

# HORSE CENTS

*The business of horses generates \$579.1 million a year in Ontario, with \$5.9 billion in fixed assets*

BY PHIL WRIGHT

Many believe being an equestrian is a sport where only the well-heeled can compete at the highest level, given the steep capital costs. Yet, many within the horning industry contend it is becoming more accessible to the common horse enthusiast – whether a weekend trail rider or the experienced competitor looking for the slightest edge on the competition.

Exchange interviewed the owners of several area equestrian businesses and found that horning is popular across the demographic spectrum. As well, the number of horse farms is on the increase and participation is seemingly at or near an all-time high. This participation spike is spearheaded by baby boomers who have one eye on rediscovering their own youth and the other focused on the happiness of the younger generations.

However, there remain a number of challenges. Acknowledging, confronting and defeating such challenges are essential to the continued health of the industry, although statistics provide ample evidence of the size and vitality of this long established activity.

At JL Equestrian Centre, west of Trussler on Huron Road in Petersburg, “Business is booming, but it always has been,” claims Leslie Brooks, who co-owns the 10-acre stable alongside her husband, Jim Waechter. The 21-horse facility opened three years ago. “We were full in four months,” recalls Brooks, who had years of riding experience prior to opening her own stable. Riding lessons, taught year-round at JL for riders of all levels and ages, are the stable’s bread and butter.

Explains Brooks, “We have 80 students a week, from beginner to advanced, from age seven to sixty.” The stable boasts a large, bright indoor arena, large sand ring and paddocks and 21 large-matted box stalls, and hosts a summer camp which includes daily riding and instruction in horse safety and care. As a means of diversification, the stable boards and sells horses. Recently, the stable had a number of six and seven-year-old horses for sale, ranging in price from \$5,500 to \$7,000.

Given the popularity of horning, says Brooks. “The better stables have waiting lists [for lessons] because over the past 15 or 20 years more and more people are getting involved.”

Although Ontario Equestrian Federation statistics indicate the shift in horning clientele is towards adults, Brooks says that is not the case at her stable. “That’s not our demographic here. Most here are under age 16,” says Brooks, adding that over 90% of her students are female. Brooks nevertheless recognizes the industry-wide significance of the baby boomer trend. “Boomers are getting more involved and couldn’t afford it before. Everyone wants to get more fit and many boomers are paying for their children and grandchildren... A lot of them didn’t ride as children, but want the younger generations to ride.”

Owning a stable has its challenges. “There’s a lot of work involved,” says Brooks. “It’s a 24-hour a day job. It’s a huge job.” Some enter the business with the misconception that boarding horses is virtually a license to print money, but many fail to take into account their

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PHOTOS: DIANE JOHNSON









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own time in caring for the horses. Given the fact that JL has just one coach on staff, with Leslie also teaching beginners, time management is a large challenge. Unexpected complications with horse care are often time consuming and throw off schedules at a moment's notice. It's a labour of love for Brooks: "It's a lifestyle. We're not here to make money. We give a lot to the children. Making the children smile is rewarding," says Brooks.

#### Provincial challenge

One significant challenge was the province's controversial initiative of 2004 to reassess equestrian facilities as commercial properties. This would have seen property tax rates increase exponentially for horsing establishments and caused the closure of some facilities. Given her experience in computer systems and project management and her husband's accounting expertise, Brooks felt the two could effectively combat the province's proposed initiative. As Brooks would find out, what was needed was an organized movement rather than a number of smaller grassroots initiatives. "People tried fighting it individually," recalls Brooks. That didn't work, so the husband and wife team volunteered to co-chair a committee on property tax issues for riding establishments. In addition to meeting with a cross-section of groups including politicians, agricultural groups and members of the Municipality Property Assessment Corporation, Jim and Leslie initiated a letter-writing campaign to raise awareness of the dire consequences of the reassessment.

Though they had the business acumen, Brooks was unprepared for the lengthy process. "We put in 1,000 hours. We had no idea what property assessment was about,"



Leslie Brooks of JL Equestrian Centre

she remembers. As a result of their dogged determination the commercial tax initiative for equestrian facilities was eliminated in early 2005 and a series of compromises reached. Brooks and Waechter were voted volunteers of the year by the OEF.

Despite its reputation as an exclusive domain for the wealthy sporting class, horsing is inexpensive for most. But that affordability is dependent upon the extent of participation, says Brooks. "It can be still at the higher end, in terms of cost. It depends on the level of involvement. A group lesson can cost an individual participant between \$30 and \$35 for quality instruction. However, competing at the 'A' level is an entirely different story. At the highest level of competition, costs can be excessive for any budget with the capital cost of a quality

horse, its upkeep, equipment and the costs associated with traveling to competitions across the province or, if successful enough, the prestigious Royal Winter Fair in Toronto.

At the other extreme a one-hour trail ride, using a stable's horse and trail network in addition to instruction, can cost less than \$50.

#### Diversification

Twisted Pine Farm is in picturesque Ayr. Head coach Dana Belfour, who owns the thriving stable along with her ex-husband, is proud of the diversity of her 21-horse stable. "We have to be a bit diversified," explains Belfour about the need to offer a range of services in order to withstand the ups and downs experienced by any business. Aside from offering recreational riding lessons, the 150-acre farm offers lessons for competitive riders, as well as jumping, eventing and vaulting in addition to summer camps. The stable also develops horses for competition and eventual sale.

With a successful coaching career spanning over 20 years, Belfour focuses on the competitive riders, but realizes many riders don't have similar ambitions or talents. "Many don't have competitive aspirations. They just want to learn."

Student enrollment at Twisted Pine has flourished in the past few years. "We have tripled our business in three years," claims Belfour. Numbers range from 60 to 70 students in the recreational program and between 15 and 20 in the competitive program, says Belfour, who has coached a number of riders on the provincial team in eventing. Twisted Pine also offers summer camps, which are constantly busy, says Belfour.

Demographically, Twisted Pine's students are predominantly under the age of 21, but "We're seeing a steady increase in adults,"



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says Belfour, who was instrumental in spearheading the Young Rider program for competitive riders. "A fair number have ridden and some haven't. The adult population is increasing across all disciplines."

The aging trend is obviously beneficial to the equestrian business given the significant numbers of baby boomers. "Many Olympic riders compete in their 50s and 60s," says Belfour. "It's not just a young person's sport."

Twisted Pine has been in business for six years. The property was purchased in 2000 and everything was built from scratch. Previously, Belfour rented a property in St. Agatha.

Belfour's own competitive experiences are international, in the UK and the US. For a number of years she developed and ran Express Air Canada Cargo Equine Services which imported European sports horses and has bred both thoroughbred race horses and Canadian sports horses.

One of the main challenges confronting the horse industry locally, says Belfour, is a lack of education. "The Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge area is not a 'horsey' area." Areas east of Milton have a greater concentration of people with horses. Newer horsing businesses tend to concentrate on boarding without fully understanding the business. "First time horse-owners don't understand the ramifications of horse care. Horses are delicate in terms of treatment and are emotional." A horse that is well taken care of is more likely to create a better experience for riders. "A horse has to be happy to give its best performance," says Belfour. "Owners are more educated further east of this area. There's a high percentage locally of people with little experience."

Given the number of stables that board horses, those looking for boarding have the luxury of shopping around. Those boarders without the experience or business acumen eventually learn – often the hard way – that the business is not as simple as it may appear. "After two or three years they tend to hit the wall," explains Belfour. "They didn't do their homework and didn't take into account their own time and other important factors." Such circumstances would be minimized if there were more open communication between stable owners – a further challenge described by Belfour. "They [stable owners] tend not to communicate with one another." This lack of communication, she adds, is more evident in the competitive realm.

Belfour agrees horsing is accessible for most budgets depending on the degree of involvement. The recreational rider, who commonly does not own the horse the student rides, can expect a relatively minimal fee for quality instruction. "They can pay



Dana Belfour of Twisted Pine Farm and Jean Rablat, trainer

between \$35 and \$40," explains Belfour. However, "To keep a horse and have it professionally schooled with lessons and competitions can be costly... A competitive horse can cost \$500,000 if you're lucky," says Belfour. "Such a horse could be ready to go to the Olympics as a typically 11-year-old

show jumper. A Young Riders horse can cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000. A show jumper, as well as a dressage horse could cost over \$100,000."

#### Trail Riding

Located between Waterloo and Conestogo, Horseback Adventures offers trail riding, summer day camps, sleigh/wagon rides, private riding lessons in either English or Western disciplines, as well as group activities. Operating 362 days a year, company co-owner Tatyanna Van Lenthe says her farm is the only major trail riding facility in the area outside of Belwood Lake.

Offering packages ranging from one-hour rides to four-hour hikes to St. Jacob's, trail riding is the company's main activity, utilizing a trail network crossing the Conestogo River. "Our trail riders are age 11 and up," says Van Lenthe, adding that baby boomers are getting more involved in trail riding.

Van Lenthe, who has co-owned the facility for two years, says business is brisk at their Northfield Drive operation. The summer camp, which features daily riding and instruction based on the student's personal ability level, is growing in popularity. The stable can host 20 campers per week for the nine-week summer period. Much of the

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business from the camp is largely repeat business. There is a waiting list for lessons, says Van Lenthe, adding her motivation for getting into the business is more altruistic than financial: "We do it because it's fun."

Van Lenthe's motivation is apparent as she proudly relates a recent story of an older rider Van Lenthe helped to overcome her fears of riding by finding the right horse for the timid first-time rider. "The Norwegian Fjord is not a common breed. It's extremely stocky and can easily carry a 200-pound person. It's not glamorous looking, but cuddly. It's very friendly and affectionate

— great for a first-time experience."

Since Horseback Adventures is mainly a trail riding enterprise, the main challenge with such a business, says Van Lenthe, is insurance. "Insurance is the reason why some businesses have closed down," explains Van Lenthe. Van Lenthe believes stables with trail riding as their main activity are presumed to be high risk regardless of the precautions taken by the stable owners.

The emphasis at Horseback Adventures, according to Van Lenthe, is the enjoyment of the outdoors and the rapport with the horses. Unlike competitive riding, the



Tatyanna Van Lenthe (left) of Horseback Adventures with her son Tyson and husband Terry.

expense of trail riding is minimal; the horses are owned by the stable. "We would like to portray horse riding as more accessible," says Van Lenthe. "People come here to have fun," explains Van Lenthe. "Other stables are more focused on achievement."

### Growth trend

The latest figures from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs show increasing numbers of horses and facilities in the province, at a growth rate of 11% over 10 years. A study by Dr. Bob Wright, lead veterinarian, equine and alternate species, for OMAFRA concluded the estimated annual economic impact of the horse industry for the province of Ontario is \$579.1 million. Total investment in fixed assets is estimated at \$5.9 billion for the entire province. Waterloo Region has an estimated 2,769 horse facilities and Wellington Region is slightly higher with 2,990. The two regions' estimated investment in fixed assets was \$274.1 million and \$333.8 million respectively.

As summed up by Melissa Monardo, marketing coordinator for the OEF, the horse industry is a "disjointed industry." There are numerous disciplines, from the fancy footwork of dressage to the beauty of jumping, as well as numerous levels of participation, from competitive to casual. Obtaining definitive statistics for participation and investment is problematic.

Yet, local stables are thriving. Part of this growth is due to baby boomers who want to remain active. They also want to instill an active lifestyle on their children and grandchildren. And in a computer-dominated, high-tech obsessed society, that is a valuable legacy to pass on. X

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