

Joe Kavanaugh, Bovine Podiatrist Talks While He Works

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agriculture, reminding him that one need not have a farm to be involved with them.

Stopping one day at Kingstead Farms, Damascus, he met Pennsylvania hoof trimmer Jake Emig. The idea of being able to improve a cow's overall health by correcting her walk intrigued him. He undertook six weeks of training under Emig's instruction, and, in 1974, began hoof trimming on his own. Soon he was traveling to Virginia, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania to serve a growing list of clients.

But Joe Kavanaugh had always wanted his own herd of dairy cows. In 1981, he and his wife Jeannette purchased a farm in western Maryland's Garrett County and assembled a milking string of 70 head. Within two years, the herd had surged from a 15,000-pound herd average to a 19,000-pound one, even while he continued to do some hoof trimming.

Though the herd was developing quickly, interest rates were running to levels as high as 22 percent, while milk was \$10-11 per hundredweight. Believing that remaining in the milking business would not be profitable for them, the Kavanaughs opted to sell the herd in 1983. Their 65 milking head and 73 head of young stock averaged \$1,100.

"I was on a roll with those cows. It was a traumatic thing to do," he remembers. "But farming is a business, and it was a business decision."

In Kavanaugh's early years of trimming, the profession was one of somewhat seasonal demand, mostly spring, fall and in mid-summer, for cattle shows. Then came an industry introduction that he outspokenly pinpoints as the beginning of an upswing in the need for cow foot help.

"Along came the magnetic feeder," says Kavanaugh, "and some of those girls would pull in there and just eat and eat. Then they'd founder."

Other factors he attributes to the downfall of cattle foot health include the use of Total Mixed Rations (TMR) and other changes in feeding and pushing for production that put high levels of grain and less fiber in modern dairy rations, as well as feedlot environments where cows' feet remain damp.

"Hot" rations ruin cows as two-year-olds. Those type rations have so much starch in them that it affects the circulation to the leg," says this longtime observer of cattle feet and their problems.

In addition to feeding and housing changes, Kavanaugh also blames modern dairy breeding philosophy with putting hoof trimming service in such demand. And

he pulls no punches about outlining that philosophy.

"Legs and feet in cows have gotten commoner. We don't have good flat-boned cattle any more. We never used to trim the feet of two-year-olds. Our genetic base is narrowing and we can see the results of five generations of breeding for cow index."

Then he adds with a classic touch of Kavanaugh dry humor; "We're just so grateful; there's no end to the work it's generated for us foot trimmers."

"I often trim feet 364 days a year. Christmas is the only day I've never trimmed a foot. But there are some days when I only do 15 or 16 head, due to the serious amount of foot work they require," he adds.

His affection for the bovine species makes him a stickler for perfection in his work. Each animal in turn is firmly secured with wide rubber belting to a hydraulic tilt table, then gently laid on her side on the table so that he has ready access to the bottom of the hoof. Using specialized tools, he trims away unhealthy tissue, pares away misshapen parts of a foot, removes imbedded stones or gravel and treats infected areas. Feet that have needed aggressive trimming due to serious infection are wrapped with heavy-duty bandaging materials to keep them clean and dry while healing.

Before setting the "patient" back upright and releasing her, Kavanaugh meticulously checks with a small, flat footboard that every part of the outer rim of the trimmed, shaped hoof touches the board. If it does not, he will retrim until satisfied that the hoof is shaped to his perfectionist

"A properly-trimmed foot should leave a perfect 'horseshoe shape' track behind when that cow walks away," he says.

Foot warts, a plague which affects many dairy herds, create many of the problems Kavanaugh attacks daily on the hoof end of his patients. While the virus remains dormant in cold weather, warming weather can generate an epidemic of the painful warts.

He counsels his clients to deve-



Any sore spots or infections are treated with antiseptics during the trimming process. Feet with the most serious problems are carefully wrapped and bandaged after treatment to keep the foot clean and dry while it heals.



A sharp, curved hoof knife is one of the key tools of a foot trimmer's trade. On a few rare occasions, Joe Kavanaugh has missed a hoof and carved into his own hand, one of the physical hazards of the profession.



Removing small amounts of hoof material at a time, Joe Kavanaugh trims and shapes a dairy cow's foot to remove damage wrought by viral warts, stone damage or a variety of other afflictions which cause the animals to limp.

lop a schedule of at least semi-weekly use of a footbath. He also blends a mix of oxytetracycline with sterile water for use in spray bottles to spray on affected his clients to use as a safe treatment on cows' feet as the animals move through milking parlors.

He also blends a mix of oxytetracycline with sterile water for use in spray bottles to spray on affected hooves, which he recommends to his clients to use as a safe treatment on cows' feet as the animals move through milking parlors.

"Barnyards need to be kept scraped and clean and cows turned out on ground as much as possible in good weather. A couple of hours of sunshine on a cow's foot

helps tremendously. The more time out on dirt the better," he suggests. "God didn't make cows' feet to stand 24 hours a day in a sloppy, damp environment. Wet feet are more susceptible to problems."

As might be expected, working with the kicking equipment of a cow has had its dangerous moments in Kavanaugh's 24 years of experience.

"I got kicked in the head one time that you could hear my skull crack. I looked away while fastening down a cow's foot to talk to the owner and she got me," he explains, adding with a grin, "I still talk, but I never look away from those feet until they're secured."

A key tool of his trade, the sharp, curved hoof knife, has like-

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