



GROOM ELITE has BECOME the STANDARD for TRAINING in the HORSE RACING INDUSTRY

By Denis Blake

When your car needs new brakes or you have a leaky pipe at your house, more than likely you are going to seek out a trained and certified professional to take care of it. Even if you just need a haircut, chances are the stylist you visit had to attend a training program and pass a certification test. Yet when it comes to racehorses, some worth millions of dollars and all capable of injuring or killing a jockey in a breakdown, much of the work is done by grooms with little or no training.

Many grooms are outstanding horsemen and have been working with horses their entire lives, but it can be remarkable to some people outside (and even inside) of racing to learn there are really no requirements for being a groom. Even if there were, proper training would be hard to find. At least that was the case until 2001, when The Elite Program Inc., or Groom Elite, was founded. In less than a decade, the program has made significant strides in educating and training America's stable area workers, including

grooms, hotwalkers, exercise riders and trainers.



DR. REID MCLELLAN

"I tell people all the time that the only requirement for being a groom in this county is the ability to go to a stable gate at a track, and in either English or Spanish, say that you're looking for work," said Dr. C. Reid McLellan, Ph.D., who serves as Groom Elite's executive director. "People laugh when I tell them that, but it's the truth. But

nowadays we don't have many people standing at the stable gate saying that."

Groom Elite strives not just to educate existing stable area workers, but also bring in more workers to an industry that sorely needs a bigger labor force. Since it was founded by Susan O'Hara-Bates, with help from the Texas Horsemen's Partnership, Groom Elite has grown into a national, and international, program that now boasts nearly 1,100 certified graduates from classes conducted at more than 20 tracks in 14 states, plus South Africa (see sidebar on page 26). The program has even been taught at correctional facilities in South Carolina and Virginia, and its training materials have been used in Europe, Australia, and even Trinidad and Tobago.

What started as a single class at Sam Houston Race Park is now a wide range of educational programs for grooms and other industry participants. There are three tiers of programs for grooms, plus educational classes for owners, trainers, farms, and youth.



Classes and the accompanying material are presented in both English and Spanish, and much of the program comprises hands-on training, either with live horses or a range of props and teaching aids. Among the topics covered are equine behavior, evaluating a horse's current health status, proper bandaging techniques, and recognizing issues with horse's legs and feet. The first seeds of Groom Elite were planted in Texas when Dr. Doug Householder of Texas A&M University put on a half-day educational clinic for trainers.

"Doug introduced himself on a cold call and asked what we did at (the Texas Horsemen's Partnership), and he said they (Texas A&M) have a program about equine nutrition and wanted to do a seminar about it, so I said let's do it," recalled Tommy Azopardi, the current president of The Elite Program and former president/CEO of the Texas Horsemen's Partnership.

That first seminar at Sam Houston attracted mostly trainers, but later ones included assistant trainers and grooms.

"The grooms were so attentive, like they were almost starved for information," said O'Hara-Bates, who served as president of The Elite Program until 2007 and was also on the Texas Thoroughbred HBPA Board. "It was like talking to high school girls who love horses, and you just can't tell them enough. They had a passion for horses, and I could see it in their eyes."

O'Hara-Bates saw a pressing need for a training program tailored specifically for grooms and, perhaps just as importantly, some much-needed recognition to go along with it.

"They took the classes for their own self-knowledge, but I wanted something to give them credit for and make them stand out for taking these classes," she said. "I talked to some of my grooms, and they were so eager and almost flabbergasted that we were considering doing something like that for them. The change in their self-esteem, even just talking about it, was huge."

Even though O'Hara-Bates and Azopardi saw great potential in the program, their enthusiasm was not shared by all.

"It had tremendous resistance at first," O'Hara-Bates said. "All the trainers agreed it was okay to talk to the grooms, but many of them said the grooms would have no interest in this whatsoever. They said the grooms were just there for a paycheck and I was foolish to waste my time on this."

"But the trainers quickly realized that the grooms did have an interest. The grooms already knew a lot about horses, but now they started to understand why they were doing certain things. It was like a light bulb went on."

FINDING THE FUNDS

Like most non-profit organizations, Groom Elite is constantly in search of funding, a task that is particularly tough in the current economic climate. However, the program gets the most out of its less than \$100,000 annual budget, and McLellan said the expense of bringing the program to a racetrack is a wise investment and, in fact, a bargain. To teach a group of 25-30 grooms, the cost is about \$16,000, which is generally paid by the local HBPA.

"In our industry, we have invested a lot of money in the care of racehorses, trying to figure out why horses break down," noted McLellan. "This is a fairly small investment—we are talking a total cost of about \$500 per groom—and that's being spent on someone who works every day with four different horses, so that's \$125 per horse."

"That \$125 investment could give a horse an extra race or two by keeping him healthy and sound. And then there's the collaborative benefit of these grooms helping other grooms do their job better."

While McLellan says it's not easy to prove the benefit of the program to horses on the track, it's hard to argue with the logic that it does indeed work.

"If a horse doesn't get hurt because a groom is doing a good job, you can't really measure that and prove that," he said. "We have grooms that have been doing this for 15 years, and they have no idea what's in a horse's leg that they've been rubbing for all these years. But I've had trainers say they can see a difference after the grooms go through the program. If I could keep up with every groom and every horse that they groomed and prove that those horses start more times per year, then I could use that information and prove the value, but that's just not possible."

Groom Elite receives funding from several industry organizations, including the National HBPA.

"We are very bullish on Groom Elite," said Remi Bellocq, CEO of the National HBPA. "It satisfies the need to tap into a source of much-needed labor and to train them. It's smart for the HBPA and the horsemen to be involved in this."

HELPING TRAINERS IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

The program has proven to be helpful not just to grooms, but also to their trainers.

"I was the leading trainer last year at Penn National, and there were things in there that I wasn't aware of, and I learned something in each of the classes," said Stephanie Beattie, who is also a top trainer at Charles Town



Races and attended and helped organize Penn National's first program in 2007. "I had four grooms go through it, and it's an absolutely great course.

"I see them catching things now about where a horse can't see you, like when you duck underneath because of the range of their eyesight," she added. "Even small things like that can make a big difference."



MARCOS GONZALEZ

Marcos Gonzalez, a groom and exercise rider in trainer Todd Pletcher's barn, graduated from the class at Gulfstream Park earlier this year.

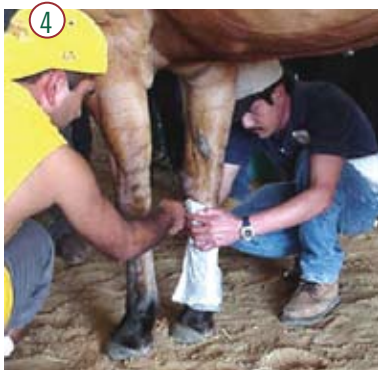
"The Groom Elite course made me a better groom because I learned a lot of new things about horses," said the 28-year-old from Argentina. "I learned about the different kind of medicines and bandages for use on the horse's legs, and now I know why, when and how I have to use it. Also, I

learned about the horse's eyes and how horses can see and how their memory works."

Gonzalez earned a near-perfect score on his exam and traveled some 60 miles each day from Palm Meadows Training Center to Gulfstream to attend the classes.

"I saw other grooms were really happy because they learned about the horse's health and how they can check it," Gonzalez added. "After the course, grooms can recognize when the horse does not have normal symptoms of temperature, heart rate or respiration rate, and they can alert it to their trainer

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- 1 A GROOM PRACTICING BANDAGING
- 2 DR. REID MCLELLAN SCORING GROOM ELITE 201 GROOMS AS THEY PRACTICE SPLINT SUPPORT BANDAGES.
- 3 GULFSTREAM PARK'S 2009 GROOM ELITE 201 GRADUATING CLASS
- 4 A GROOM PRACTICING BANDAGING

RIDING with a purpose

Susan O'Hara-Bates has truly gone the distance for stable area workers, both literally and figuratively. The accomplished horsewoman

Janice Radatz (www.equestrek.com)



founded The Elite Program Inc., better known simply as Groom Elite, in 2001 and has put in countless volunteer hours to build and grow the education training program. In 2003, she traveled to the other side of the world to bring the program to impoverished grooms in South Africa, and now she has embarked on a daunting 2,650-mile trail ride to raise money and awareness for Groom Elite.

In early May, O'Hara-Bates saddled up for a ride on the Pacific Crest Trail that she expects to last approximately five months. The trail, which starts in Mexico just south of San Diego and ends in Canada near Vancouver, passes through six of the seven North American ecozones, and O'Hara-Bates is likely to encounter everything from extreme desert heat to biting cold winds and snow, all while riding through a variety of elevation changes from just above sea level to 13,000 feet in the Sierra Mountains.

According to O'Hara-Bates, only two others—both men—have completed the entire Pacific Crest Trail on horseback (the Pacific Crest Trail Association says "a handful of people" have successfully made it, although they are not sure how many). Regardless of the number of riders who have finished the journey, there is no debating that it is a brutally grueling course.

"To actually ride this trail has been on my mind for a long time," said O'Hara-Bates. "I've ridden across the United States but never anything longer than 10 days, so when I heard about this one being contiguous from Mexico to Canada, I thought that's my trail.

"But to do it just for myself didn't feel right, so with Groom Elite desperately needing funds, it seemed like a great chance to help raise awareness about how great our Thoroughbreds are for things other than racing, and hopefully some people would like to see some blisters on my derriere and will put some money in to support this."

O'Hara-Bates will spend most of the trip aboard Four N Port, a Texas-bred son of Porto Varas who she bred at Woodswitch Farm, which she recently sold. The 10-year-old gelding didn't have much of a racing career—he finished off the board in three starts—but he has proven to be valuable nonetheless.

"He turned out to be a great trail horse," O'Hara-Bates said. "We've been all over together—Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, the East Coast and West Coast."

O'Hara-Bates will carry a GPS unit throughout the ride, and the Groom Elite website, www.groomelite.com, will allow visitors to track her progress. Donations can be made by sponsoring O'Hara-Bates on a per-mile basis or with a one-time contribution. At various stops on the trail when she can get Internet access, she will post online updates and answer questions that are submitted by site visitors.

before the horse goes to the track. They can help their trainer to prevent an injury on the horse, and that is very important.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As the years have gone by, Groom Elite has expanded to become an educational resource for all facets of the stable area, not just grooms. Recently, the program has taken steps to help the entire industry by making the H-3 training visa a viable option for bringing in new stable area workers. The visa program would allow grooms to come to the U.S. from other countries for a two-year training program, during which they could also be paid by a trainer. Although the launch of the program has been slowed by the government approval process, both at the state and national levels, it still has the potential to help the industry find more labor, with the hope that those trained grooms will then go back to their home countries and spread the education there.


“We’ve been working hard on the H-3 training visa program,” said Bellocq. “We are still trying to work through getting it implemented on a national basis, but it never would have gotten this far without Groom Elite.”

The most recent development for Groom Elite is a potential merger with the Backside Learning Center at Churchill Downs, a program formerly known as the Klein Family Learning Center that is under the umbrella of the Kentucky Derby Museum.

“They would be able to provide the administrative structure and distribute information and answer questions, and I can provide the teaching and curriculum development,” said McLellan. “It seems like its going to be a mutually beneficial merger.”

The Backside Learning Center already offers a variety of classes, including computer skills, English as a second language, and Spanish for owners and trainers. The facility also provides a library and entertainment options like movie nights, so adding a groom education program seems like a natural fit.

McLellan, Azopardi, and O’Hara-Bates hope that the merger will give The Elite Program a stable home and allow it to expand even further and reach more backside workers.

“Beyond the fact that we are educating people who handle our horses, the humanitarian reasons are tremendous,” O’Hara-Bates said. “I had one groom come up to me after he got his certificate with tears rolling down his face, and he told me that he’d never graduated from anything and that he was sending the certificate home to Mexico to be hung on the wall. Even if you forget the horses, we are making other people’s lives a lot richer with this program.” 



GROOMS AT SAM HOUSTON RACE PARK STUDYING THE GROOM ELITE MATERIALS.

GROOM ELITE Invited to South Africa

The Pacific Crest Trail ride trek will not be the first time O’Hara-Bates has gone to great lengths for Groom Elite. In October 2003, she took a nearly 10,000-mile trip to Cape Town, South Africa, to train grooms in that country. Most of the students who attended the training program were members of the Xhosa tribe, the same as Nelson Mandela, and they lived in poverty that is hard to imagine in the Western world.



SUE O’HARA-BATES SHOWING A BLANKET DONATED TO THE GROOM ELITE PROGRAM IN SOUTH AFRICA

To prove that point, O’Hara-Bates recalled a story about one of the students:

“I had brought over a bunch of props and supplies, and I had the empty cardboard boxes in the rental car,” she recalled. “And one of the grooms came over and asked if he could have them. So I said he could help himself, and then I asked the instructor why he was so excited

to get those boxes. So she said, ‘Let’s go take a little tour.’

“We drove around to where a lot of these people live, and there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of homes made out of cardboard boxes. I’ve never seen such a sight in my life; the poverty is unbelievable.”

But just like in her experience at U.S. racetracks, O’Hara-Bates found the grooms to be incredibly dedicated to their job and eager to learn how to do it better.

“The energy and enthusiasm really stood out,” she said. “These people knew this might be a way out for them.”

One groom in particular showed such extraordinary determination in receiving his certification that O’Hara-Bates still recalls the story vividly more than five years later:

“I can still remember this as plain as day,” she said. “We told them all that you absolutely had to be there on time and go through the written and hands-on test to get certified. But we had one guy saying he had to go home because of a death in a family, and over there are no exceptions—you stop your life and go to



the funeral of a loved one.”

O’Hara-Bates extended her condolences but could not allow him to take the test at a later date because she was due to fly home shortly after the exam.

“On the day of the test, we got underway and, of course, he wasn’t in attendance, and then a few minutes later the door opens and he comes running in with sweat pouring down. So he sat down and I said, ‘How did you get here?’ Of course he had no money—it’s not like he took a taxi or a bus. It turns out he ran for three days, with bare feet, to get back to take the test. That’s how important it was to them to have a chance to maybe elevate their lives.”

Although perhaps not as dramatic, O’Hara-Bates has seen the same thing repeated time and again in this country, and that is what she says makes the Groom Elite program so important.