

INDUSTRY UPDATE

TALKING TRACTION: THE REVOLUTIONARY WTS SHOE



Photos: Kim Hendriks



When two stars collide, brightness ensues. So, when two of the industry's leading farriers joined forces to bring a specialist horse shoe to the mass market, there was no doubt that performance farriery was witnessing a unique new business model. We asked Dutch farrier Richard Wijnen and Swiss farrier Stefan Wehrli to share the story of 'WTS'

Richard Wijnen has been a farrier for over twenty years now, with a client list that includes Jan Tops, Leopold van Asten and the Qatar show jumping team to his name. "Looking back at where I started and where I am now, there has been a lifetime of adventure in between," he tells us. "Early on in my career as a farrier, I decided to focus solely on sport horses, working with people that make the equestrian world their career; the challenges I have met along the way have made it a great deal of fun for me," says Richard, who calls his vocation 'a natural calling'.

IMPROVING FARRIERY SKILLS

Richard continued to specialise within the horse-sport sector as a farrier, and went on to set up an innovative company called Podi Artist in 2015, an organisation based in the Netherlands that focuses on training and supporting farriers in their daily work. "We support farriers and vets by organizing clinics for them to improve their skills, and therefore their quality of work," Richard tells us. "It is important for me to give people the right skills and knowledge to support their horses in the best way possible."

A MEETING OF MINDS

When Richard set about launching his first clinic with Podi Artist two years ago, his thoughts turned to a long-term friend and fellow farrier, Stefan Wehrli, inventor of the Wehrli Traction Shoe. Stefan, who had trained with the famous Swiss Army Farrier Corps, had been a show jumping rider contesting up to 1.45m competitively. "I shod the horses and rode the horses," Stefan says of his early life as a farrier who show jumped as a hobby. "This was a good way to learn, so I was involved in all aspects of a horse's life, watching how horseshoes affect balance, development and ultimately, performance." Richard and Stefan met in the early 2000s when Richard was seeking a second opinion on a farriery case he was working on, as Stefan was gaining a reputation as a go-to farrier for 'problem' horses. "I was observing that the shape of the hooves in some horses was very different to the shape of the coffin bone," Stefan explains of this time, when he was developing the early models of the WTS, or Wehrli Traction Shoe. "For example, the horn capsule would sometimes start to get distortion, if the shoe is not in the perfect place. The distortion of

the horn capsule creates too big a 'lever force' against the coffin bone - the result is a lack of blood perfusion, and undesirable re-modelling of the coffin bone."

THE SHOE'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE COFFIN BONE

This in-depth knowledge of the hoof's anatomy was the reason Stefan started to develop a shoeing concept that focussed on its relationship to the coffin bone. "I was aiming to keep the coffin bone healthy, and to have a natural, well shaped horn capsule," he says of his early work developing the WTS. "A normal horseshoe has almost no traction. I'm shoeing a lot of high level sport horses, so I needed a horseshoe with better traction, to help the equine athlete to perform better, hence, I developed the WTS," Stefan tells us. Richard, also fascinated with hoof dynamics and physiology, maintained a close contact and collaboration with Stefan as the WTS shoe was developed, going on to become the product's main distributor, as well as lead coach and trainer for delegates at Podi Artist's WTS training courses. "I would call Stefan a bit of a professor; he's always had remarkable vision," Richard says of his colleague. The pair launched the first WTS clinic two

SHOW JUMPER TESTIMONIALS

Ludger Beerbaum: "I first tested the WTS shoe over a couple of months on a few chosen horses. Now, almost all my competition horses are shod with WTS. I've noticed that the horses move more smoothly, and the 'breakover' of the foot is easier, on a straight line as well as on curves. It also gives significantly more grip to the horse. This enhanced grip and breakover give an advantage to the horse for jumping as well; on take off, the horses have more hold on the ground, even without studs; and on landing, the easier breakover gives less strain on the joints, and the movement is more fluent."

Hans-Dieter Dreher: "Since my horses were first shod with the original WTS shoes and also the Soft Heel shoes that Stefan developed, the horses' movement has become much more elastic, and they jump with much more ease. I think it is comparable to an athlete performing with shoes specially developed for his sport! The difference is obvious."



Dutch farrier Richard Wijnen and Swiss farrier Stefan Wehrli.

years ago, aiming to showcase to farriers and vets the key concept of the WTS - promoting balance and health, in relation to the coffin bone's location. "The benefit of the traction that the WTS offers is that the horse can efficiently use his power to pull with the front feet, and push with the hind feet, propelling his body in the direction of movement," says Stefan, who spent two and a half years ahead of the product's launch gathering data like hoof shapes, coffin bone data, and angles of the bars, frogs and heels. "With a good traction, the horse has, with the same power, more performance! The shock absorbing aspect simply works with the design of the shoe," Stefan says.

SIX PER CENT ASYMMETRY

Interestingly, the WTS incorporates into its design 'room' for up to six per cent of natural horse asymmetry. "Up to six per cent asymmetry is the average, from my research. But if a coffin bone has six per cent asymmetry, and the hoof shape has more asymmetry, this is unhealthy," Stefan adds. The pointed end of the 'branches of the sole' element of the WTS, and the pointed end of the 'ground contact' element (e.g.

beneath the coffin bone on the shoe) penetrate easily during the landing phase of a horse's action or jump, says Stefan. "The sole element is only 4mm thick for this reason; the frog has very early ground contact,

and is, together with the digital cushion, the hoof's natural shock absorber," he continues. "With the WTS Soft Heel model [see 'Models of Wehrli Traction Shoe'], the very soft polyurethane section makes even harder competition ground soft for the horse. The WTS's tapered heels aid soft landings, resulting in less stress on the common flexor tendon, and also the suspensory ligament. The length of the stride is enhanced because the horse dares to reach out further. I have feedback from a lot of riders that the horses are landing much more comfortably when shod with the WTS," Stefan adds.

THE HORSE PERFORMS BETTER AND RUNS FASTER

Comfort and balance are the gold-standards of farriery; but what does the WTS add in terms of competitiveness and results for horse and rider? "Put simply? The horse performs better, does more jump offs, and runs faster. The horse is feeling more safe with the better grip of the WTS; the body is more relaxed. The horse can bend more easily in the neck, the back and the pelvis. Like this, the horse is able to make tighter turns without stress," Stefan says. "With the better grip on grass, it's possible to use smaller studs. This helps for a more comfortable landing. There's less lever forces against the coffin bone and enhanced blood circulation. This is very important for healthy feet! It brings nutrition to all structures inside the foot, and

transports the toxins out of the foot. The horse stays sound for longer and performs more successfully," he tells us. "If the horse performs better, does more jump offs and runs faster, it has less time off for injury or lameness. But, as a word of warning: if the rider is using the horse too much, every horse get broken; so I say to all clients, please give the horses breaks from riding and competition, and if they are in recovery, give them enough time to heal completely," Stefan warns.

NO SHOE CAN FIX ALL PROBLEMS

Playing devil's advocate with the farriery trade, with horse coverings arguably having been around since the Romans invented 'hipposandals', why has it taken so long for a superior hoof covering like the WTS shoe to be developed? "The WTS is a wonderful tool in the toolbox of the farrier. But no shoe can fix all problems, or is needed for every horse," Stefan muses. "It's always the skills and knowledge of the farrier that makes shoeing success possible, or not."

THE GOAL IS ALWAYS TO FIND THE BEST INDIVIDUAL SOLUTION

Stefan believes that the challenge of horseshoeing is to find the right solution for each horse and each team, including the rider, trainer, vet and owner. "That means you always need different options for the same problem. With the WTS products, we have



By taking x-rays Richard and Stefan gain more information about the structures of the hoof.



The length of the pastern bone determines the length of the hoof.

enjoyed a lot of success in the fields of sport horses and therapeutic shoeing, but sometimes, you should ask yourself, do you need another solution? I shoe 60% with WTS, 20 % with other therapeutic shoes, and 20% with regular shoes. The goal is not applying your idea to a horse; the goal is to find every time the best individual solution. It doesn't matter with which shoe! In the last 10 years, the research into equine healthcare and also the value of sports horses has increased; we know more than ever before about physiology and performance, and it is now possible for farriers to work with

more expensive materials and concepts. "It's a very exciting time," Stefan agrees. "In November, the brand new WTS Therapeutic Shoe will come onto the market, and we're already developing the next model... the research and development is never ending!"

don't want 'hype' for one year, and after that, it's finished. Growing slowly and offering a high quality service for farriers, vets and riders is what we do with the WTS shoe," Stefan concludes. ■

MODELS OF WEHRLI TRACTION SHOE (ALL PATENTED DESIGNS)

1. WTS Solid Front, with a thicker sole element for extra stability. For all surfaces, including trail riding on hard ground.
2. WTS Light, a steel shoe with holes on the coffin bone element that makes them more lightweight. The sole element is thinner and the coffin bone element is thicker, for more grip. Perfect for sport horses on grass and sand arenas.
3. WTS Solid, with a thicker sole element, for extra stability and an optional third stud-hole. A steel shoe for all surfaces.
4. WTS Race - a lightweight aluminium shoe developed with more grip, for faster riding.
5. WTS Soft Heel - a predominantly steel shoe developed for a softer landing, with a flexible back half of the sole element made from polyurethane. (Two show jumping horses with these shoes placed in the top ten in the individual rankings at the 2017 Olympics.)
6. In November 2017, a new WTS Therapeutic Shoe will come onto the market.

THE WTS BUSINESS MODEL

With a product such as a horseshoe, one wonders how the business model of international product distribution to farriers works for Stefan. "Farriers wishing to fit the WTS must attend one of Podi Artist's specialist fitting clinics. We give a recommended price for the shoes, and in 2018, we will also have a recommended price for applying the WTS concept, as well as the shoes. But every farrier can charge what is needed. I'm happy with this model, e.g. that they need to attend the clinic before they can buy and use the WTS," Stefan explains. "My goal is not to sell a lot of shoes; my goal is that the WTS has success. The key point is of course the skills and knowledge of the farrier. Later this year, we will offer coaching and training days to improve the skills of the existing WTS farriers. The goal for this is to keep them working with the WTS knowledge, as well as keeping them up to date on new techniques and upcoming practices. Although only WTS-trained farriers can buy the shoe, so it is therefore a small market, it is growing slowly; but it is a sound business. This is my goal! I

THE TOPS INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Jan Tops, Olympic Gold medallist, businessman, Founder and President of the Longines Global Champions Tour, has been a long-term supporter of Podi Artist's WTS clinics. "We have worked with Jan Tops and his connections for many years now and are eternally grateful for their support and the fact we host our clinics and events at their fantastic base in Valkenswaard in the Netherlands," says Richard Wijnen.

WTS RIDER EVENING

Podi Artist is organising a 'WTS Rider Evening' on the 30th November 2017. This evening is for riders (and others) interested in being introduced to WTS horse shoes. Email toinfo@podiaartist.com or call +31 (0)6 15674094.



The WTS shoe fitted on the hoof.