

Tommy Mc Daid left rural Ireland for a career in Abu Dhabi's royal stables. So what's it like to have the responsibility of shoeing HH Sheikh Khalifa's horses?



Tommy smiles as he watches the horses swim in the crystal clear water of the 75m indoor pool. Some horses glide gracefully through the water like equine ballet dancers while others prefer to splash lazily like small children.

Tommy's workplace, HH Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's Al Asayl complex, is worlds away from the stables in Letterkenny – the small Donegal town where he grew up. Al Asayl includes a first-class racetrack, a hydrotherapy spa, horse treadmills and a state-of-the-art clinic, but one thing that remains the same for Tommy is his role as master farrier.

### **What do you do?**

I'm an equine podiatrist. Basically I put shoes on horses for competitions, racing and show jumping.

### **What do you like most about your job?**

When my horse runs past the winning post, in front of the others!

Working with horses, I get to know their personalities and it's a great feeling to watch them overcome setbacks and cross the finish line.

### **What inspired you to choose this career?**

I'm the fourth generation in my family; my father, grandfather and great-grandfather did this before me. I shod my first pony when I was only four years old and my first horse when I was seven. We have a forge at home and when I was young I was always in there, beating shoes and playing with metal. It's my passion and my hobby and I was doing it before I can remember.

### **What training did you do?**

I did a four-year apprenticeship. I went to college for a few months every year and the rest of my time was spent out training on the job with a master farrier. My dad trained me. After four years I did my final exams.

But in this job you never stop learning. If you like your job then you'll want to learn and know everything there is to know about it.

I qualified as a master farrier when I was 21 – the youngest person in Ireland ever to qualify. I'm 25 now and I've worked with farriers in Barcelona, Florida and Kentucky. I decided to move to the UAE because I wanted to experience the best horseracing scene in the world – the most expensive horses and best facilities are here.

### **What's the most challenging aspect of your job?**

I work with such expensive horses, so there's a lot of pressure. A horse may only get the chance to be in a big race once in their life. Some horses have hoof problems so it's up to me to get them as comfortable as possible in time to perform. Recently one of my problem horses was competing for the Dubai Gold Cup – it was great to see him gallop across the finish line (he came fourth).

**6.30am:** I wake up and go straight to work. During racing season (October to March) I have a list of racers and I check that they are 100 percent ready to race. This time of year I'm also doing corrective work with foals to fix problems with their little hooves.

I walk the horses and do a quick examination of their hooves to check if they need to be shod. A horse should be shod every four weeks – we never go longer than that.

Firstly I remove the old shoe, and then I trim the hoof to make sure that it's balanced. Using tongs I hold a strip of metal over the gas forge. It turns red, orange then yellow. When it's yellow I remove it from the heat then singe it onto the hoof, cool it and nail it on. We mainly use strips of aluminium rather than old-style iron at Al Asayl. This metal doesn't change colour, so I test if it's hot enough by holding it against paper.

After I drive the shoe with nails I clinch the shoe by bending the tips of the nails to hold it in place. Of course the horses don't feel anything because there are no nerve endings in the hoof; it's like your fingernail. But it's important to be accurate because some horses have thin hoof walls; if the wall is thin and you nail too close to the foot then you could make the horse lame, if you nail too far out then the shoe will fall off.

**10am:** I finish my morning shift and go home for the afternoon. It's too hot for the horses during the day so they stay in their air-conditioned stables. The stables are immaculate! The horses are really pampered here; they have an equine spa, a racetrack and treadmills. We can even work out how fit a horse is by linking it up to a heart monitor when it's on the treadmill.

**4pm:** I return to work for a final check of the horses to see if any need to be shod. After that I swim them in the pool – it's great for fitness because it doesn't cause shock to the legs. The pool is in a huge shed – its an unbelievable size, it is fully tiled and the water is crystal clear. The horses love it. Some horses are able to swim and some aren't. It's funny to watch them, one of our horses really is a poor swimmer and he swims with only the tip of his nose sticking out of the water.

**5:30pm:** I finish work for the day and my evening is free to relax, meet up with friends, watch

football or read up on work to keep up to date.

**Final thoughts:** I love my job and I can't imagine doing anything else.

***Catriona Doherty***