



GENTLEMAN FARRIER

Nikki Jardin • Spot Magazine

RICK VANDENBROOK STRIDES THROUGH THE GATE LOOKING EVERY BIT THE CLASSIC COWBOY.

From his leather chaps and sweat-stained cowboy hat to his weathered face and slightly limping gait, the man looks straight out of central casting.

Today Vandebrook is trimming the hooves of a sleepy-eyed donkey named Sergio, who is being led in from grazing at Out To Pasture Sanctuary (OTP) in Estacada, Oregon. While waiting outside the barn Vandebrook chats, sharing that he's been in this line of work for about a decade, with a litany of injuries to show for it.

He points to a scar between his eyes, to where part of an ear is missing, and tells of busted ribs, a



broken toe, and legs once so bruised he could hardly walk. But, like anyone who revels in rough and tumble, there is pride in his patter. "It's not an easy job," he drawls, rummaging through the pockets of his faded work jacket, "but, I give 'em these apple oat treats." He pulls out what look like sawdust-covered lumps of dirt. "Then I pet 'em; I do kindness with them. Here, try one," he says, offering a treat.

I accept the dust ball and follow his lead as he bites down hard. "I eat everything I give the horses," he says. The treats have a faint hint of apple, but mostly taste like they look, which is to say, like dirt. "They're pretty dry," he acknowledges, crunching away, "but the horses love 'em."

Vandebrook practices the centuries-old trade of the farrier, or horse-shoer. The title dates back to the 12th

Century as a derivative of *ferrum*, the Latin word for iron, commonly used long ago for horse shoes. But shoeing the horse is only part of job; farriers must also understand anatomy, foot health, and how to trim hooves so as not to impair or retard the horse's natural gait.

A former carpenter who changed careers following an injury, Vandebrook had always loved and wanted to work with animals. "I was born and raised on horses and I love animals, so I thought the only thing I wanted to do was [work with] animals ... but I like the big guys."

Unfazed by the physical demands of the job, Vandebrook does find one thing particularly challenging. "Ornery horses," he says with a chuckle. Peevish large animals can be problematic, but Vandebrook follows this general rule for bad days: "If I get kicked three times I'm done," he says, "three strikes and you're out."

While the work is certainly physical, it also involves a good measure of psychology. "You have to learn to keep hold of that hoof," he says. "I mean, he's 1200 pounds and I'm 135; he can have his hoof any time he wants, but the minute a horse thinks he can take his foot from me, he's got me whooped."

When Sergio is ready, waiting patiently with Kit Collins, co-founder of OTP, the black donkey approaches the slim guy in the cowboy hat, knowing his visitor brings yummy (for a donkey) apple oat treats. Vandebrook happily obliges, offering treats, gentle words of greeting, and forehead scratches before setting to work.

Now the farrier is all business, hunkering down with his shoulder against Sergio, lifting a hoof, working away with a magnificent nail file known as a hoof rasp. While it sounds like a saw, there is no pain, as hooves have roughly the same properties as human fingernails. Really, it's a pedicure on a grand scale. Affirming the routine nature of the process, Sergio stands at ease, happily enjoying his oat treats while Vandebrook works.

This peaceful scene is a far cry from Sergio and Vandebrook's first meeting. Originally rescued from a farm where he'd been severely neglected, Sergio's specific history wasn't clear, but his deep-seated fear of people was. Just loading him in a trailer to be whisked out of harm's way and into the loving hands of OTP took four hours. In poor physical condition, Sergio's hooves were a mess, having grown so long they'd begun to curl, a painful malady that can render an animal lame.

Because of Sergio's fear of humans, he was tranquilized for his first sessions with farriers, a practice Collins wasn't happy about. Having heard good things about a certain local shoer she decided to give him a try. During an early phone conversation with Vandebrook, Collins mentioned coordinating the farrier's visit with the vet for tranquilizers. He stopped her, saying, "No — don't do that." Collins recalled him saying "We'll teach him to calm down. We'll kill him with kindness."

During Vandebrook's first visit, Sergio was a terror, spinning in the air, jumping and thrashing. "It was really scary," Collins' remembers. "But, Rick came out with this bucket of treats and just spent forever trimming his hooves." That session lasted several hours, but was accomplished without tranquilizers. "He didn't even charge us extra," Collins says, who has relied on Vandebrook ever since.

"It's all about the treats," Vandebrook says. He relied on tranquilizers early in his first years as a farrier, but not anymore. "It's actually easier not to sedate them," he says. "They remember that shot and how it doesn't feel good. I give them treats so next time they think, 'Hey, this guy isn't going to hurt me.'"

Vandebrook maintains a steady, calming patter while working with each of Sergio's hooves, clipping and filing with a confident rhythm, saying his own calm demeanor is key to working with skittish animals. "You know, this big guy can feel the touch of a fly, so he can also feel if I'm nervous. If I go in calm, he's gonna be calm."

He further notes that body position matters. "A lot of guys will hold that foot wherever it's comfortable for them. Bull. You gotta feel the horse and feel where he wants to relax it. The second he's relaxed, I put my body where he's comfortable. I think I make a lot of progress that way. It also helps to have someone like Kit here to talk to. If we just stand here talking in calm voices, just talking and working, the horse calms down."

Vandebrook grew up in Milwaukie, Oregon when pastureland was abundant. His family had only three neighbors, but all had barnyard animals. He tended to chickens, ducks, rabbits, goats and pigs on his own family's "mini-farm." He also often visited and learned to ride at his grandparents', who had thousands of acres in Lewiston, Idaho. "I've been riding since I was about three," he says.

His home today isn't much different. Vandebrook and his wife Joyce live on several acres just outside of Estacada, along with more than 40 farm animals, many of whom are rescues. "We keep as many as we can, or try to find good homes." He says his family has always taken kindly to animals and he doesn't tolerate cruelty. In the course of his work he sometimes finds situations of neglect or abuse and he doesn't hesitate to speak up. "I'll turn 'em in," he says matter of factly. "I care more about that animal."

Vandebrook gently drops the last of Sergio's four nicely manicured hooves onto the hay-strewn barn floor, petting him affectionately. The donkey expresses fondness in return, nuzzling Vandebrook's gloved hand.

Leaving for this day the farrier looks back. "That little donkin' — he's gotten better and better each time; it's just taken awhile." 🐾



Nikki Jardin is a Portland-based freelance writer who loves to write about people dedicated to making the world a better place for all beings.



PHOTOS

Opposite page: Out to Pasture resident Singer also gets the Vandebrook treatment (with Kit Collins). (©Nikki Jardin)

From top: Vandebrook using the hoof rasp (©Nikki Jardin) Rick and Sergio, bonded buddies (© OTP) Friend to all beings (© OTP) Rick with OTP's Kit Collins (©Nikki Jardin)