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The Self-Guided Horse Facility Analysis: A Proactive Safety Education Tool for Equine Facilities

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



The Self-Guided Horse Facility Analysis: A Proactive Safety Education Tool for Equine Facilities

Abstract

Extension professionals who work with horse owners, barn managers, and other equine clientele often encounter resistance to new management ideas. There are several faulty theories that horse people often rely on with respect to safety in equine facilities. Exposing these flaws facilitates convincing horse owners to adopt safer standard operating procedures. *The Self-Guided Horse Facility Analysis* is a checklist-driven booklet designed to help clientele recognize the potential hazards in their facilities and to make a proactive change before an accident occurs.

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Introduction

There are inherent dangers associated with equine activities, as documented by the fact that 44 states have equine limited liability statutes. These statutes protect horse people from frivolous lawsuits if there is no negligence involved. However, many equine professionals and amateurs put themselves and/or their clientele at unnecessary risk in their barns and facilities while working with horses. This article examines some causative factors for accidents and potential solutions for helping horse people to become more safety conscious.

Faulty Assumptions

Accidents happen when people make false assumptions about the risks involved in working with and around horses. Often these false assumptions are inherited by each incoming group of new horseback riders and instructors. Six major assumptions that prevent people from taking adequate and necessary safety precautions in their everyday riding program include the following.

1. My facilities are very safe.
2. Others that are not careful have accidents . . . not me.
3. My school horses are "bomb-proof" and very dependable.
4. I will be able to react quick enough to prevent an accident in the arena.
5. My horses will take care of the beginner riders.
6. Falling off is a necessary part of learning to ride.

Professionals allow themselves to believe these myths because these assumptions appear to hold

true in most equine facilities, most of the time.

Often, equine professionals get accustomed to working within or around the shortcomings of their facilities and do not realize that these inherent dangers are not obvious to inexperienced people. For example, a beginner might not realize that horses may spook at equipment in the barn aisle or that a specific horse does not stand in the cross ties.

Professionals often allow themselves to believe that their program is safe since they have never had a serious accident. Sometimes, if they have not experienced an accident, they cannot conceive either the possibility or the potential devastation associated with a serious injury or death.

In the arena, good lesson horses will often adapt to the riding skills of their riders and are tolerant of incorrect or rough aids from beginners. Horses attain the title of a "school horse" through being predictable and dependable most of the time, supporting the apparent plausibility that school horses will never hurt or will even protect the rider.

"Old school" instructors may gauge the rider's level of experience by the number of times the rider has fallen off, even stating that the falls will increase the "toughness" of the rider, rather than acknowledge the unsafe situation that may have caused the fall.

Finally, some instructors believe that keeping their clientele ignorant of the dangers involved will protect them from lawsuits.

The Truth Behind the Myths

In reality, dangers do exist in the riding programs of even the most competent professionals. Many safety-conscious people have been in or exposed to a serious accident in the sport and focus on safety because of that experience. Based on the results of barns evaluated using the Self-Guided Barn Safety Analysis booklet, most equine facilities have areas that are unsafe, regardless of the care taken in designing for safety. Extension professionals have the opportunity to intervene prior to an avoidable injury.

Problems can vary from the actual structure or set up of the barn/arena, to the behavior and/or habits of the participants. For example, dependable school horses do exactly what they are expected to do most of the time, but in the case of an unexpected perceived danger, noise, or distraction, the natural instincts (fight or flight) of the horse will override the training.

Unfortunately, some equine professionals will rely on the "ignorance is bliss" theory and fail to warn clientele of inherent dangers associated with their facilities or horses. Any professional is expected to provide a safe environment and adequate warning of the risks involved working with and around horses. If the professional had previous knowledge of safety issues and chose not to address them, it would be classified as negligence by the court. There is enough documentation in the courts where the stable or instructor has been found to be negligent at some level and therefore responsible for an injury or death, to show that avoidance won't work.

An Ounce of Prevention

The Self-Guided Horse Facility Analysis is designed to help stable owners or users evaluate the risks at facilities and prevent accidents involving themselves, clientele, visitors, and horses at their barn. This easy-to-use booklet provides a proactive, educational tool that will alert barn owners and users to dangerous environments or procedures. Using checklists and supporting information to identify problems, it enables users to improve the safety of their facility through either structural or procedural changes. By helping people identify high-risk areas and the potential liability that exists, this tool may decrease the exposure of equine enthusiasts to accident or injury through education.

Ideally, this tool will be used to educate incoming amateurs, professionals, and youth involved with horses. It has been endorsed by the American Medical Equestrian Association/Safe Riders Foundation, and the United States Eventing Association has used it in their national Instructor Certification Program. The booklet is available through UVM Extension by contacting the first author.

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