

Raising the Bar

Groom Elite training program teaches students about horse care, much more



DEBBY THOMAS ©

“Groom” and “elite” might not be words commonly seen together, but for nearly 10 years, Dr. Reid McLellan has been doing his part to change that.

“If you understand horses’ behavior,” says McLellan, executive director of the Groom Elite equine care education program, “you can work more safely with them.”

“The ELITE will be certified. Do you have what it takes to wear this patch?” closes the introduction to the Groom 101 student manual, referring to the symbol received by those who successfully complete one of his training classes and challenging the participants to reach the highest level of their profession.

A former teacher and head of the animal industries department at Louisiana Tech University, McLellan now travels to racetracks, including Virginia’s Colonial Downs and Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation facilities, teaching classes to experienced and novice grooms. He holds a Ph.D. in animal breeding and genetics from Oklahoma State University, along with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in animal science. But McLellan tries to teach as much about the art as the science of work-

ing with horses. It’s a program in which the humans often learn as much about themselves as they learn about the animals, particularly at the TRF prison facilities, where most of the men have never worked with horses before.

One of the inmates, McLellan said recently in a phone conversation about the program, was “scared to death” of horses and kept getting pinned against the stall wall while working with a horse that clearly had decided who was boss in their relationship.

“Every day I walk up to the stall, my heart’s racing. I break out in a sweat,” the man told McLellan. The instructor soon discovered that the man wasn’t worried about himself.

“I don’t think it’s fair to that horse because I’m afraid of him,” the man continued. “I don’t have the confidence to be his leader.”

Although that student decided to leave the program, he didn’t fail, in McLellan’s perspective: he learned enough about himself to have the confidence to say that he wasn’t in the right place.

McLellan joined Groom Elite in 2005 after a year at the North American Racing Academy in Lexington, Ky. Founded

by horse owner Susan O’Hara in Texas, Groom Elite conducted its first class at Lone Star Park in 2001, and the next year began offering courses at Colonial Downs.

It was at the New Kent, Va., track that a trainer from Camden, S.C., saw what McLellan was doing, and that connection led to Groom Elite courses being offered first at the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation farm at Wateree River Correctional Facility in Rembert, S.C., then at TRF facilities at James River in Virginia and Sykesville in Maryland, along with other TRF facilities nationwide.

The racetrack program offers courses at a variety of levels: for hotwalkers who’d like to learn to be grooms; for grooms to increase their skills and knowledge about working with horses; for experienced grooms interested in becoming trainers. The program also offers courses for trainers and owners.

A more than 100-page document, the student notebook for

the 101 course covers such topics as conformation, equine physiology, bandaging and tacking, and shedrow safety. Students who successfully complete the course, including attending 80 percent of classes and passing written and practical exams, earn a Groom Elite certificate.

At Colonial Downs, the Groom Elite courses are funded by the HBPA, an investment, said executive director Frank Petralamo Jr., that is well spent. He estimated the cost of the 101 program at between \$10,000 and \$15,000, including travel, instructors and instruction materials; he also purchases Groom Elite jackets for graduates and pays for participants’ lunches.

At the end of the hotwalking program, which lasts about a month, the HBPA pays for participants’ hotwalker licenses and helps them get jobs working on the backside.

“We wouldn’t spend the money if we didn’t think it was worth it,” Petralamo said.

The basic, 101 groom program usually lasts six to eight weeks, its two sessions per week scheduled for the track’s dark days, each lasting about four hours and com-

prising of lectures, classroom training, and work in the barns with horses.

Because so many grooms speak Spanish, all course materials are in both languages, and during lectures, Spanish speakers are given a headset over which the lesson is translated.

Vice president of the Virginia HBPA, Stephanie Nixon, who trains and breaks horses near Colonial Downs at Horseshoe Hill Farm in Ashland, teaches Groom Elite courses at the track.

"Anything to educate people about horses, I'm all about it," she said. "The program is a great learning tool. Grooms learn not just how to work around a horse, but barn safety and basic veterinary care, things you need to learn to make a good start in the business."

Among the grooms who have attended the program are those from the barn of Ferris Allen, seven-time leading trainer at Colonial Downs.

"It's a very well-conceived program," Allen said. "They come out of there, they're better than when they went in. Most of the guys that wind up working as grooms on the backside learn from their trainers or their peers, and they know the mechanics of what they do quite well. But lots of times, they don't know why they're doing this. The Groom Elite program is more than just practical application; it tells them how to [work with horses] and why [they're doing it]."

At TRF correctional facility farms, the Groom Elite program is offered to inmates as part of work and educational programs; they have to apply, and acceptance is considered a privilege.

Former TRF board member Kip Elser is among those responsible for bringing the program to the South Carolina committee of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation. Elser also owns Kirkwood Stables breaking and training business in Camden, S.C.

"We were starting a retirement facility at the prison farm," he said, "and we were trying to find a vocational, educational program that would fit with what we were doing. I looked at several, and Reid's program was the most comprehensive and the most practical."

Groom Elite came to the facility in 2002, and as Elser explains it, the program offers more than an education in working with horses.

"One thing that we're trying to do," he said, "is get the guys jobs in their community when they get out of prison. They do

much better if they have some roots in the community."

For a variety of reasons, it's difficult to track whether the program is successful in that respect. Most inmates leave the area after they are released, to return to their home communities. The state doesn't have an adequate system for tracking inmates after they are released, and inmates often want to sever their connection to the facility, distancing themselves from an experience they'd rather forget.

Still, said William Cox Jr., president of the TRF program in South Carolina, "We've been successful in placing one of the better guys we've had [come out of the program], and once he gets out, we may be able to keep in touch with him."

Opened in 2007, the TRF's James River Work Center, a joint venture with the Virginia Department of Corrections, and Anne Tucker, the chapter's president, said that Groom Elite was a part of the program's concept from the start. In addition to the basic education program, the James River facility offers leadership opportunities for inmates who graduate.

"Some stay on to be teaching assistants," Tucker explained. "The ones who excel, who are interested, and who are good leaders, that's where they really learn a lot. They basically manage the barn, with supervision."

At James River, McLellan's instruction is supplemented with classes taught by local volunteers, who give lectures on the equine digestive system, equine dentistry, and training.

"Being incarcerated is a horribly negative experience," said Tucker. "We start to break that down, to help inmates get in the mind frame of being ready to be released, to get out in the world and think for themselves."

The majority of inmates, she said, are at James River for drug offenses.

"They're good guys who made mistakes," she said. "When they've done the Groom Elite training, when they've spent six and a half months working with horses, they have a new sense of value that they never had before. They have confidence, and confidence is a game-changer. They come out with a different attitude—a good attitude."

Tucker said that some graduates of the program have gone on to work at local horse farms after their release; several have found employment at Rose Retreat Farm in Goochland County.

"They're willing to work," said farm manager Larry Dixon. "They get down and dirty."

McLellan wants his program to prepare its students to go into a variety of horse-related businesses. In addition to the program's content, students also learn, as he put it, "the importance of paying attention."

"They know how to watch," he explained, "to see when a horse might be colicking, or to notice that a horse that wasn't limping yesterday might be off today."

He also stresses the value in understanding horses, of knowing why they act as they do, an understanding that also leads to self-awareness in the humans who work with them.

During one class at the Wateree facility in South Carolina, a particularly difficult mare refused to "learn the harmony" of working with humans, as McLellan put it. Charging around a round pen, intimidating the inmate working with her, she resisted even McLellan's expert instruction, but finally got to a point at which McLellan felt comfortable bringing the inmate back to work with her.

"She walked over to him and almost put her head in his chest, and she stayed right with him with no halter, no lead rope," he said. "With the gate wide open, he took a step, and she followed him, and as she did, I watched a tear roll down his cheek."

Incarcerated for aggravated assault, the man told McLellan that his time in prison hadn't up to that point had much of a positive effect on him.

"I was the same angry person that might suddenly snap," McLellan remembers the man telling him. "I had a knot in my stomach every night, until the day I walked out of that round pen with that horse. That was the first night I never had a knot, and I know it will never come back."

"That's why we do what we do," continued McLellan. "Those horses give those guys that opportunity to learn about themselves. I see it happen a lot. They learn that the animals want to be in harmony with them and that they can give something to the horses without giving up something themselves."

Said Elser, "Groom Elite isn't a vocational school, it's a life school."

The Virginia HBPA's Petralamo agreed.

"Groom Elite is the best educational program I've seen," he said. "I can't stress enough how good this course is." ✨