

The Equine Apprentice

Before you dive headfirst into the horseworld, consider testing the waters with an equine professional first.

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Admit it. You have an undying thirst for learning anything related to horses. You know what I'm talking about. Don't you start mentally salivating at the beginning of each month, waiting impatiently for your favorite horse magazines? Can you claim your bookshelf isn't filled with equine care and riding texts? And aren't you just as guilty as we are of wondering how in the world they actually get horses on film to perform those hair-raising stunts? Admit it!

Of course, some of us are thirstier than others. If you're like me, your quest for knowledge has driven you to volunteer for nasty duties just to be able to soak up nuggets of horsey wisdom from professionals you respect. Yes, like so many others, I started my path to an equine profession by becoming an apprentice — someone who volunteers for hard labor (read: slave) in exchange for priceless knowledge, and if lucky, a small stipend.

My personal experience as a working student for top trainers is something I look back on fondly and affectionately—from a distance. I also feel a bit weak in the knees as I recall those days, because at the time, it felt like an equine version of boot camp. As a trainer's apprentice, I woke every day at dark-thirty to present myself for another round of torture at the barn. You might think I'm exaggerating, perhaps—but only to make a point. Many would-be apprentices have rose-colored views of the jobs they think they want and are shocked once they smell the manure, so to speak. If you're considering travelling the apprenticeship path, expect hard work and no free meals. Apprenticeships aren't like paying for lessons.

However, there's nothing like the rewards of such a position: You'll get a firsthand understanding of whether you're suited for your chosen profession, gain experience and knowledge that will help you succeed in your field, and develop mentors and contacts along the way. At the same time, you'll pick up a lifetime of good habits albeit those beaten into you!

Apprenticing isn't limited to horse trainers. You can swap work for knowledge with farriers, farm managers, veterinarians and so on. You can trade a few hours grooming and cleaning up tack for lessons with your local instructor, or set your sights as far away as apprenticing overseas. We'll give you some tips on where to find apprentice positions, what to expect once you get there and how to survive the experience. Also, we'll introduce you to a few apprentices and two establishments that offer apprenticeship programs.

Definition of an Apprentice

The very word apprentice conjures up visions of Mickey Mouse in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," enlisting the help of brooms to carry water for cleaning. Like Mickey, a non-cartoon apprentice has several different responsibilities, and what these are will depend on the type of profession they are learning, their goals and the amount of time they have committed to their employers. For example, Laura Forrester, a 19-year-old architecture student at Cal Poly University, spends her summers and vacations exchanging work for riding lessons. A cash-poor student, she found that the working-student position was the only viable way to continue her equine education during her college years.

Survival Tips

While the rewards of apprentice positions are generally worth the effort, the work can be rough. Here the apprentices we talked to offer you some tips to toughing it out.

1. "Keep the lines of communication open with your trainer. Listen and observe as much as possible while others are taking lessons and the trainer is working different horses. Ask questions and have things clarified if you do not understand. Be flexible. Expect to be an improved rider with a better understanding of horses. Sometimes the hours are long and the weather isn't the best, but think of your long-term goals." — Barbara Werbach
2. "Make the long hours and lack of salary bearable by focusing on being able to ride experienced and upper-level horses. Be honest, reliable and responsible. Once you've earned the professional's trust you'll get to do more." — Laura Forrester

3. "In order to become a good farrier you are going to have to pay a price — hard work, that's not a whole lot of fun. Take advantage of every opportunity. Don't be lazy about your position. The most important thing is learning as much as you can." — Pat Britt

4. "It's important to have two traits — the ability to work very hard and patience. You have to be willing, after a long day, to scrap any plans you have made in order to help a sick or injured horse. You can't scream at a foal because he won't lead after one lesson. Look at every day as a learning experience; every time you handle a stallion or a newborn you are gaining valuable experience and knowledge." — Tammy Watson

5. "At first stand back so you don't get in the way, then get involved in any way you can. Work together with your mentor." — Summer Griffin
"My responsibilities can be summed up as a sort of 'right hand man,'" says Laura. "Basically I pick up the loose ends. I tack horses, longe them, put them away, groom at shows and offer moral support whenever needed. I also help my trainer on the ground while she's riding. An extra pair of trained eyes is really important in dressage." In exchange for her work, Laura gets several lessons per week and the opportunity to ride well-trained horses.

Barbara Werbach, a former small-animal vet technician was burned out on her profession when she decided to give it up and go to work full-time for her dressage trainer Kathleen Lockhart, of Dallas. "My main responsibilities are to have the horses ready when Kathleen is ready to ride and then cool them out and bathe them," says Barbara. "I receive a lesson each day."

Tammy Watson had a lifetime of experience with horses, but was never sure she could turn her love of horses into a career. The apprenticeship program at Al-Marah Arabians, a large operation that offers 2-year positions, seemed a good way to find out. The only spot open was in the breeding barn. After just a month in the program, Tammy had found her niche, and in fact, she now holds the position of assistant breed manager. Tammy's program taught her how to handle stallions, deliver foals, collect stallion semen and artificially inseminate mares.

"In the breeding barn, our duties are varied depending on the time of the year," says Tammy. "During the spring, we are breeding horses all day and delivering foals all night, in addition to our regular chores. In the fall we do a lot of basic training with the foals. We also may be doing vaccinations, deworming, treating sick or injured horses, or having a weekly riding lesson. I maintain health records, breeding and foaling records and records of horses that come and go." Sound like a lot of work? It is, and Tammy's days are long. But to her the gains are immeasurable.

What's in It for Me

Hands-on experience is irreplaceable. Some things just can't be taught in school or in a 1-hour weekly lesson. Tammy explains, "With the many horses we have at Al-Marah you see it all. Colds, stitches, belly aches and the occasional foaling problem. All of this adds to your level of confidence when you leave. But the short-term rewards are also a big part of the job: It gives you a great feeling to take a mare and newborn foal outside for the first time and watch them run together."

Consider the fact that you'll have a mentor, someone to go to for advice. Summer Griffin, who rides along on rounds with veterinarian Craig Chandler, tells us, "He has given me tons of tips to help me along the way, such as urging me to keep a log book of my volunteer hours, a requirement for vet school." You'll also get to ask loads of questions, learn professionalism and find out how a successful business is run.

Barbara found that "the most valuable experience is being able to work with and ride a lot of different horses. Each horse can teach you something different." Laura Forrester agrees, "To become a confident, responsible rider you must be able to ride experienced horses. It's difficult and nearly impossible to be able to have horses like this at your disposal as a recreation rider, but you'll find lots of well-trained horses at professionals' stables."

Being an apprentice will give you a foot in the industry door. When you emerge as a hopeful new professional, not only will you have your boss's name attached to your resume, but you'll also have met people throughout the horseworld who can help you make contacts later. Networking isn't just for Corporate America.

A Reality Check

Imagine if you thought you wanted to be a veterinarian or farrier and then, after spending tons of money, you realized it wasn't your cup of tea. Apprenticeships can offer you a chance to test the waters of a would-be career and confirm your choice—or turn you away before you waste years and money on education and training.

Summer Griffin was thinking of becoming a veterinarian and wanted to make sure the choice was a good one for her. She wanted to watch the day-to-day goings-on and see what kind of obstacles a vet faces. She signed up with equine practitioner Craig Chandler as a ride-along helper. "I mainly went out on vaccine and teeth-floating clinics. As I became

familiar with the instruments he used, I would get them ready. I also would help out by cleaning up and filling out invoices. But mostly I was there to observe."

Like many other apprentices, Summer helps with cleanup and similar chores. She doesn't actually perform any veterinary procedures; what she learns comes from observing her mentor as he handles his work. This may not seem like much, but Dr. Chandler says, "One of the best ways to improve your chances of getting admitted into vet school is to explore as many facets of the profession as possible by observing vets in action."

In addition, Summer can see firsthand what her life as a vet will be like. Summer's experience cemented her decision to become a vet, and she's currently enrolled in preparatory animal science courses at her local college.

Pat Britt, a former Oakland A's catcher, longed to go back to work out of doors. His second career as a pharmaceutical representative wasn't quite all he'd hoped, so a friend introduced him to farrier Mike Henry. After asking Mike a few questions, Pat was interested in shoeing, but not ready to dive headfirst again into another profession. Instead, he signed up with Mike as an unpaid apprentice working on the weekends.

Pat worked with Mike for several months before giving up his pharmaceutical job and heading off to the Oklahoma Horseshoeing school. "Mike really allowed me to be flexible. I got to ride along with him whenever I wanted; this fit perfectly into my [work] schedule. My responsibilities were to pull shoes and clinch the nails. I got to ask plenty of questions and observe Mike handling different types of horses and their shoeing needs."

The knowledge gained from his apprenticeship program also enabled Pat to have a better understanding at school, giving him a leg-up on the education at farrier's school.

Ferretting Out Opportunities

How can you find professionals who might take you on as an apprentice? Here are some tips to get you started, but be creative and assertive. Laura Forrester says, "If I were to start an apprenticeship again I'd walk up to a trainer and ask to help in any way, pulling manes, longeing, helping on their days off, whatever. Even if the trainer didn't need help with riding right away or didn't have time for a nonpaying student, I'd at least get my foot in the door and eventually get to ride." Be patient, however, and don't expect to instantly be handed the reins to top mounts: You have to earn people's respect and trust first, and that might mean mucking out for a few months before they'll let you sit in the saddle, or holding tools and heating up iron before touching a hoof.

If becoming an instructor is your interest and you already are taking lessons, ask your current trainer if he or she'd be interested in swapping a bit of work for lessons and information. Offer to help do the work he least likes—and do your best job at it. If shoeing is your goal, ask your horse's farrier if you could watch her work for awhile and help out. If she's willing and you get along well for the day, ask if she'd be agreeable to showing you the ropes in exchange for work.

You can find other local equine professionals by looking in your local feed and tack stores, stable bulletin boards and the yellow pages for phone numbers of stables and local equine organizations. Then call them up and let them know you're interested in learning from them and set up an appointment to meet when it's convenient for them. You might wish to ask about apprenticing only after they've had a chance to see you face to face—it's much easier to convince someone in person. However, this could also backfire on you if they feel manipulated. Use your best judgment, and realize you're asking them to spend their time with you, something they probably have little to waste. Your goal should be to show them how such an arrangement can benefit them.

If your initial search for trainers doesn't yield any openings, start attending local shows and approach trainers and instructors there. You'll be able to see how they interact with their customers—an indication of what kind of instruction you'll receive—and they may be more willing to let you help when they're running around with a million things to do.

Shows are also good places to find potential work with barn managers, who are trying to fulfill everyone's needs and might be grateful for a "gofer" willing to do grunt work. You'll want to wait until after the show to approach them with an apprenticeship request, however, since they won't need any additional decisions thrust on them.

Offering to scribe at shows using this system can get you contacts with trainers and judges who can steer you to potential apprentice positions, and which can be a great education in itself.

If your would-be mentor doesn't want or need any equine-related help, offer to help plant his garden, detail her truck or anything else in exchange for sharing his or her expertise with you.

For more formal-type programs, such as Al-Marah or CA (see sidebar), check in national magazines or trade journals; these groups usually advertise in the classified section.

National breed and show associations can be gold mines of opportunities for such programs, and are generally willing to give out names of breed establishments and trainers in your area.

Finally, place an ad listing your skills in trade journals and magazines, requesting an apprentice position.

Look Before Leaping

Once you've found a willing victim—I mean mentor—don't assume the hard part is over. One of the biggest mistakes new apprentices make is believing they've signed up for a fun job working around horses. If you think a working-student position is exactly like playing around the stable with your horse on your day off—leisurely riding through the woods and spending hours brushing his tail—you are sadly mistaken. Most apprentices work their rear ends off—long hours every day, 6 days a week or more, doing the unglamorous chores. But don't bother complaining, because guess what? These types of days will look pretty familiar when you finally become a professional. If you look around, you'll probably find your mentor IS working just as long and hard. So consider it good training.