

Benefits and Disadvantages of a Barn for Horses

Our topics for this week are:

- **Advantages of pasture turn-outs**
- **Advantages of barns and stalls**
- **A reasonable combination of pasture time and stall confinement**

Some horse owners keep their horses out on pasture at all times. Other owners keep their horses in 12 by 12 foot stalls most of the time, allowing a couple of hours for turnout per day. So, which is the best?

Evolutionary Preparation

Our domestic horses evolved from an animal that lived in forests 50 million years ago. They and their descendants were constantly exposed to environmental elements and predators nearly all 50 million years until domestication by humans about 6,000 years ago. Evidence of the first phase of domestication has been found in Kazakhstan where they were raised initially for food. Horses were the most abundant game in the more arid regions of the Eurasian Steppes.

Domestication of horses for work, brought with it the obligation of human owners to provide the 5 freedoms, or needs, of domesticated animals, which are a suitable diet, environment, ability to exhibit normal behavior, companionship with other animals, preferably horses, and freedom from pain, suffering, injury, and disease.

History of Indoor Stables

Large indoor stables for horses began in Ancient Egypt at Pi-Ramesses around 3000 years ago, built by Ramesses II, featuring sloped floors for drainage and stalls for hundreds of warhorses. Ruins of stables in the Negev Desert of Israel show use of purpose-built indoor structures for Arabian horse breeding dating back to around 100 AD. In Medieval Europe, stables with paved floors and drains were used as housing and preparation for combat beginning around the 13th Century. With the Renaissance stables became elaborate architectural statements denoting wealth and status with less emphasis on purpose and function.

Pasture Turn-outs

Horses have not lost their coping abilities gained in their 50 million year beginnings. They can survive relatively well without shelter in certain environments, but not all. At times, in some environments, 3-sided shelters, barns, and stables are not a luxury but an essential to survive.

When their health and the weather permits, most of horses' time should be spent outdoors, with the companionship of other horses, room to run, and grass to forage. During their evolution, horses never lost the need to socialize with other horses, to feel the security of other horses being present, to leisurely walk about 10 miles while grazing 12 to 17 hours per day. Frequent movement is required for normal blood circulation in a horse's legs. Muscle, tendon, ligament, hoof, and bone health requires frequent movement and occasional bursts of extra effort. Grass grazing and pasture exercise is beneficial to a horse's gut motility and digestion resulting in lower risks for colic.

A horse's mental and physical health is adversely affected by isolation from other horses and the inability to exercise. All barns are inherently dusty places. Outdoor air and eating in down head position is always better for horse respiratory systems than barns and elevated feed bunks. All of these daily outdoor experiences beneficially affects a horse's ability to be handled by humans and to perform desired tasks with normal to low risk of injury.

Freedom to graze grass with other horses is a great stress reliever in horses. Another stress reliever is mutual grooming, such as standing nose-to-tail with a herd buddy, nibbling each other's withers, and swishing flies away from each other's face.

Stables

Now you may be asking yourself, do horses ever need confinement for anything other than avoiding lightning strike, hail storms, extreme cold, or extreme heat and sun exposure? The answer is yes!

The use of stables during certain parts of the day, such as dawn and dusk, can enable handlers to better control biting insects, such as horseflies, stable flies, midges, and mosquitos. Daily feeding of grain in stalls for 15 to 30 minutes can permit better monitoring for illness or injury. It also permits the ability to provide for individual dietary needs or the administration of medications.

Persistently wet periods from rain are common in springtime. This fosters a higher risk for thrush and scratches due to horses standing in wet environments. Stall time can allow intermittent dry-out times for their hoofs, heels, and pasterns. Movement is crucial. Slow-walking or turnouts in small, safe dry paddocks should be provided.

If stall time needs to be prolonged due to health problems, a quiet, safe place to rest and sleep, away from pasture dynamics should be provided. During this time, they should be given the opportunity to see, touch, and smell a companion horse. Slow feeders (hay nets) should be used to mimic natural, constant grazing. Excessive stall time leads to boredom-induced stereotypic behaviors such as weaving, pawing, and cribbing.

Reasonable Combinations

Domesticated horses require both outdoor time and occasional stall time for optimal health and safety. The goal is to balance the benefits of stabling with the natural need for movement, fresh air, forage, and companionship, among other mental enrichments that pasture containment can provide.

Good combinations are providing some walk-in shelter whenever out on pasture. Bringing horses in for grain twice per day to also allow a short inspection for signs of illness or injury. Horses in groups on pasture should have their shoes should be removed to reduce risk of kick injuries to other horses and the loss of nails in the pasture that could lead to puncture wounds and tetanus. Pastured horse should also not wear halters, or their halters should be the break-away type.

Pastured horses should be brought inside during inclement weather such as hail storms, risk of lightning strike, deep snow which could exhaust some horses, and excessive heat. They also should be sheltered in stalls during unusual disruptions such as nearby fireworks, biting fly harassment, or for medical treatments or physical therapy.

If a horse must be kept in a stall for several days, or more, it should be kept next to another horse in an adjacent stall that it can see and hear. Hay should be provided in a net or other slow-feeder to aid digestion. Excessive dust should be controlled by low-dust bedding and higher quality hay. As much exercise as feasible and appropriate should be provided, such as slow walking for the disabled and individual runs or turnout pens.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Healthy horses should spend most of their time pasture grazing with compatible horse companions.**
- 2. Barns and stalls are important means of protecting horses from adverse weather and tending to health or injury problems.**
- 3. Ideal care of horses requires pasture grazing with companions and the availability of shelter, preferably a barn with stables for use when needed.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.