

Almost every week I talk to a young person who tells me of their desire for a career with horses. I agree that it is a wonderful way to make a living. Among many other benefits each day has variety – physical activity, the satisfaction of molding a young horse, preparing a rider to meet their goal, traveling. I would much prefer this to working in a florescent office (although it's just occurred to me I'm writing this in my florescent office and it's not bad !)

I caution them, however, to do some careful research before they jump in. I see many trainers who burn out while their vocation takes a toll on their finances, family and free time. Following are some questions I'm often asked by an eager horseperson, contemplating teaching and training for a living.

Q. What are the drawbacks to a career in horses?

A. Typically, horsepeople choose this career because of their passion for the animal and the sport and not to get rich. This tends to be a feast or famine industry depending largely on the show or breeding season. There are dry times when sales and training horses are limited and it's difficult to plan on a regular income. Benefits such as statutory holidays, dental plans and overtime pay are almost unheard of. Hours tend to be long and unpredictable, so if you're the kind of person that likes to have their ducks all in a row, you're in trouble. Horse shows tend to run into the night, and start bright and early. Often you can hit a snag in a training session that rearranges your daytimer, as can unexpected customers, equipment breakdowns, and medical emergencies.

Q. What is the difference between a coach, instructor, and trainer? How do I get the education I need to become one of these?

A. A coach works with competitive riders and is typically self employed. You gain recognition in your discipline by being good at it yourself and then producing winning riders. You gain customers with a track record of competitive success and this can't be gained in a course or certification program (although these can make you a more effective coach) A coach must be a good communicator and able to challenge and inspire confidence. She must keep up with the trends of the industry (usually, but not always by competing herself) and be able to match a horse and rider to make a winning team.

An instructor focuses more on non competitive riders, often in the setting of a riding school. Here, you may teach groups of riders and must be well organized in schedule and communication skills. You must be patient, able to start beginner riders, and keep more experienced riders challenged. Medical and instructor certification makes you more employable and less vulnerable to liability.

A trainer teaches skills to horses and gains his reputation by successfully doing this with horse after horse. Most often a trainer makes his name in competition by producing winners and horse owners take note. Once again, this can't be accomplished by taking a course. An aspiring trainer must either apprentice with a reputable trainer, or have the means to invest in his own prospects to show what he can do. Training horses doesn't always involve teaching people to ride, but I

find that when I install the buttons on the horses, I need to teach the owners how to push them!

Q .Besides horse skills , what other education would benefit me?

A. A computer background is a tremendous help. My assistant trainer is a whiz on the computer. She has helped me design my website, invoices, advertising, and is a handy resource for me as I'm learning.

If you can be an expert in one additional area, you can save yourself some money if you're self employed, or be attractive to an employer.

Veterinary skills, advertising, accounting, carpentry, tack repair, and first aid, are excellent additions to any resume

Q How much of an investment will I need to make in order to begin in the horse business?.

A. This depends on whether or not you will be self employed. Working as your own boss as a trainer or coach, you will need to either rent or buy a facility, and the farm equipment to maintain it. A truck and trailer is a necessity. Alternatively, you can rent stalls in a boarding facility, or teach in various stables on a freelance basis. The downside to this is the profit tends to be lower , and without running the stable yourself, you're at the mercy of someone else's quality control. Appropriate property, liability and disability insurance is a must.

To teach lessons at a riding stable you will likely need certification (available through the Canadian Equestrian Federation) appropriate liability insurance.

Q. How do I go about building a client base?

A. It is important that people see you and your students competing successfully at the horse shows or competitions. This is the proof that your program gets results. Word of mouth from satisfied customers is another great asset. Advertise in local horse publications. Join your breed association or riding club.

Q. How long does it take before I can expect to make a profit?

A. Although this is impossible to predict, here are some suggestions . While gaining a reputation as a trainer, you may need to have a secondary job and do your teaching and training after work and on weekends. As with any entrepreneurial endeavor, count the cost before you jump in . What do you have to charge per horse in training in order to make money? How much do you make per ride? How will you generate income in the off season? A self employed person has to actively pursue business – initially customers don't come knocking on the door. What makes more profit – going to the horse show this weekend or staying home and teaching lessons? Eliminate activities that don't generate enough income. Does it make sense to hire an instructor to teach those lessons while you go to the horse shows? An impartial consultant could see your business from a new angle. Explore all possibilities. Keep abreast of the trends in the industry. Don't get left behind.

Q. Are there other areas of the horse industry in which I could make a living?

A. The horse industry is booming and you are only limited as far as your imagination. Breeding and selling quality horses if preceded by careful research and investing in quality broodmares can be lucrative. Consider working in retail selling horse products, or developing your own product (clothing, equipment, etc) Services including video, photography, blanket cleaning, shoeing, equine massage – the list is endless.

As the weather gets colder and I start to think of those days I swear my toes and fingers will freeze off if I ride one more horse, I acknowledge there are easier ways to make a living. But I count myself fortunate to do what I do – it's a wonderful way to make a living. And there is a niche in this industry for you too. Just go in with your eyes wide open!