

Working Student: An Underestimated Education

By Amber Heintzberger

If you strive to have a career with horses, there are numerous ways to learn the ins and outs of the horse industry. One of the more popular venues is to become a “working student” for a successful professional rider and trainer. While each arrangement varies, from working a few hours a week in exchange for the odd lesson to spending almost every waking moment at the barn, a working student position should provide a solid education on how top riders and breeders go about their business on a daily basis and what it takes, physically, emotionally and financially to succeed.

A working student should also learn what it takes to get horses to the top of their sport and how to keep a high-performance horse sound and competitive. Working students can expect to spend long hours working at the barn, and in exchange the professional guides the student to learn many aspects of the horse business—not just training methods. A smart working student will take on any challenge or responsibility, roll up his or her sleeves, and work very hard no matter what the task.

Show jumper Will Simpson has represented the United States five times in World Cup Finals and in 2008 won the Olympic Show Jumping Team Gold Medal riding Carlsson vom Dach. He says, “One of the best ways to learn the business if you have the time and that’s what you want to do, is to go out and find a really good working student position. If you’re willing to *work*—that’s the key word—you should be able to find a good quality instructor that’s willing to teach.”

Will reasons that a good working student could offer any number of services. “You could clean stalls, drive the truck, maintain the vehicles, take care of the kids—anything that’s going to help the instructor’s situation,” he says. “In turn you’ll learn good horsemanship. All situations are different and there is no excuse not to be able to seek out good information.”

Four-Star eventing competitor Dorothy Crowell (nee Trapp) was an alternate for the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain riding Molokai. Based in Frankfurt, Kentucky, her most recent upper-level partner was Radio Flyer. Dorothy says the



Will Simpson and Carlsson vom Dach competing at the 2008 Olympics.

Photo courtesy Anke Magnussen

difference between a working student and a paid employee often comes down to experience and finances. “A working student is usually someone that financially needs to work off their bill. They typically don’t have ‘grooming’ experience; I pay someone with that experience. Often it takes less time to do the work yourself than to take the time to teach the working student how to properly muck a stall, clean tack, groom a horse, wrap a leg, tack up a horse, pack for a show, pack a foot, shut gates, sweep, medicate, set jumps, and drive a truck and trailer. If you find someone who can do all that and more up to

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your standards, you happily pay them!”

So why do instructors take the time and make the effort to hire working students who may not know all the ropes, when they could hire an experienced worker to handle things around the barn?

Will’s take on things is this: “I think as horsemen go, it’s our duty to pass on what we know. It’s not like you can just go to Harvard and learn about horses. Now there are more opportunities since good horsemen are willing and eager to pass on what they know. It’s for the benefit of the horse - more horses are ultimately in better hands.”

Career Beginnings

35-year-old Alex Robertson, who now trains and shows for Iron Spring Farm, worked for dressage trainers Gunnar and Birgit Ostergaard for three years when he was in his early twenties. “I suggest you only do a working student position if you’re willing to work your tail off!” he says. “It is an invaluable experience and the only one that can really prepare you for working in the

horse industry. You will learn a lot more than you could learn at any school, just being immersed in the horse world all day every day.” He adds, “If you can find a position with a schoolmaster to ride, that’s worth its weight in gold.”

Beth Perkins, who represented the United States in Three-Day Eventing at the 1978 World Championship, spent close to a year in England working with Lars Sederholm and then three years riding with Jack LeGoff as a member of the U.S. Equestrian Team in the 1970s. Prior to that she had earned her ‘A’ Pony Club rating and participated in clinics with a number of top riders, including frequent lessons with Olympic dressage judge Jessica Ranshousen who was involved with the Pony Club when Beth was young.

Beth says, “There are people who think you shouldn’t ‘hang out your shingle’ as a trainer until you’ve apprenticed with one person for a few years. There is so much to be gained by being a working student rather than just driving in and taking one lesson a week; you get all the years of experience that person has to offer. There’s something to be

said too for doing that with a couple of people that you respect, for a couple of years with each person.”

Grand Prix dressage rider Sue Cooper, whose business Impulsion Unlimited is based near Lynchburg, Virginia, found that working for a professional not only gave her the education to start her career with horses, it helped her decide that it was the right lifestyle for her. Sue worked for Gina Smith in Canada for a year and as then an assistant trainer under Pam Goodrich for another year and a half.

“Working for Gina was really my biggest inspiration that I could work in the horse world,” says Sue. “She was like me: an average person, not from a wealthy family, who was willing to work hard. I had the riding skills, and I like to think I have the talent, but I didn’t have the business skills to know how to take the next step; after being immersed in it 24/7, I think there’s no other way to do it than to work for a professional. I think horse-related colleges are great, but I don’t think they give the



Alex Robertson and Iron Spring Farm’s Watch Me, by Sir Sinclair, have successfully competed through Prix St. Georges. Photo by Terri Miller

experience to find out if you're cut out for this. It's definitely not an easy life."

A Fair Exchange?

Some top level riders charge for the privilege of being their working student, while others find that keeping track of specific jobs results in a fair deal for everyone involved. Will reasons, "Sometimes it's a very expensive sport, but if you're willing to hustle and make yourself a viable commodity, there's always a way to make yourself useful." He cautions, "You also want to make sure that the instructor offers what you want."

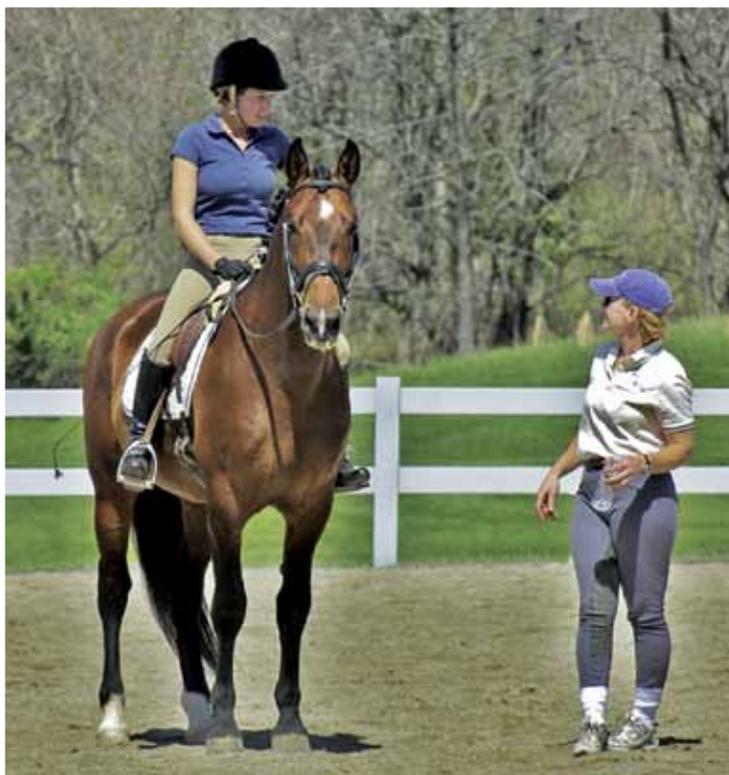
Beth has had many working students over the years and says that she always organizes things by dollars and cents, so that everyone is treated fairly. "People would come to me and inquire about working student positions usually because they couldn't afford lessons," she says. "I've never really had live-in students who came from a distance; in that case they would probably have to find housing and cover the cost of the horse's board. I'd say the work is valued at \$10/hour, which is appropriate for this area. I pay grooms more because they have to be more skilled—they usually get \$150/day for grooming, or say if they clip a horse I pay \$100. You have to break it down to dollars and cents, otherwise they end up working really long hours or you get behind in your lessons."

Beth also has two paid employees: a groom that also rides, and a man who cleans stalls and maintains the farm. A student might help grooming, getting horses fit, and whatever else she needs help with.

Dorothy also finds paying her working students the most satisfactory arrangement. "I charge working students the same as full paying students; I then pay them an hourly rate, \$6–10, depending on their skill level. They choose how many hours they want to work. They must tell me at least one week in advance what they want to do and then they must show up—no sleeping in because they are tired! This works for me because the less they work, the more they pay. The average student working a six-day work week will easily take care of the room and board, and they can take as many lessons as they need."

She points out that with this system it is within the working student's power to work off what they can't afford. "I have had a few motivated kids who have put in the extra hours and worked off room, board and lessons and I owed them money. In those rare cases, I'm happy to pay!"

You also have to take the big picture into account: does the situation include stabling? Accommodations? Sue's partner, Jeff Johnson, says, "There's a difference between someone who wants to be a working student and someone who wants a job. I



Sue Cooper helping her working student Kate Breiner on Impulsion Unlimited's Stallion Jorongor Mor. Photo courtesy Jeff Johnson

talked to a girl who wanted a minimum of \$250/a week and I had to explain the value of the stall, the apartment, and the lessons—but she could only see that she needed X number of dollars per week."

To avoid misunderstandings, when making arrangements to become a working student, both the student and instructor's expectations should be clear from the beginning. Will says, "To me there are no real hard-set rules on how things are set up. I think that being a working student is a great lesson for the horse business itself; everything should be spelled out right from the get-go. It might be a fantastic deal for some and a terrible deal for others. It has got to be flexible."

Will advises, "Usually a working student is someone on the young side, so you want to have a parent or responsible advisor help with the negotiations of the position and to be there at the meeting, writing things down. Negotiations should be signed off so everyone's on the same page. Communication on a regular basis is important. At the end of the first week there should be a review of the student's efforts—see if everyone's happy and keep the dialogue going so nobody's wasting their time."

Similarly, before you apply for a position, Dorothy suggests, "No matter how sure you are that the person you want to work with will be perfect for you, go take a lesson. Even better, go spend a few days at their facility. Shadow a current working student, live in the house, work, and take a flat and a jump



Beth Perkins (center) with her husband Mick Doyle (left) and Annie Eldridge (right) and her horse Fernhill Cove at the 2011 Fair Hill International three-day event. Photo © Amber Heintzberger 2011

she had a little horse that was spectacular. Unfortunately she went on to work for another person and she got burnt out and quit riding."

Having been a working student herself, Sue tries to make sure that she doesn't treat anybody like they are only at her farm to do manual labor. "We all do everything together—Jeff and I both clean stalls and once that's done we're riding all day. We don't have any paid employees; we do just as much as the students. I would never ask my working students to do something I won't get out and do myself."

What It Takes

As long as they are willing to work hard and have a desire to learn, working students can

lesson. It is a huge commitment for both parties and to make it fulfilling, it is best to enter into it without surprises."

Sadly there are unfair situations, where students spend long hours performing hard labor and do not receive the education that they hoped for. Beth recalls, "I had a very good working student, Hilary Thompson, who was from the Virgin Islands. She won the national Intermediate championships at Radnor one year while she was working for me, which was exciting. She didn't come from a lot of money but she worked hard and

come from all walks of life. While teenagers and 20-somethings are typical, there are also opportunities for older riders who want to learn the ropes. Even experienced professionals might head to an even more experienced professional, like eventer Sinead Halpin, a candidate for the 2012 Olympic team, who spent half a year in England as a working student for top event rider William Fox-Pitt. Not only did she get an education in riding but she learned how things are done "across the pond" and had a great cultural experience as well.

"I learned to just get on with it," she says. "Some days you just have an off day and that's it—don't over analyze it. I learned that it's more important to spend quality time on your horses warming up and cooling down than an hour polishing brass." While she said that being far from her friends and family was difficult, the hard work kept her busy and the time went by all too quickly.

Sue says, "I think that a lot of people misunderstand what the purpose of being a working student is. The biggest thing that I want in a working student is someone with a tremendous amount of desire to learn; I don't even care if they're new to the sport of dressage as long as they're motivated. I'm a giver and I don't want someone who is going through a phase and killing time for a year. I think so many working students end up as a slave and say, 'no way, I'm not going to be in the horse business.' I want them to see that while it's not always glamorous, you can enjoy the work and have fun. I've had people come for a year and say, 'That was okay but it's not what I want to do.' That's fine, but I also had a girl stay three years and

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU BECOME A WORKING STUDENT

- ▶ What are your typical working hours?
- ▶ How many lessons will you receive per week?
- ▶ Will lessons be with the professional or with an assistant?
- ▶ Will you receive a salary or spending money?
- ▶ Is housing/stabling for your horse available, and do those cost extra?
- ▶ Will you be the only person working or are there other grooms/working students?
- ▶ Will you have the opportunity to ride horses other than your own?
- ▶ Is there a schoolmaster available to ride?
- ▶ Will you be traveling to competitions?
- ▶ Do you get any time off?
- ▶ Is this a long-term or short-term position?



Dorothy Crowell and Radio Flyer at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event in 2008.
Photo © Amber Heintzberger

go on to be the assistant trainer at a dressage barn. She had plans to go on to law school but realized working here that she could go in the horse business."

Dorothy says that her only prerequisite for a working student is that they have an open, friendly, motivated mind. "The purpose of our working student program is to improve your horsemanship in the saddle and on the ground. Equine addiction is mandatory!" She stresses, "The program is not a camp. My job is to provide an intensive equestrian education, not a fun time. Spoiled, grumpy people need not apply. As much as possible, I try to keep both the horses and riders content with their progression."

Beth says that she likes a working student who is eager to learn and really tries to fit into her world, so that she doesn't have to accommodate them too much. "The biggest reward is when you see someone get really engaged with your program and profit from it," she says. "It's been very rewarding working with Eliza because she believed in me and what I said and it worked. It's nice to see the fruition of your system with one person: she's become a well-rounded horse person who learned how to do different things." Eliza Culbertson is Beth's ongoing working student who achieved her "A" Pony Club rating while working with Beth and has moved up the

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levels of eventing while under her tutelage.

Sue says, "Every person who's come through our program is still involved in the horse world in some way, and we are glad that they've had a positive experience. We're not rich and we never will be; but we're happy. Our working student program is 24/7. We expect them to feel like it's their farm too so they want to be responsible. We try to run it like one big family, not like I'm the boss."

Obviously there are many ways to reach the top level of equestrian sport or to work in the horse industry, and learning from someone who has "been there and done that" is an ideal way to learn the ropes. As long as you are not afraid to roll up your sleeves and get a little dirty, you can learn a lot and even have

fun in the process. There are numerous ways to work out a mutually beneficial agreement, so it is worth looking around for a working student position that fits your personality and expectations and will help you meet your goals. As Alex Robinson suggests, "Only take a working student position if you're willing to work your tail off!" 

THE INTERNET is a great resource for finding employment with horses. Many professionals list opportunities on their own websites, or there are sites dedicated to listing job opportunities such as:

www.equistaff.com

www.yardandgroom.com

www.horsejobs.ca (Canadian employers)

www.horsejobsonline.com

Also check the employment sections of the general equine websites such as chronofhorse.com, equine.com and equinenow.com.