While the iron's hot

By Kevin Oleksy
Record Sports Editor

Record photo by Kevin Oleksy

Pete Butler, part of the father and sons team that run Butler Professional Farrier School, strikes a near-white hot piece of steel with a hammer, sending out a beautiful cascade of sparks. Pete said the thing that interests him about farrier work, and smithing in general, is that there is a mixture of art and science in the work. A shoe must be measured to fit a horse's hoof, but is also a carefully crafted piece of artwork.

Butler Professional Farrier School moved to its Table Road, Crawford address in 2006. With almost a decade of operating in the area under its belt, and a tradition that stretches far longer, the father and sons trio of Doug, Jake, and Pete Butler are still at it.

"We feel fortunate to be here," said Jake, "We're grateful for the community surrounding us and we really like the area. My wife and I have five kids so we're definitely settled in here."

Since offering its first class in 2007, BPFS has hosted students from all over the country and the world. The facility's classroom boasts a map of the United States with many pins in every state. A strip down the map's border catalogues the students who've come from South Korea, Norway, Iceland, New Zealand and Australia among others. Recently, they've had a handful from Israel. Soon enough they'll need a world map for all the international attention they've garnered.

And while the school is internationally recognized, the work of the farrier and educator remains rather humble and communal. The local business has been strong too. Jake said the school has done work for Fort Robinson, the Chadron State Rodeo team, and worked with a clinic in Alliance to bring their work to more of the panhandle.

The word farrier, commonly taken to mean one who shoes horses, traces its root back to the Latin ferrarius which loosely meant blacksmith. And while the work of the farrier has evolved much over the many years since antiquity, it's also remained essentially the same.

A farrier uses his or her knowledge of horses, their anatomy and physiology, to create and shape shoes to keep animals comfortable, and in many cases to ameliorate the effects of injury, disease or deformity. Doug has worked as a farrier for more than 57 years, and trained some of the top farriers and educators in the world. Jake has been shoeing horses for 20 years, and Pete for 15.

Between the three is a wealth of knowledge, and a variety of experience unmatched in the industry. The Butlers teach students of all experience levels to know and respect the animals they work with. Their passion for the work and care for horses shows in every aspect of the school. And it is something they strive to pass on to those they teach.

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A promotional video on the school's website states the work of a farrier can't be learned from just a book or a video. And the process is not simply attaching a stock shoe to each of a horse's feet. BPFS excels at giving the hands-on experience.

Atop having high quality models to show bone calcifications or fusions, students get to see first hand working with horses that have tendon injuries, odd-shaped hooves, or situations that might require a special shoe or some creativity on the part of the farrier.

A horseshoe is not only custom-fitted to the horse's foot, but to the whole horse. Factors far from the hoof can affect a horse's gait.

Jake just returned from the 44th annual American Farrier's Association convention in Kansas, where he's taken part in the convention's anatomy lab for the last 10 years. This year, he showed off and discussed the skeleton of a horse that had scoliosis. The animal's skeleton showed the effects of the spinal deformity on its legs and its overall growth.

While their knowledge of horse anatomy is flush with the 21st century, the basic work of the farrier hearkens back to what most would think of as the Medieval blacksmith.

BPFS trains students using modern propane-fired forges, but also demonstrate more traditional forging methods using coal or coke.

Pete makes manipulating steel appear easy using a coal fire, intensified with a forced-air hand crank from the turn of the 20th century. There are electric fans that can help stoke the fire, but Pete prefers the manual labor of the crank, that hearkens back to pumping a leather bellows.

"There is a heritage in the craft, and I like this style for that reason," he said, "There's as much art as there is science; that's what I enjoy most about it."

As a demonstration, Pete fashioned a shoe from a stock piece of steel bar. Heating the metal close to white hot in just a few minutes on the coals, and working quickly with hammer and tongs to shape it on the anvil.

He said the adage "strike while the iron is hot" is true and a guiding principle. The coal fire will get to about 2200 degrees, but the metal needs to be at about 2000-2100 degrees to be malleable without liquefying. On a cold day, the steel might have to return to the fire a few extra times as once it hits 900 degrees it loses a lot of pliability.

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>
> ***– Pete Butler, Butler Professional Farrier School***

As Pete finished shaping the shoe, he began rounding the edges slightly. "All things need to help the horse," he said. "If it's going to hurt the horse in any way, throw it out."

Both brothers noted that a traditional blacksmith was the go-to craftsman for just about everything. Keeping in that tradition they also make some of their own tools, hammers, and tongs.

While keeping rooted in tradition, BPFS is also keeping up with modern innovations and looking toward the future. On the farrier side this can be seen in using newer materials such as polyurethane to fill in cracked or broken hooves, or fabricating something at the recommendation of a veterinarian.

Their courses derive benefits from including technology as well. Jake and Pete developed an online portion that uses the 2012 book "Essential Principles of Horseshoeing," written by the three Butler men, as well as streaming video. The online portion better acquaints students for the theory and anatomy aspects of the work, prepares them for the skill areas, and allows them get more out of their time on site.

"Experience can't be replaced," Jake said. "But we try to improve and provide more opportunity on the educational foundation we build for the rest of people's careers."

The on site portion includes the voluminous tome--considered the book on farriery--originally written by Doug Butler in 1974 "The Principles of Horseshoeing." The book was revised and updated with Jake for its third edition in 2004.

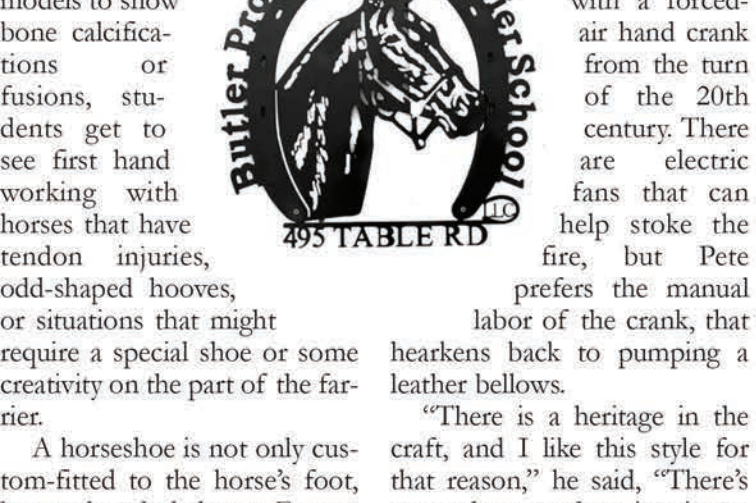
BPFS's formula--six-week basic and advanced courses that make up a complete 12-week course that is about the length of a standard college semester.

Technology also allows a platform for former students to keep in touch and reach the Butlers with questions on how to address different problems. Via email and conference calls former students can get in touch with the Butlers to say hi, to share stories of their work, or for help.

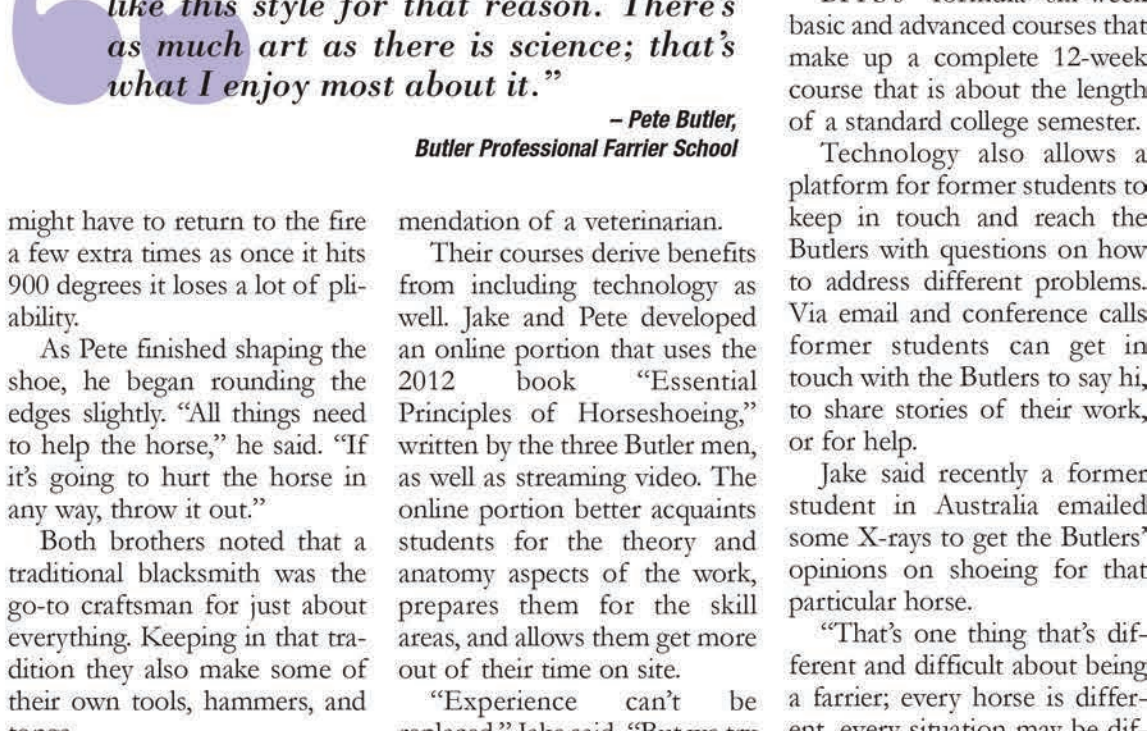
Jake said recently a former student in Australia emailed some X-rays to get the Butlers' opinions on shoeing for that particular horse.

"That's one thing that's different and difficult about being a farrier; every horse is different, every situation may be different. But the goal remains to make the horse as comfortable as possible through trimming or shoeing to each individual situation," he said.

To find out more about BPFS visit online at: butlerprofessionalfarrierschool.com



The work of a farrier incorporates many different skills and a variety of horses and their hooves. Horseshoes range from the diminuitive monstrous. INSET: Pete Butler holds a tiny pony shoe. ABOVE: Jake Butler holds a shoe for a Clydesdale.



Record photos by Kevin Oleksy

Pete Butler turns the crank on a mechanical fan that acts in place of his coal furnace's bellows. Pete said although there are electric versions, he likes to use the manual crank from the turn of the 20th century to keep a sense of the manual labor of the work's history.