



# TECHNICAL TOPICS

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## Hard Hooves, Harder Lessons Shared From Longtime Hoof Trimmer

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Footbath design and maintenance are critical, with copper sulfate and formaldehyde solutions being the most effective treatments
- A calm, patient approach to handling cows reduces stress and improves milk production
- Properly designed stalls, ventilation, and heat abatement strategies are essential for cow health and productivity
- Combining nutrition, cow comfort, facility design, and team collaboration results in the healthiest and most productive herds



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## HARD HOOVES, HARDER LESSONS

From the early mornings on a modest 50-cow farm to the bustling operations of today, my journey in this industry has been nothing short of transformative. Joining the Standard Dairy Consultants team is the latest chapter in my 24-year career that's rooted deep in the world of dairy, and it started with my role as the owner-operator of Gauthier's Hooftrimming, working with farms across Central and Northern New York. If you've been in this industry for as long as I have, or even half that time, you've probably witnessed firsthand how much it has transformed—everything from herd sizes to consumer trends to technology. My, how times have changed!

### The Early Days

When I started hoof trimming in 1998, dairy farms looked very different. The average herd size was smaller and tie-stall barns were the norm. Most of my work involved herds of under 200 cows, with a few outliers in the 200-500 range. Trimming in those days consisted of extremely hard feet as the cows were confined to dry tie-stalls, and tunnel ventilation was commonplace. I remember I'd burn through a pair of gloves in just a couple of days—hoof chips from the grinder would wear a hole right through my right index finger.

OUCH!

Spring and fall were my busiest times of the year. Farmers wanted their cows in top shape with good hoof health before heading out to the pasture, and again before winter set in. I vividly remember the excitement of landing my first “large” herd of 300 cows. It brought consistency to my schedule, but it also introduced me to new challenges I was forced to face head-on—the biggest being Digital Dermatitis (DD), or “Hairy Warts.”

### Battling Digital Dermatitis

As farms grew over the years, DD became a widespread problem for dairymen, causing significant losses in both treatment and production, reproductive issues, and even increased cull rates. Footbaths for cows became a necessity, and while there are many products available today, I've found that the most effective footbaths typically use a combination of copper sulfate and formaldehyde. But it's not just about what's in the bath—design and setup are equally important. Ideally, cows would get at least two full “dunks” per foot, with sidewalls to prevent them

from stepping outside the bath. Cows can get creative when it comes to avoiding footbaths!

One critical mistake I've seen is the use of pre-wash footbaths. Do not do this! We have found that wet feet allow the medicated solution to run off, reducing effectiveness. The key to controlling DD is maintaining excellent hygiene and ensuring management consistency. I've developed a bias against alley scrapers over the years. After every pass they create a manure tsunami that cows walk through, providing the perfect anaerobic environment for DD to thrive. Heifers and dry cows need exposure to a consistent footbath. You can have a perfect footbath protocol, but if you ignore your heifers and dry cows, you will only continuously reintroduce DD and reinfect the herd.

### The Evolution of Cow Comfort

As the industry moved towards free-stall environments, cow comfort became a focal point for milk production. I've seen my fair share of poorly designed freestalls, but we have learned from our mistakes. Today, we understand how to optimize stall dimensions, flooring, bedding, ventilation, and water trough placement to set our cows up for success, if we choose.

As a former hoof trimmer, one of the first things I look for when walking into a barn is how many cows are lying down. Empty stalls and cows standing, bunching, or perching make me cringe because I know the long-term effects. The summer months, especially, are hard on cows and equally as hard on hooves. Prolonged periods of standing always equates to an increase in sole ulcers in late August through as late as November. I can't stress enough that well-placed, clean, and functional fans



*A HEALTHY HOOF thanks to routine hoof trimming promotes even weight distribution and maintains the well-being of cows, while also preventing lameness and improving mobility. (Photo Credit: Robert Gauthier/Standard Dairy Consultants).*



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## ■ HARD HOOVES, HARDER LESSONS CONTINUED

are crucial in barn design, yet their maintenance is often overlooked. Heat abatement in holding areas is another stress point—standing in extreme heat while waiting for milking can be brutal for cows and detrimental to production.

To reduce the stress of prolonged standing in the holding area, floor mats can help. However, I don't believe mats are necessary everywhere. I recommend rubber flooring for return alleys, holding areas, and high-traffic zones where cows are required to make 90-degree turns. Rubber is particularly useful on return lanes with downhill slopes, as it prevents cows from wearing down their hooves, which can lead to ulcers and white line lesions. Additionally, rubber mats on 90-degree turns can help reduce stress and repetitive pressure on the hooves as cows are moved to the parlor.



*A COW HOOF SOLE PROTECTOR, also known as a hoof block, serves to elevate an injured claw off the ground, allowing it to heal faster and pain is alleviated. By attaching the block to the healthy claw, the injured claw is spared from bearing the cow's full weight, promoting recovery from injuries or other conditions (Photo Credit: Robert Gauthier/Standard Dairy Consultants).*

## The Art of Cow Handling

If I've learned anything in my career, it's that slower is faster when it comes to handling cows. They need to be handled with care to increase milk production and prevent stress—the release of adrenalin, which negates the release of oxytocin, along with the possibility of injury. I've worked on some farms where cows were more prone to this. They were on "high alert," skittish, resistant, and harder to handle. The difference? Handling techniques. A calm approach always yields better results.

## Lessons from the Best Dairies

I've had the privilege of trimming on some truly outstanding dairies throughout my career. These farms didn't cut corners when it came to running a footbath and maintaining clean, well-designed barns. Their cows were comfortable, their stalls

filled with sand, and feed always pushed up—boosting dry matter intake and, believe it or not, reducing hoof issues caused by overreaching for feed (this puts more stress on the soles of the feet, as well as the medial claw of the rear feet).

But perhaps the most important factor I've observed on some of the best dairies? Communication. All of them had a strong, unified team where trimmers, veterinarians, managers, and nutritionists worked together toward a common goal. That approach made all the difference.

As I step into my new role with Standard Dairy Consultants, I bring with me 24 years of lessons learned and a respect for the industry that runs deeper than ever before. Nutrition is just one piece of the puzzle, but combine it with sound management, cow comfort, and collaboration? The results can be extraordinary. ■



## Standard Dairy Consultants (SDC)

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