

## SERIES FEATURE

# THE BACKBONE OF YOUR LESSON PROGRAM ... HORSES & STAFF

with JULIE DANIEL

Building a thriving lesson program requires more than a love for teaching—it demands the right resources, and at the heart of that are your horses and staff. A carefully selected team of horses and a reliable, knowledgeable staff can elevate your program to new heights. This column guides you through selecting your school horses, growing your herd, and assembling a team of instructors to ensure your program operates smoothly and safely.

## STARTING SMALL: THE FIRST TWO HORSES

If you're starting your lesson program from scratch, two horses are all you need to begin. However, choosing the right two horses is crucial:

1. **The Beginner Horse:** This horse will be the cornerstone of your program. It should be calm, reliable, and well-educated in all basic commands. Safety is paramount, as this horse will work with brand-new riders learning foundational skills.

At our program, every beginner starts on a lunge line. From the very first lesson, we teach students how to get on and off properly, how to balance without reins, and how to ride confidently before progressing to riding independently in the arena. A horse that understands and tolerates these practices is invaluable.

2. **The Next-Level Horse:** The second horse should have all the qualities of the beginner horse but with the ability to challenge intermediate riders. This horse will help your students develop higher-level skills, such as riding patterns, refining aids, and progressing toward more advanced techniques.

With these two horses, you can effectively serve a range of students and build a solid foundation for your program.

## GROWING YOUR HERD

As your program expands, so will your need for more horses. Additional horses allow you to:

- Increase the number of lessons you can give
- Offer group lessons, which significantly boost revenue
- Build a sense of community among your riders

When adding to your herd, consider horses that complement your program's needs. For example, if you teach many unmounted lessons (an excellent way to diversify your program), a horse that isn't suitable for riding but excels in groundwork can still be a valuable asset.

## WHERE TO FIND THE BEST LESSON HORSES

Finding the right horses takes patience, research, and networking. Some of the best sources include:

- **Retired Show Horses:** These horses often have a wealth of training and, while they may not thrive in the show ring anymore, they can make incredible school horses. Many find a second career teaching riders, and their experience often makes them more forgiving and adaptable.
- **Rescue Horses:** Occasionally, a rescue horse can surprise you by thriving in a lesson program. These cases require careful evaluation, as not all rescue horses are suited for teaching.
- **Word of Mouth:** Ask around! Many great lesson horses are never officially advertised. Networking with trainers, other instructors, and horse owners can lead to hidden gems.
- **Trials and Training:** Once you find a potential candidate, take them on trial if possible. Spend time assessing their temperament, skills, and suitability for your program. Some horses may need additional training to adjust to the demands of being a school horse.

It's also important to recognize when a horse isn't a good fit. Not every horse is cut out for the role of a school horse, and that's okay. Doing your homework will save you time, money, and potential safety issues in the long run.

## BUILDING YOUR STAFF TEAM

Your horses are only one half of the equation; the other is your staff. As you grow, having the right people by your side will make all the difference.

- **Instructors:** Look for people who share your teaching philosophy and are committed to safety and education. Whether they're experienced instructors or enthusiastic beginners, invest in training to ensure they align with your program's standards.
- **Barn Staff:** Reliable barn staff is essential to keep your operation running smoothly. From feeding and mucking to assisting during lessons, a dependable team allows you to focus on teaching and growing your program.
- **Supportive Community:** Don't underestimate the power of creating a positive atmosphere. Parents, volunteers, and students can become some of your greatest advocates, helping to spread the word about your program.

## A FINAL THOUGHT

Your horses and staff are the heart of your lesson program. By starting with the right two horses and growing strategically, you can build a program that serves riders of all levels while ensuring safety and success. Investing in your team—both equine and human—will create a sustainable, thriving lesson program that benefits your students and your business alike.

Do your research, trust your instincts, and never stop refining your approach. The time and effort you put into your horses and staff will pay off in a program you can be proud of.



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