

The morning of October 7th started the 31st annual Georgia Professional Farrier Association Fall Contest and Clinic at the UGA livestock arena in Athens, GA. After 4 ½ years of shoeing horses, I was finally going to be able to stay an entire day of the contest and be a sponge to atmosphere. Contestants and officers began arriving as early as 7 am, and would later find themselves there well past many of their bedtimes that night. Our usual supporting vendors like Georgia Farrier Supply, Neal Baggett knives, G & H Horsehoe Sales, and Vettec were all set up that morning. Robby Hunziker,CJF with Hurricane Forge joined the group of vendors as well. There was a very good turnout of spectators and contestants, many of whom it was their first time to a contest. There were many of the usual contestants and friends from our neighboring states that came out to support, as well as friends that came from as far as Illinois. Many new faces filled the air with introductions as we all set up our workspaces and prepared to watch a demonstration by the clinician.

In division I there were 9 participants, 4 in division II and 8 in division III. The Clinician this year was Jonathan Oehms, CJF, from Brisben, Australia. He began giving guidance for the classes and expectations as to how we would be judging. Shortly after he put 2 keg shoes in the fire for a demo, he took a few minutes to set the tone, and quickly remembered just how fast you can burn up a shoe in a coke fire. It was like watching an artist create a new piece, as each fluid blow of his hammer effortlessly shaped and forged his demo shoes. After Jonathan made it look so easy, we were all in agreement that our shoes wouldn't look anything like his. With that, it was off to our anvils to start the first class.

At the end of the first class, a pairs class, I don't think that there was anyone who wasn't looking to see how they measured up to the competition. Those of us in division I huddled around the judging table for a while to see all the strengths and weaknesses of our peers. The second class proved to be a little tougher, as some of the contestants had setbacks by the time the clock stopped. With each division having some type of bar shoe to turn in, we all walked our shoes to the judging table, wishing that we had a few more minutes to clean things up a bit. There were some puppy dog faces in division I with shoes that didn't weld, had a very visible seam (I fell in this group), or just had pinched nail holes. We all knew that once it was all said and done, Jonathan's decision would have the top four in each division moving on to the live shoeing.

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While we ate lunch we all waited nervously to see who would be in the live shoeing, except for the division II competitors. With only 4 of them, they knew that they had to do a really bad job to not make it to the top 4. Being one of the 4 for division I, I must admit that the nerves kicked in for the first time that day. I went into the contest just wanting to do my best, have fun and learn something new. It also didn't help that the division II & III classes went before we did, which gave me about 2 ½ whole hours to make

myself even more nervous. The afternoon quickly turned into the early evening as we all watched division II & III do their best to perfect their work before they called time. The hour for division I flew by, since all I remember is the circle of moving from the horse to my anvil over and over again. When they called time, I felt that I'd left everything I could on the horses foot and in my display shoe. The feeling I remember having after they'd called time was that of being blessed and appreciative to have made it that far.

With the darkness of night approaching fast, we paired with our partners for the 2 man open division class. It must have been my lucky day because I was paired with Jason Gilleland, and new that I was about to have my mind blown. I'd heard from many of our mutual friends as to just how good Jason was, but I can tell you first hand that he made it look easy. We moved so fast through the class that I can't even recall the names of the shoes we made. What I remember most is how Jason instructed me on what to do before I brought the shoe out of the fire and verbally guided me with each blow. It was at this point that the true lesson of the day began. We all have our eureka moments as we work each day in this industry, but a lot of the "how should I forge or shape this" questions were answered for me in that hour. It was hard to believe that I'd forged the shoe that I did at the end of time..

The night was over for me after that, and I was getting ready to head home. I had some family events planned the rest of the weekend, so I wasn't planning on coming back the next day. That all changed though when a friend of mine told me that I needed to try my best to make it back to Athens the next day. Without being given much more detail than that, I made it back for the end of the award ceremony to find that I'd won quite a bit. Very much to my surprise I'd won classes 1 & 3 for division I, best shod foot and the highpoint for division I. To this day, I still have to look at the awards just to remind myself that I achieved one of my career goals much earlier than I expected. Aside from my family, Uncle Sam and my animals, many of my close friends know just how little time I have to commit to practicing in the fire. As much as I like to feel sorry for myself and consider this a setback, I use it as my drive to be the best that I can be. I can't help but to attribute my success to the many top notch farriers that I surround myself with and all of the eureka moments they've helped me to have. In all, that weekend was definitely one to be remembered.

