

The Annual Dragging of the Mats

By Cindy Hale

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Ah, nothing like autumn! The cooler weather has finally arrived and my thoughts have turned to upcoming celebrations: Halloween, Thanksgiving and yes, even Christmas. But before I get too festive, I had to first confront another autumnal tradition: Yanking out the stall mats and leveling the stall floor.

You see, I've discovered that no matter how thoroughly you pack a stall floor, and regardless of how conscientious you are with slapping thick rubber mats down as cushions, you cannot prevent a 1,200-pound beast from creating craters in the flooring. That's due to compression from the aforementioned beast selecting favorite spots for eating, for standing, for surveying the panorama of the neighborhood and for pooping and peeing. If I didn't pull out the mats and level the stall floor once a year, all of these assorted spots would transform the 16 X 24 stall from a luxurious cabana into an equine Grand Canyon.

I'm not sure which of my Paint geldings to blame more for meddling with the interior design: Wally or Joey. I only keep one of them at home at a time. With the disability in my right arm, that's all I can physically handle. I keep one horse in my backyard while the other one gets to lounge around at my parents' place a few blocks away. I switch them back and forth. Currently Joey is here and Wally is there.

Regardless of which horse does the most damage (*cough* Wally *cough*), I set a date once the weather begins to cool off. Then Ron heads to the sand and gravel depot just outside of town and gets a tractor scoop of coarse sand. I rake and shovel the bedding into one corner—the lone corner neither of my horses find appealing—so the mats are revealed. Then I have to drag them, one by one, out into the sun and turn them over. Oh, the lovely aroma that wafts up from the underside of rubber stall mats! Fortunately, a day or two of sunshine takes care of that.

It's the actual dragging of the mats that's worthy of a national horse holiday. Though each one measures only 4 x 6-feet, they're so much deadweight that they're nearly immovable. I feel like a mob moll attempting to roll an unconscious Tony Soprano across the floor.

Once I've recovered from that spine numbing chore I de-odorize and dry the stall floor. Many years ago we used to use lime. But now I just select one of several concoctions available at the feed store. Who'd have thought there was that much intellectual energy put into manufacturing products that suck up the mucky moisture trapped beneath stall mats? Worse, who'd have thought I'd spend so much intellectual energy mentally debating which stall drying product to purchase?

On top of the magical drying agent goes the coarse sand that Ron shovels from the bed of the truck. That's when I feign exhaustion and allow The Man to work. Then we work together and pack it down, making sure it's level, and then replace the mats. Somehow they're easier to drag back in, which is fortunate, because by the end of the day I wish that Joey and Wally were free-range mustangs. Or that I owned pastureland.

The final layer is the bedding: fluffy, pristine shavings. Even I can understand how they tempt a horse to roll. Naturally, it's the rolling—along with the pawing, the standing in one place and the lying down at night—that over time creates the hill 'n dale effect I'm forced to correct. But then, what would autumn be without my own personal celebration of horse ownership? Once it's over, I can concentrate on the upcoming festivities that "normal" people enjoy. I can think about pumpkins and pumpkin pie and gift wrapping. It's early October and the annual Dragging of the Mats has come and gone once again.

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