

Ask the Alpha Mare



Email your questions and/or comments for Alpha Mare to alphamare@telus.net. Your feedback is welcome, and could be featured in an upcoming Alpha Mare column in *Horses All!*

birds prefer cages any more than horses prefer stalls, so I'm giving myself away here.

It seems that too often we do for our horses what we think we would like, and don't stop to consider what they want or need.

Horses are gregarious herd animals. The bigger the family, the better! Sure, they have their "moments" with their "siblings," (don't we all?), but sorting out a pecking order is one of their favourite games, which is why it is never truly resolved.

If they get scraped and scratched or kicked and bitten, oh well, it's just their way. Even a horse that has never had a broodmare to teach it the "equine code of ethics" will learn to master the necessary social skills. The herd will see to that, and, amazingly, without victimizing anyone in the process.

All horses know the strength of a herd is evident in its weakest link, so their hierarchy games are intended to improve each other's powers of awareness rather than be the victor and send the loser packing.

Riversong's equestrian facility won't be built until this spring-summer, so up until now our seven horses have lived outside 24/7. They have a shelter, should they want it, and a canopy of trees around their 10-acre paddock for protection. And they are as happy as clams in any kind of weather – at all ages, with all levels of training.

They have huge furry coats to keep them toasty during the cold Alberta winters, and they sleek right out in the spring and summer. Even though both my Thoroughbred and Chris' Hanoverian had never lived in anything but box stalls in their formative years, they have adapted to their great-outdoors living arrangements like they were born to it ... which they were!

I can fully understand the ease of horse management and accessibility that comes with having horses stalled at an arena where they are being trained.

Adding to this, and to ensure the well-being of the horses being trained here at Riversong, every stall in our facility will have long run-outs, which means every horse "in" for training has plenty of room to "be a horse" during the hours they are not being trained, which is, let's face it, the bulk of their day! Such an approach is



If your horse spends part of his day indoors, give him at least *some* time for what he craves: room to move.

really just common horse sense.

For a horse to be cooped up in a stall and not be ridden but twice a month is, well, just plain cruel, Wendy. But yours is not an isolat-

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ed case.

There are places Chris and I work (Bermuda primarily) where land is at such a premium that turnout for horses (who all live in stalls in big barns), is barely an hour a day, and even that is a luxury.


Such horses have, not surprisingly, huge and chronic stall issues like cribbing, weaving, and stall-walking. They can be as aggressive as biting and kicking, or, on

the opposite end of the spectrum, they can totally shut down like they've been lobotomized. All are symptoms of not enough room to move or socialize.

Chris has a great saying: "Birds fly. Kids play. Fish swim. Horses move." Whatever your living arrangements for your horses, give them what they crave: room to move with user-friendly herd mates (including yourself), and you'll find that the majority of their "issues" resolve themselves and disappear on their own, regardless of their age or level of training.

Kathryn

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and "Train the Trainer" sessions throughout North America. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton.

If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at alphamare@telus.net 

by Kathryn Kincannon

Dear Alpha Mare,

I have a five-year-old gelding who is responding well to riding and training. He is stalled in the winter and, due to my work schedule, he only gets ridden once or twice a month. At what age or at what stage of his training can I leave him out for the winter for a few months?

Wanting-to-do-right Wendy

Dear Wendy,

In my mind, your question regarding leaving your horse out or in has nothing whatsoever to do with training, or age. So what's the question beneath the question?

Is he hard to catch and thus wreaks havoc on the training schedule? If so, my July 2006 column addresses this common complaint.

Is he difficult with other horses (bullies or gets bullied) so you can't trust him to mind his manners in a herd? If so, techniques from my October 2005 column would alleviate this issue.

If neither of these apply, and it is simply an attitude about what is "best" or "right," then this attitude bears discussion.

While I don't subscribe to stereotypes, I will say that from the hundreds of equestrian centres, barns, and horse environments that I have experienced – both in my own years with horses and now coaching with Chris throughout the continent and into Europe and Bermuda – I have seen a horse's reality from the swankiest show barns to the lowliest sorry-excuse-for-a-horse-coral-in-a-backyard. And, I can tell you that "where you come from" and the mindset you bring to the care giving of your horse bears far more on its well-being than the actual physical surroundings.

On one side of the attitude scale is the "it's-just-a-horse" lover who keeps their horse in a small corral, feeds it hay twice a day, and doesn't think much more about it other than to saddle it up and ride it on the trail when they get home from work or on the weekends.

At worst, these horses might suffer from neglect, as the owner may not be very educated about hoof care and nutrition, and their horse may not have a very big turnout area in which to run and play, or have shelter from the elements. If the horse lives all by itself (and this is not uncommon), there's a good chance it is lonely as well.

The alter-ego of this is the upscale English horse barn whose boarders pay a handsome fee for lap-of-luxury stalling with a state-of-the-art indoor heated arena. They tend towards the "overly-protective-mother" syndrome and cringe during turnout time ("What if it gets hurt?") or will call the vet each and every time their horse gets a tiny cut or its temperature is off a degree.

Horses here are spit-shined daily, sport perfectly pulled manes, clipped coats in the winter, every known supplement to man is in their feed, and they have a military training regimen to ensure success in the show ring. Such horses, in effect, live a life of solitary confinement, rarely getting to "know" the other horses in their barn and never have a chance to truly interact with them. The result is chronic stall issues, neuroses, and high anxiety overall.

I admit to being part-and-parcel of both realities; trust me, I am not here to judge. But, I do feel I can give a well-rounded opinion about what, from a horse's perspective, is a good idea when it comes to how it lives, and what is for the birds – although, I don't think

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