

What I Didn't Expect to Learn on a Horse Farm

Jennifer Brown

Ronald Reagan once said, "There's nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse." In the short time I have been working with and around horses I have found out how true this statement is. By pure happenstance I stumbled upon the opportunity to work with an experienced horse trainer in my junior year at Ball State University. I was a part of a professional student organization geared towards those looking for a career with wildlife. The main focus of the club was for those students most concerned with wildlife research, of which I was interested in.

My club, the Ball State Wildlife Society, met for an hour every other week to discuss research and club events coming up. The meeting in which I heard about a horse informational seminar was scheduled to take place the week before finals, so naturally not many people showed up. I myself almost did not attend for that very reason, I probably should have used that extra time to study, but instead I decided to go. That was one of the luckiest decisions I have ever made. It worked out that the person who sends out email alerts forgot to send out the information about the seminar, which was scheduled to take place that same Saturday following the meeting.

The only people who heard about the seminar were the six people who showed up to that club meeting. For most of those six people who showed up Saturday was very short notice and everyone already had plans for the weekend. However, when I heard the words "horse farm," my plans immediately changed. I organized a carpool with one of the other two students who would be attending the seminar and made a stop after the meeting to the ATM to pull out extra gas money.

Two days later, I met with my carpool partner in the parking lot of the Cooper Life Sciences building on the Ball State campus. Together we headed out and after making several wrong turns we made it to Butterfield Stables in Muncie. Of the three students who showed up only one had any previous real experience with horses. That one student was not me. The most experience I had ever had with horses was a two minute pony ride at the state fair when I was still in grade school.

Suffice it to say, what I knew about horses came from what I had seen in Hollywood movies. That is to say, I didn't know much and a good portion of what I did know, was wrong. Within minutes of meeting the trainer and owner of

Butterfield Stables, Michelle “Shelly” Butterfield, I realized that there was a wealth of knowledge I could learn from her.

It quickly became apparent that Mrs. Butterfield was an extremely hands-on instructor. After giving a brief lecture including horse reproduction, physiology, dietary needs, and training methods several horses were brought in, including two belonging to the professor overseeing the seminar, Dr. Ann Blakey. Once the horses were put in the cross-ties Mrs. Butterfield put a brush in my hand and told me to get to work grooming. Over-excited and a bit intimidated I tried to imitate the actions of the other students and Dr. Blakey. After half an hour of clumsily but enthusiastically brushing the horses, we moved outside for the next part of the seminar.

When we had first arrived at the barn, one of the horses was having a sketch of his skeletal structure painted on over his coat. For the final lecture on horse physiology, Mrs. Butterfield worked the horse in a lunge line so that we could see how the skeletal structure moved as the horse moved. Throughout the exercise all I could think about was how much I would love to work with Mrs. Butterfield. At the end of the seminar I finally worked up my courage to ask if Mrs. Butterfield ever took volunteers to work at her barn.

This question was very well received. Within moments I was hauled into a field with just a few horses and was told to walk up and pat a specific horse on the chest and walk away. Confused, but practically giddy with excitement, I did as I was instructed and was shocked when said horse followed me as I stepped away. I felt a firm push at my back as the horse bumped into me looking for more scratches. I must have looked as happy as I felt because Mrs. Butterfield and Dr. Blakey decided to allow me start volunteering at the stables.

I first started volunteering at the Butterfield stables at the beginning of the summer in 2013, the week following the end of spring semester. I initially believed that I would just be doing grunt work; mucking out stalls, cleaning tack, cleaning water buckets, organizing, etc. Quite happily, I did end up doing a lot of grunt work but so much more. Right from the beginning I was being taught about all manner of different aspects of the horse trade; training, behavior, common practices, illness, health, diet, grooming, and so much more. I unintentionally learned a great deal more than I believed I would when I first starting working, not just about the horse world, but also about life in general.

Ingenuity

I have found that Murphy’s Law is the perhaps the greatest law at work at a horse barn. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. I am now under the belief that

Murphy may have originally been a horse or at the very least owned a horse. Working with and around horses will continually challenge you to think in new and creative ways to solve problems. Often those problems will crop up at a moment's notice.

Horses can be a very destructive creature. In the wild, a horse's intelligence is routinely engaged with trying to survive. In captivity, with humans providing the basic necessities, horses often find themselves with too little to do and too much time in which to do it. Boredom can cause a horse to invent new ways to entertain themselves. These entertainments can become very expensive and inconvenient for the humans sharing their time with such horses.

I have seen the horses on Mrs. Butterfield's farm test her creativity and patience time and again. Jerry-rigging is a fundamental concept that anyone working on a farm must learn and quickly. Equipment breaks down, tools get lost, and still the job must be done. This means that when a problem pops up a solution must pop up just as quickly. I have seen Mrs. Butterfield use baling twine in place of a broken leather strap when lunge lining a horse. Extra twine was tied to the sides to purposely irritate the horse to see how she would react, and to teach her to calm down. One horse, Alvin decided to bend a gate in half just before Mrs. Butterfield was scheduled to leave for vacation. No problem. We simply pull a panel off of the round pen and wire it into place until she can purchase a new gate. Aside from the horses, other general farm problems are solved with just a bit of ingenuity.

Tops of tin cans are bent and nailed over mice holes to preserve grain. A low wooden beam above the cross-ties doubles as a teaching aid. If a horse won't stop throwing its head up, it will continually smack its head against the beam. This is particularly useful for very tall horses who don't want to get their whiskers clipped for shows. Mr. Butterfield fashioned a watering system out of PVC pipe so Mrs. Butterfield would not have to cart heavy water buckets throughout the day. A horse runs through and breaks the electric fencing, and you happen to be missing a repair piece. No problem. You simply look at what is lying around the barn and make-shift a piece that will work.

I have found myself doing similar things when I am not at the barn. The cat keeps getting stuck behind the stove. No problem. Simply using some duct tape and extra cardboard to block off the access point. The door keeps squeaking when you walk in. No problem. A little vegetable oil on the hinge will fix that. Couch cushions are sinking in. No problem, simply stuff an old blanket or dirty laundry to boost the seat. Learning that you can solve problems in unconventional ways

allows you to be more flexible and calm when you come across seemingly difficult problems in your daily life.

Psychology

Working at the barn has given me much insight into my own and others thought processes. Horses are very social animals, much like humans. At the Butterfield stables there are roughly four main pastures with four smaller isolated pastures. Many times I have found myself just watching how the horses will interact; in large groups, small groups, when they are alone, and when you add humans into the mix. I often compare how the horses relate to each other with how I and my friends and relatives relate to one another.

Most herds will have an established pecking order in which each horse may be dominant to some and submissive to others. In one of the large back pastures the most dominant horse is Alvin, a Morgan gelding. I found this odd at first because Alvin is the second smallest horse in that pasture. The largest horse, Justin a paint horse with draft blood, is the second most dominant horse. I couldn't understand this relationship until after I had watched that field for some time. While Alvin may be relatively small in physical size he more than makes up for it in personality. Alvin is 'meaner', more willing to fight and less willing to back down than any other horse he is put with. I initially categorized him in my mind as a bully. Mrs. Butterfield sometimes uses him to humble younger horses that give her trouble.

My view of him changed when I noticed that the horse he spends the most time with was the paint mare, Sierra. Sierra is blind in her left eye, which puts her at a great disadvantage when it comes to fighting with the other horses. Alvin, will often walk with her, almost as if he is acting as her guide. I came to admire Alvin for his tenacity but also for his leadership skills. There are not many fights or power struggles in his field. It is obvious to all who is boss.

I found that many of the horses would form their own small groups like this within the larger hierarchy of the pasture they were in, much like how humans will form small cliques in families, at school, and at workplaces. The horses' social rank was almost as complex and just as confusing. The pecking order and hierarchy of a field is never set in stone, especially when a new horse is added. In one of the smaller pastures that had just three horses the Morgan gelding Cappy was the most dominant followed by a Tennessee walker named Cash, and the most submissive a young Morgan named Forest.

When a new horse was placed into the field, a palomino named Goldie, he quickly established himself as the new boss. He remained the supreme boss for

about a week until Forest landed a hard kick to Goldie's back leg. Thereafter Goldie remained the boss to Cappy and Cash but became submissive to Forest. However Cappy and Cash still remained dominant over Forest, which I found very interesting, especially at feeding times where the horses would chase each other off of food in a circular pattern that would last until the food was gone. This got me to thinking how attitude and confidence can influence the relationships I share with those around me. I feel that this has helped me learn how to better handle myself in situations when I am intimidated by someone and have helped me come across as more confident.

I have also learnt a great deal about patience when working with horses. I have found that much like children a horse will learn at their own pace, not yours. One horse in particular, a Morgan mare named Misty, has tested my and Mrs. Butterfield's patience time and again. Misty was sent to Mrs. Butterfield for a refresher on cart driving so that the owner could sell her. Misty had already been trained to drive but had been out of practice for nearly three years. When Misty was hitched for the first time since arriving at the barn, she acted as if she had never been worked.

After repeated sessions and a lot of groundwork Misty still acted unpredictable. A week of driving peacefully passed and Mrs. Butterfield decided to get a video of her to show to the owner. Misty began acting up, spooked, and took off with the cart. Frantically, I tried to run into the mare's line of vision to get her to whoa while Mrs. Butterfield yelled at her. After getting the mare calm she put a special training lead on the mare and forced her to work until she was working quietly. I was told this would teach the mare that a tantrum would not get her out of work and would in fact make her have to work harder.

I do something quite similar when I am watching my nieces and nephew. If they misbehave I force quiet time. The longer it takes for them to settle down the longer they have to sit in the quiet spot. Once they realize that bad behavior results in a negative response the outbursts get fewer and shorter. Horses are like children in that they will take advantage of you when they can, and if a behavior gets them what they want that behavior will continue regardless of your displeasure. If you remain consistent both horses and children will begin to respond with the same consistency that you enforce the rules, or don't. I have found that often the same can be said when dealing with difficult adults as well.

Business Management

Mrs. Butterfield is self-employed which means she is the decision maker and the problem solver at the barn. Her customers are typically boarders, riding

students, or have horses in training with her. After spending close to eight months working with Mrs. Butterfield I have been able to see how she handles her clients and the problems that come from owning her own business.

One of the most important things I have learned concerns the use of paperwork and legal documents to hold people to their word. In this day and age it seems that less and less people put much stock in a promise unless there is paperwork to enforce it. This is especially true if many of your customers are also friends. Unfortunately, friends seem particularly likely to take advantage of a situation if rules are not enforced.

I have seen many boarders in particular take advantage of the stable when rules are not being strictly enforced. Most of the time customers are breaking small rules or overlooking common courtesies. People will use up expensive grooming supplies without replacing them with new bottles or replacing the supplies with cheap substitutes. When riders bring their horses in and brush them down they will leave without sweeping up the barn aisle. Many people will also pay their bills late. This is especially harmful in that the financial burden for things such as bedding, grain, or hay will fall to Mrs. Butterfield. She then has to pay for such expenses out of pocket. So she must put off buying things for herself, her family, and her own animals in favor of picking up the slack until the customers pay their bills.

The worst case scenario is that some customers will stop paying completely and abandon their horses to Mrs. Butterfield. A free horse may sound like a good exchange if a bill is not being paid, but in reality it carries twice the burden. The health care and maintenance of the animal is costly, and Mrs. Butterfield may not be able to sell the animal due to various reasons. In times of bad economy many people are not in the market for a new horse. Horses that have been abandoned may have behavior problems that make selling them difficult, or devalue them. If a horse needs training before it can be sold, that is time that Mrs. Butterfield must spend training the animal for free when she could be working the horse of a paying customer or spending time with her family. Paperwork that would state legal consequences for abandoning a horse may help deter people from leaving them to her care. Aside from customers it also became clear to me the importance of the location of a business like this.

The type of neighbors surrounding a horse farm can have the potential to make life much more difficult or helpful. Many people love horses but not everyone wants to live near horses. Knowing the local real estate before you set up can prevent many future headaches. There is quite a bit of forest near the Butterfield Stables and deer will sometimes venture onto the property. This is not always a pleasant experience. While checking on the horses one morning Mrs.

Butterfield realized that several horses were missing. After looking around the back pasture she saw that some of her fencing had been pulled apart and left gaping wide open. Just outside the broken part of the fence lay the headless body of a white-tailed deer. Beyond that grazing in the nearby cornfield were the missing horses. Mrs. Butterfield suspected the deer was the same buck she had seen running through the pasture just weeks before. The most likely explanation for the deer and the broken fence was that someone shot the deer illegally on her property, where many of her horses were, and broke her fence apart to retrieve the animal for the trophy. This incident could have resulted in a wounded or dead horse. The bullet could have hit one of the horses or they could have spooked and trampled through some of her fencing. To this day the hunters have not been caught.

On many separate occasions children of the neighbors have short circuited her electric fencing. The kids figured out that by using a stick to push the wire into the ground it diverted the charge. They have done this so that they could reach over and pet or feed the horses. This is dangerous in many ways. The children could feed something that would make the horses sick. A child may try to climb over the fencing and get stepped on by a horse which could result in a law-suit. At the very least the horses could tear down the non-electric part of the fence and get out. The neighbors live toward a back pasture which makes it difficult for Mrs. Butterfield to catch them in the act.

Mrs. Butterfield sometimes drives the horses she is training through the local neighborhoods. She does this to test how they handle different type of stimuli. Recently one of the residents started making complaints because the horses defecate on the roads and they drive through it. That resident has filed complaints to make it more difficult for Mrs. Butterfield to use the streets closest to her barn. Such neighbors can make any business you do more difficult if they do not want that type of business around their homes. This must be taken into consideration for any kind of business you intend to set up.

Confidence

It is amazing how knowing that you can boss around a creature that outweighs you by 1000lbs can raise your self-confidence. I have always been somewhat of a shy individual, but you cannot act timid around a horse. If you let a horse believe he is the boss that puts you into a very dangerous position. If a horse believes you are submissive he will treat you as such, by biting, kicking, and generally being disrespectful.

I have seen one of Mrs. Butterfield's horses, a mare named Maya, stop in mid kick when she realized who was behind her. Maya, a brood mare, was brought up to be groomed and wormed after being left to her own devices in the pasture for over a year. Maya is the most dominant horse on the entire property. Not even Alvin will challenge her. However, Maya is completely respectful towards Mrs. Butterfield, who is more than willing to discipline her when she misbehaves. After standing nicely to be clipped we started to lead Maya out back to the pasture before remembering that she needed worming. Holding her in the grassy walkway I and Mrs. Butterfield gave her the wormer. Maya did not appreciate this at all, after shaking her head loose she pulled away and spun around to kick. At the last second she stopped and stood still instead. The mare remembered who was standing behind her and recalled what the consequences of kicking the boss were. She immediately came to the conclusion that kicking would be a bad decision. She was right. Mrs. Butterfield would have brushed herself off and disciplined the mare had she followed through on that kick. That incident taught me how discipline is important for a horse to know good etiquette.

When I first started volunteering at the barn I was very intimidated by Mrs. Butterfield's breeding stallion Vegas. He pinned his ears at me every time I came near him. Whether it was feeding time or if I was just walking near his pasture, I thought he was giving me dirty looks. I was told to be careful of him because he was known to bite. I now think that he knew I was afraid and took advantage of me because of that. After seeing one of Mrs. Butterfield's riding students, a young girl named Lydia, play with Vegas in his pasture I realized how silly I was being. I gradually got more comfortable going up to the stud and hand feeding him peppermints or retrieving his ball when he threw it over the fence and out of his pasture. Soon I was confident enough to start petting him on the nose and on his back. At one point he did try to nip at me, and I instantly smacked him on the neck, which startled him very badly. Since then he does not pin his ears at me as often and will even let me play with his lips when he is in the stall.

I realized that it was my own fear that he was feeding from. My behavior told him that he was the boss and he listened. I now look at my behavior when I talk to and interact with other people and find it easier to convey my self-confidence to those around me. This is not the sort of thing that comes with reading a book or listening to a lecture. This type of lesson I had to experience first-hand to truly understand how my behavior and body language communicates my thoughts.

Since working for Mrs. Butterfield I have come to have a greater appreciation for my own abilities. I have found that I am capable of much more

than I ever imagined. Problems that crop up in my daily life no longer feel as difficult as I once thought. I now view them as challenges and fascinating puzzles that have been given to me to make life more interesting. I approach the world with much more confidence and ease. People and activities that once used to intimidate me no longer do. I can now look at situations with a more analytical view. I have to agree with Ronald Reagan, my insides have never felt better.