

# Home Sweet Barn

Whether you're building or renovating, take some advice from those who have been there and done that

BY MEGAN BRINCKS



*EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: Barns like this one in Wellington, FL, are beautiful, but this horse cares more about the fact that he has a well-ventilated room with a view*



**H**orse people love to think big, especially when it comes to their dream barn. But sometimes the polish on the brass gets in the way of the practical.

Above all else, your facility needs to be a safe, healthful environment for horses and humans alike. Beyond that, what's perfect for someone else might not work for you and your equestrian needs. In this article, we'll hear real-life barn-building stories and cautionary tales from a design expert as well as a dressage pro.

## The Big Picture

The idea of constructing a barn from scratch may seem daunting. Start with the basic, large concepts before worrying about the details. Someone who specializes in designing and building custom equine facilities might be able to help you with this process.

"It is important for the client to prioritize and compromise in light of their needs," says Gretchen Yahn, who owns and operates Castlerock Enterprises Inc., Hume, VA, a design firm that specializes in equestrian properties. "The best way to achieve your dream barn is to understand your financial constraints in light of your priorities. Some items may cost more up front but will provide a long-lasting benefit and less money in the larger or longer view. A barn should work easily for each client's needs and should be easy to maintain and clean."

Start by thinking about how many stalls you want, how much storage you'll need, and where you will ride. It might seem obvious, but don't build a 20-stall barn if you never want to manage more than five horses, and don't plan for a small riding area if you really need a full-sized dressage arena.

## Case Study

Yahn begins consultations with new clients by discussing these and other general ideas, such as: Does the client need office space? How big should the stalls be? Are kitchen or laundry facilities required?

When dressage professional Lauren Sprieser decided to make some improvements to her Marshall, VA, home base, Sprieser Sporthorse at Clearwater Farm, her goal was to make the facility more functional. In addition to rethinking the tack storage and living quarters, she also wanted better ventilation, drainage, and turnout.

"I decided to expand my barn," Sprieser says. "I needed more stalls, more storage, and more human housing, and I figured that while I was at that, I'd tweak some of the things that were in the existing barn that I didn't like." ➔

ARNOLD



GROOMING BAY: Designated area frees up aisle space and promotes safety. This spacious area features a heat lamp as well as storage lockers.

When Sprieser first took over the property, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, feed was kept in one stall, hay in another, and shavings were outside under a tarp.

“The long and short of it is that nothing was really where I wanted it to be,” she says.

Sprieser has since created a feed room as well as dedicated bedding and tool storage in the main barn. To minimize fire hazards, she keeps the hay in a separate building, which also eases the delivery process.

High on Sprieser’s wish list was better ventilation, something Yahn said is often overlooked in the planning process. Sprieser added fans high above the stalls and upgraded the stall windows, which together provided for better ventilation and more natural light in the barn’s interior.

Barns in warmer climates should have plenty of cross-circulation, and barns further north should be cozy enough to withstand harsh winters. A contractor or barn architect can help you to find a design that will work well with your property and the climate in your region.

## Storage Wars

As her business expanded and additional horses took up residence, Sprieser needed more-efficient storage space for tack, feed, bedding, and hay. Although a smaller barn might make do with rooms doing double duty and an extra stall designated for hay and bedding, a larger operation needs more space and dedicated areas to keep an open flow of traffic for both horses and humans.

“A dedicated grain room and dedicated bedding and tool storage in the main barn [were important],” Sprieser says. She also made a point to add a second wash stall as well as grooming bays “so I don’t have horses in the aisle. One of those grooming bays has a big door that my veterinarian and farrier can pull right up to.”

If your barn houses only one or two horses, cross-tying in the aisle might be an easier solution than building grooming bays. But for higher-traffic stables, grooming bays may be safer and result in less shuffling to allow horses, people, and equipment to pass by.

Yahn says she makes sure her clients think about storage—for everything from feed to tractors—as part of the planning process.

“We often analyze how the feed is prepared at each barn for ease of storage and use, and how the supplements are stored and utilized to arrive at the best feed-area design,” she explains. “We also look at amounts of tack and use, and ensure we have

### Digital Edition Bonus Content



Lauren Sprieser gives “*before*” and “*after*” video tours of the improvements at her home base, Clearwater Farm in Marshall, VA.

areas for laundry and blanket drying and storage.”

Yahn’s barn designs always include areas for the storage of small tools and the motorized equipment used for daily mucking. She finds out the location of the manure-disposal area and positions the storage areas to streamline the process. The attention to detail results not only in work efficiency but also in reduced wear and tear on equipment, fewer repairs, and lower fuel costs.

## Seasonal Considerations

According to Yahn, some of the most-overlooked aspects of barn design relate to planners’ failure to consider the range of temperatures and weather conditions from season to season.

Watering and fly-spray systems should not freeze in the winter. Adequate insulation will help prevent pipes from bursting in frigid temperatures.

If your area regularly gets snow, driveways and paths need to be easy to clear, and you’ll need someplace to put all that snow—along the sides of the driveway, if there’s room, or perhaps in an extra paddock or unused patch of grass.

In autumn, winter, and early spring, keeping horses clean can be a nightmare without heated water in wash stalls. Especially for riders who want to compete during the cooler months, heated water can make the difference between thinking about and actually attending that dressage show.

Gretchen Rademacher, of Sedro Woolley, WA, says that hot water is important to her when she looks at prospective boarding facilities.

“Hot water in the sink is great, but hot water at the wash rack is so nice,” says Rademacher, who also appreciates well-kept bathrooms—no portable facilities!—in the barn.

## New Book Offers Horse-Friendly Design Ideas

Gardeners and homeowners pore over coffee-table design books for inspiration (and a little envy). In that vein, a new book offers prospective equine-facility builders and renovators a similar experience.

In *Healthy Stables by Design* (Images Publishing Group, 2013), architect John Blackburn shares philosophies, photos, and principles from his 35-year career in design. The president and senior principal at Blackburn Architects PC in Washington, DC, Blackburn has designed equine facilities in all corners of the US.

“Credited with raising the bar on barn design through strategic use of elements such as



REMEMBER THIS? Will snow, ice, mud, or extreme heat make barn chores a nightmare? Plan traffic patterns and surfaces accordingly to minimize inconvenience.

## Arenas, Pastures, and Paddocks

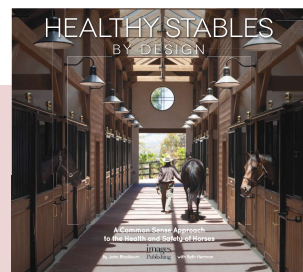
Where will you ride? Where will the turnout be situated? These considerations are just as important as the barn itself.

In planning her new indoor arena, Sprieser wanted windows that allow natural light and a cross-breeze during warmer months. What she didn’t include in her plan—and wishes she had—are extra-large ceiling fans for days when there isn’t enough air movement and the space gets stuffy.

The number and size of turnout areas are an often-overlooked element in facility planning, says Yahn.

Sprieser, for one, wanted lots of individual paddocks.

“I love turnout, and I have almost enough paddocks to have two per stall, which means I can rest them when the horses have beaten up on the grass,” she says. ➔



aerodynamic principles and passive solar heating and cooling, our goal is to ensure the health and safety of horses through design,” Blackburn writes in the introduction. The design studies in *Healthy Stables by Design* illustrate how Blackburn works with a facility’s geographic region, architectural traditions, and intended use to create safe, usable, environmentally friendly spaces for horses and their caretakers. (And yes, the photos are dream-barn-drool-worthy.)

—Jennifer O. Bryant



**AISLE SURFACE:** Pavers make for secure footing at Adventure Farms in Murrieta, CA, home to FEI-level competitors Kathleen Raine (right) and her husband, David Wightman. The clean, airy barn design is a good fit for the southern-California climate.

Having ample pasture space has many benefits: savings on hay costs and a chance for horses to move and interact as nature intended, for starters. Individual paddocks allow antisocial equines a place to roam, and smaller turnout spaces may be beneficial for rehabilitating or excitable horses. Enough pastures to permit rotating and resting of areas is of huge benefit for forage regeneration and preservation of the footing.

“It also helps to have clean gravel paths to all paddock and arena spaces so that the paths do not become mud paths,” Yahn adds.

The subject of fencing could be an article unto itself. In brief, consider both material and layout in comparison to cost. Double fencing, in which there is a single fence surrounded by a second fence several yards away, offers extra protection against horses getting loose (and prevents contact between neighboring horses), but it’s not always the most cost-effective. In retrospect, Sprieser says, she probably did too much of it during an early round of renovations, and she scaled back during the final phase of the project. Discussions with a contractor can help you decide

## Quick Tips

**W**hen looking into building or renovating a barn, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- **What’s the budget?** Get the best you can for what you are willing to spend, and splurge on the things that are really important to you. Conversely, don’t spend money on square footage or features you will never use.
- **Where’s the parking area?** Plan sufficient space for cars, trucks, and trailers to enter, exit, and park safely and conveniently. Keep in mind that bigger rigs are not as maneuverable.
- **How will you use the facility?** If you love hacking out, plan some outdoor space to ride. If you plan to host clinics or shows, include adequate warm-up space, room to park trailers, and a comfortable viewing area in your plans.
- **Where will vets and farriers work?** Provide for a well-lighted area that’s out of the elements.
- **Who’s the intended user?** A tack room with high shelves may be perfect for adults, but children might need a row of lower bridle hooks and saddle racks.
- **What if...?** Plan for contingencies. If a horse gets hurt and needs to be on stall rest, or if you end up housing a mare in foal, is there a stall that can be converted into a larger space? Do you have a very small turnout space, such as an in-and-out, for a rehabbing horse?
- **Where’s the power?** Include plenty of conveniently placed electrical outlets, such as for stall fans and clippers and for veterinarians and farriers to plug in equipment. Consider installing a generator. If a tree knocks down a power line you’ll be helpless without one, especially if your water supply requires electricity.



**FUNCTIONAL:** A comfortable, horse-friendly barn doesn't have to be fancy. These ponies enjoy in-and-outs with durable footing that open into a larger paddock.

what type of fencing will work best for you and what kind of upkeep you can expect.

## Under Foot

Different areas of a dressage facility require different footing, and we're not just talking about arenas. Choosing the right surface can mean easier maintenance, enhanced safety, and fewer needed renovations.

"In commercial-type barns, we look at the ease of maintenance and longevity as high priorities," Yahn says. "It is important to have easily mucked stalls with an eye to manure management coupled with ease of cleanliness."

As an example, Yahn says, some commercial operators like to install a stall-mat system, such as Stable Comfort. Mats may offer a level and moisture-proof surface; some feature cushioning, as well.

"It allows the user to bed with less material, such as expandable pine pellets, which also absorbs urine and is easily compostable," Yahn explains.

Spriser installed higher-quality stall mats as part of her renovation. "I use less bedding, which is more economical for me, less dusty for my critters, less labor for my people, and less waste to break down. We compost our own manure, and bedding is the slowest thing to break down," she says.

Footing doesn't refer only to stall floors and arena surfaces. Don't forget to consider the surfaces of wash racks—plain concrete can be extremely slippery and dangerous—and of aisles and any ramps.

Although installing all-weather footing in an arena might seem like a big investment, it can save you time and expense down the road, especially if you plan to host clinics or lessons. In addition, consider where you might—now or in the future—add mirrors or permanent dressage letters. Mirrors in particular require a sturdy support and should be positioned at an appropriate height for visibility, cleaning, and repairs.

## A Dressage Facility That Works

Building a new barn or renovating an old one can seem a daunting task. A professional contractor can help you to avoid major pitfalls, but you probably already have a set of preferences. Give some thought to facilities you've owned or visited. Make a list of the design elements that you particularly liked as well as the ones that made life a hassle. Ask your barn buddies for their own pro and con lists.

Elegant woods and brass fittings are lovely, but more important are the features that make your facility a safe and healthful environment for horses and humans. A pleasant, comfortable space that's right for your needs is a dream barn, even without the fancy trimmings. ▲

*Megan Brincks is the associate editor for the American Paint Horse Association and contributes to various equine publications across the US.*