

Why I Never Became a Horse Trainer

By Cindy Hale

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My trainer friend Sue and her assistant BJ. They may be smiling but I still don't want their jobs. Once upon a time, when I was infatuated with the realization that I had conquered some small landmark in the realm of horsemanship, I considered becoming a professional horse trainer. That didn't last long. Within a few years I had witnessed what "the business" can do to an otherwise good-natured soul who loved horses. The daily competition to win clients—and then to keep them happy—turned even the most congenial professionals into reclusive, jaded misanthropes.

Okay, so I'm exaggerating a little.

But over the years I began to see a trend: The vast majority of professional trainers were great with horses. They could communicate with a variety of equines and they turned out solid, dependable mounts. They just had problems with people. It's not like they were anti-social or maladjusted. It's just that people expect (or demand) so much from a horse trainer that it's nearly impossible to continuously meet their expectations. Everyone wants their young horse to mature into a champion. And despite begging a trainer to be upfront and honest, no one truly enjoys hearing that their horse is unsound, unsafe or untalented, especially after spending a thousand bucks or more in training fees.

Let's face it. Most of us can figure out a horse soon enough and what it takes to get through to them. But human beings come into a barn with so many personality quirks that it would take a degree in psychology to chart and analyze each individual's quirks and how to motivate them. In the end, what causes professional horse trainers to become bitter and flippant, or just plain burned out, are the people.

I can't say I blame them.

I am not someone to put up with a lot of stress. I can't count how many times I've told my friend Sue, who is indeed a professional horse trainer, "I am so glad I don't have your job." Even better is, "I would never want your job."

My comments are elicited not from issues she's having with a horse, but conflicts she's enduring with a client. She's not alone. I have numerous professional horse trainers as friends and acquaintances, and they frequently share tales of woe. Sometimes it's about a client who has become disenchanted with their horse's show record. Other times a client decides another barn can make them feel more special. Then there are disagreements about a few dollars or misinterpreted offhand comments. In such cases everything gets blown way, way out of proportion and everyone's unhappy, and the client leaves.

About a decade ago, when I was chatting with my friend Karole (yes, also a professional horse trainer) during a weeklong show, she shared this sentiment. "There is no loyalty in the horse world. I never think of a client as a friend. It's a business arrangement. It's all nice and sweet if we get along and think each other is fantastic, but eventually, that client is going to leave, for one reason or another. And if I've allowed them to become a close friend, then my feelings get hurt. It's happened before and I can't take it anymore."

That feeling of losing a friend is what would kill me. I'm too thin skinned. That's why I believe that most of the professional trainers who survive a decade or more in the horse business have either learned to remain emotionally distant from their clients or they're just incredibly tough. Since I tend to befriend pretty much anyone, and I'm also an emotional wuss, it's a good thing I never followed my original dream.

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