA as a high-powered train is a strong one. Hopefully, there is room on the AFA's train so that all farriers and all opinions can climb aboard and be welcomed. Remember General Patton's famous statement: "If everyone is thinking alike, someone is not thinking." Respecting and embracing a diversity of opinions is critical at this time.

If the AFA's governing officials are not willing to listen to their fellow professionals and long-time industry allies, and if, as their president so strongly stated, the AFA's train will run down whoever disagrees, independent-thinking farriers will just have to take the bus. Charter a plane. Saddle your horse. Hitchhike if you have to, but make sure that the farrier profession arrives in the future with its trademark independent spirit and pride intact.

That's what others who came before did for you. Pass it on.

Read more about ambiguities of professionals in the eyes of government and the courts in Hoofcare & Lameness #79.

Read regular updates on this and other important issues on www.hoofcare.com and also Hoofcare's fast-breaking news web log, online and public as of 6 June 2005 at www.hoofcare.blogspot.com.