

So You Want To Be A Working Student?

By Eiren Crawford

There are many different opportunities for an ambitious (and usually broke) young person to work in exchange for a riding education, in what's known as working student position. In Germany and some other countries, there is an official education system to become a professional rider. Typically a student secures a spot with a certified trainer for 2-3 years and gets the practical training while they attend school once per week for theory classes. At the end of their training, they take a test to become a licensed professional, or Bereiter. The students work hard, but know exactly what the end reward should be.

North America has a vague definition of what is expected of a working student and what a working student should expect in return. Every trainer can make up his/her own rules and system. Some will take on students with very little riding experience, and put them on a horse and develop them into good riders. Some will make you fight for every second in the saddle even if they promised you daily lessons! Other places only want students with a certain amount of experience joining the team.

Many ambitious riders with the dream of going to ride in Germany (or other leading sport countries) are **disappointed when discovering that they are not talented enough to, in fact, be a Rider**. But if you are willing to pick up a pitchfork and pay your dues, you might pick up the skills to take you wherever you want...

Ready to work!

As someone who has spent the better part of the past 20 years being either a working student or assistant rider/trainer, I have learned a thing or two about how to make the most of what can be sometimes be very difficult job.

Before I started my first big job for a European trainer, someone clever told me, **“keep your mouth shut and work harder than you think you can.”** Great advice to start, and here's some more:

1) **Get as much information as you can before you agree to the job.**

Find out where you will be living, will you share accommodations and if so with how many, if/how much you will get paid, what your duties will be, expected hours, will there be a car available, will there be a phone or internet available, will you get to ride, will you get lessons, what's the weather like (so you know what to pack), should you work in jeans or does everyone wear \$250 riding pants all day, are paddock boots and half-chaps acceptable... There are so many questions and *they all* need to be asked. Assume nothing. Two important questions deserve the next two points:

2) **Will you need a working visa and how do you get it?**

If you are working out of your home country, you need to figure this out. There are plenty of ways to get a job and work under the table, but if something goes wrong, you're in big trouble, for a long time. I have a friend that was recently banned from entering the US for five years! It's just not worth taking the risk.

Every job I've had in the US has involved the help of a fantastic immigration lawyer to get me the proper visa. Yes, it adds cost, and no, your new employer shouldn't necessarily pay for it (what if you quit 2 months into a 1 year/\$1000 visa?!). However, your new employer should be in agreement with you working legally.

My experience in Germany was easy, but it may have had something to do with Frau Klimke being somewhat of a local celebrity. My application took one piece of paper and 50 euro, once/year – done deal.

Denmark took a lot more paperwork but less money and it seems I can renew it endlessly. Both of the European countries' applications were simple enough to do alone or with the help of someone who speaks the language.

The **US application process is the most complicated** (hence the lawyer) and (because of the lawyer) expensive. As a Canadian, I can shed no light on working in my own country. However, the internet is a magical place filled with lots of good info. One thing I would suggest to start with is a “**working holiday**” visa, a six-month solution. Google it and see if your country and the country you want to work in are in this system.

3) **Will you have health insurance?**

You will be working with horses. They are big, strong, and often stupid. You need health insurance. In my 20's I never thought I needed any kind of health coverage since I was invincible and immortal. However, when I needed a shoulder surgery in my early 30's I was awfully happy that I was covered.

If your employer will not offer insurance, get it yourself before you start. Most farms have some kind of farm insurance that will cover you if you get hurt on the property, but this isn't enough. You will have to leave the farm sometime and if you get hurt or sick... you need health insurance. This is not something to joke around about.

4) **Are you ready?**

Please don't agree to come work for six months in another country, far away from your family, your friends, your dog, and your horse, only to find after one week that you are so homesick you need to go back. Not only is it a pain for your employer to replace you already, but it was a waste of money for you to get there. I chickened out of a few opportunities to go overseas in my early 20's because I just wasn't ready. No problem, by 25 I was and it's been great! I still get homesick once in a while for my family and friends, but with Skype and email it's fine. Plus, they get a cool reason to come to Europe and visit me.

5) **What are your goals?**

Yes, yes, you want to ride. So does everyone, many of them with more experience and qualifications than you. Riding better, and maybe eventually professionally, is probably your goal. However, could one of your goals simply be to be better educated? Could you be happy as a groom if it means getting in, getting to see how these top horses are handled, prepared, ridden, cared for each day? Are you interested in how top vets and farriers maintain elite athletes? Would that be worth the misery of 6 months out of the saddle? For me, it was. Especially since my “in” opened the door to eventual saddle time.

6) **Keep your mouth shut and work harder than you think you can.**

Now that you took the job and you're there, don't tell your employers and co-workers about how Local Hero did it better at home. You are there to learn, not to teach or compare. Sure, if you see something really unsafe and dangerous, speak up. But you are not there to voice your opinion on turnout or lack thereof for the horses, feeding programs, the use of draw reins, the demands of clients... it's not for you to say, and you chose this person to work for because of their accomplishments.

The floor won't sweep itself...

Also, if you're talking, you're probably not working as hard as you could be. And **it is hard work**. The hours will be longer than they tell you and most of the time no one will thank you for doing a good job.

Horses don't take Christmas or New Year off, they don't celebrate your birthday, and they're still hungry at 6:30 on Sunday morning. You will pull weeds, paint and repair fences, and unload never-ending deliveries of hay. Your body will often hurt and you might be emotionally drained. But no one is looking to hold your hand.

7) **Walk and sweep faster.**

There is nothing more painful than watching someone take a leisurely stroll down the barn aisle to fetch the next horse, when everyone else is practically jogging. And when you sweep, you are not sweeping your kitchen, you're sweeping a barn. Put some power and speed into it. Sweep like you hate that broom (which you will eventually).

8 – **You are replaceable.**

This sounds harsh, but remember that there are lots of young men and women who are looking for the same opportunity. On one hand, it's good news for you if you are miserable; they will find someone to take over your job, the world will carry on if you want to quit. But it also means that if you like it and want to stay you need to be useful. If you are not the right one, someone else will be. One way to make yourself more valuable is:

9) **Offer something special.**

Almost everyone can sweep and feed horses, so how do you make yourself valuable? It may sound silly, but I found my past job experience in a restaurant helped me bring some additional skills: as a hostess I learned to be cheery and helpful even if I was tired and cranky; managing the kitchen taught me to be a good organizer and delegator. I was good at talking with clients, taking and giving orders so I often found myself in some sort of managerial role at the barn.

Maybe you are particularly good with a computer and can help build or maintain a website? Maybe you are balanced with a video camera and can help make a great sales video? Maybe you are good at keeping inventory of feed? If you're scratching your head thinking you have absolutely no extra skills to offer then ***make your personality your extra something!*** Even if you're shy and nervous try to be happy and positive, be attentive and empathic to your clients and always...

10) **Remember your goals and don't be afraid to talk about them.**

I know, point number 6 told you to keep your mouth shut, but there are always exceptions! Maybe your boss thinks you only want to groom for 6 months before you go back home to some other professional goal, but you passionately want to be a competitive rider and trainer. You need to pipe up! Find a time to sit down with a coffee and explain your goals and ambitions, and ask for advice or guidance – you can learn a great deal about business decisions and career planning, not just how to ride.

If your boss knows your goals, I hope he/she wants to help you along your journey. Watching horse shows is great chance to educate yourself, but if you don't explain that you want to do this you will be left at home cleaning stalls. Often if you are busy in the barn you won't get time to see the action in the arena – speak to your boss and ask if you can watch him/her ride on your lunch-break or day off. This doesn't mean talk about your goals with every person every time you see them, but in the right situation don't be shy to say, "I really want to be a top rider one day." This also leads to another point:

11) Show your dedication.

Sooooo tired.

Just the same as no horse will make it to Grand Prix with only sugar cubes, smoochies and hugs, no rider makes it to the top without hard work and sacrifice.

You've heard it before, but you need to pay your dues. Be the one who volunteers to load the horses at 4:30 in the morning before the show, and the one who does that extra check on the bellyaching horse. Ride the stiff, fat, talentless horse and make him better.

Take the crazy mare and figure out a way to earn her trust and get her quieter in the grooming stall.

Pick up the pitchfork and broom even if you swore to yourself that you'd never clean another stall! I've heard plenty of stories from people who have really been there, about how the new guy gets treated pretty terribly at some of the barns in Europe.

But if you can just be strong enough to take it out until there's eventually someone newer coming along to take the abuse, then they believe you're tough and dedicated enough to stick through the tough times as well as the good. You will have to do a lot of things you don't like to do, but if you remind yourself of your great opportunity and the education you get after the stalls are done, then you might even do it with a smile.

Being a working student can open doors, it can crush you, or it can do both.

I very clearly remember at one job going to get some equipment out of a horse trailer, and while I was in there I closed the door, sat down, and cried – and I mean puffy-eyed, purple face, hard-to-breathe, body-wracking sobs. I don't remember what specifically triggered it, but I think I was most upset because I had been crying at least a little bit *every day for 3 weeks*. And I'm not a crier!

But this job had stripped me of all my confidence and I was physically, mentally, and obviously emotionally exhausted.

But while it stripped me of things that would eventually come back, it gave me so many other things: I started to develop my skills as a rider, my eye as a trainer, and my business sense, and my resume looked good. I quit crying a few minutes later, and quit my job a few months after that. For sure it was one of the hardest jobs I've ever had, but taught me SO MUCH. If I could go back in time I would do it all again and not change a thing, tears and all.

Like any job, a working student position will have its ups and downs.

Take the things you like and make them yours. Take the things you don't like and remember not to do it when you have your own business. While there are good and bad times, it's a great chance to educate yourself with professionals you might not otherwise be able to learn from.