
Building The Future One Lesson At A Time Taylor River Farm

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER

In today's climate how does a barn take 34 horses to the show and make 39 victory passes, finish in the top two 50 times and the top three 65 times in every division imaginable? Very few training entities can rival those numbers at a show like New England Regional AND also give more than 100 lessons a week at home. The latter part of that statement is the reason why the Gove family's Taylor River Farm is able to post those kinds of stats. They are developing their own customers, their future.

Of all their riders and drivers at the "Eastern Nationals," nine were home grown. Currently there are a total of 14 customers on the show string that came up through the Academy ranks at Taylor River under the direction of instructor Kristin Logan. The Taylor River riding program that is creating all of these new owners began in a most unique way.

"This whole farm was a small business management project at college," said Sarah Gove who attended both Merrimack College and Stonehill College. "It was a project for my final and I had to create my own business. I grew up riding at Chrislar Farm and was inspired to one day have a program that gave 100 lessons a week and successfully went to the horse shows. I was dating Jared [Gove] at the time and Jeff [Gove] helped me with some of the numbers. The more we talked about it we thought it was worth trying. We were very fortunate that we ended up hiring Richard [Boule] and away we went.

"In the beginning the hardest part for the riding program was finding the right school horses. You learn to try them before you commit to them. Chances are that if someone is trying to sell you a horse as a lesson horse, it probably shouldn't be a lesson horse. Now that we are established we have a network of friends that feed us these older campaigners who aren't ready for the pasture. They make great lesson horses. They love what they do."

The next obstacle the Taylor River crew found was figuring out the right local advertising. They tried a little of everything: radio, newspaper, and mall showings. It all had relative success but nothing like Groupon.

"We went from 60 lessons a week to 150," said Gove. "Now granted, they were only \$20. Groupon got \$10 and we got \$10 but then it was our job to sell ourselves once we got them in the door. Word of mouth is another good tool. We have a program that if any of our current riders bring a friend and they sign up for a set of lessons, that rider gets a free lesson for referring the friend.

"We also do birthday parties. Those are big hits and we invite each of the kids to come back for a free lesson. When we do our introductory hour lesson we spend the first half hour grooming and putting tack on. There is usually another experienced lesson rider or two around and they visit with the first timers. Then the last half hour of the lesson is spent riding. There is only so much riding you can do in their first time so we want to give them the whole experience of the barn family, not just show up, get on, ride and go home. When they come through the doors we have many 16 x 20 pics of Oklahoma winners and they ask a lot of questions about the pictures so that breaks the ice and gives them an idea about what we do and what there is to work towards.

"We also have instructor assistants. The kids sign up for certain days to be helpers and get free lessons for it. Their job is to make the new student feel welcome and at ease. The kids become very mannerly and very outgoing giving tours and explaining what goes on here. They do great PR for us and learn job responsibility."

Part of the business plan was to not only attract lesson riders but to also move those who are able into the show ring. It's that magic transition from lessons to Academy to wearing a suit.

"What has worked great for us is a lease or half-lease program," stated Gove. "We will half-lease our lesson horses and that rider gets to ride that horse every time they have a lesson and go to Academy classes giving them a little feel of ownership. In the regular lesson program they get one horse one time and another horse the next time. A small monthly fee comes with the half-lease so that family starts getting used to the bills that come with ownership. Then they start going to shows and experiencing the camaraderie of the show barn. From leasing a beginning type horse some go to owning a nicer first show horse. This gives them a stepping stone from lessons to the show ring."

Of course none of this matters if you don't have the right person in charge of such a program. Taylor River is fortunate to have Kristin Logan at the helm and her love of teaching and the Morgan Horse have made a great combination for hundreds of children, parents and the breed in general.

"She is the key to this," said Gove of Logan. "What makes Kristin a great instructor is she has no desire to be a horse trainer. Kristin is a talented horsewoman, but doesn't want anything to do with training. Most people in this position will give lessons but they want to be riding the park saddle grand champion as well. No one wants to take the time to do what Kristin does. Richard and I have to be done working horses by 3:00 every day because her lessons start. Her part of this is just as big as ours.



This great group of kids is coming up through the Taylor River lesson program, as Academy and Performance riders. Kristin Logan (seated far right) runs the program with Sarah Gove (c) and assistant instructor Devynne Rivard (seated far left). Standing in the middle row are Madison Leigh Logan, Camden Miner, Cade Miner, Hayden Ladd, and Taylor Ladd. Avery Ladd, Karsan Taylor, Holly Standen, Sophia Vasapolli, Olivia Myers, Makayla Hientzelman Spencer Shample and Nicky Shample are in the back row.



Sarah Gove with Taylor Rivers' homegrown students Nicky Shample and Sophia Vasapolli after they were reserve grand champion and grand champion, respectively in the Walk/Trot Classic Equitation 11 & Under Championship. Nicky rode Monnington Dante and Sophia was aboard Salem Front And Center.

“Not only is she great with teaching kids to ride, she helps them grow into young adults as well. I don’t know how she does it. I can’t tell you how many young girls have brought their problems to Kristin. She’s like a pied piper. You can’t find anyone else like Kristin so we have to hire her former students as instructors as well. Devynne Rivard is back, now working for us. She knows the atmosphere, the program.”

It took four or five years for the lesson program to really take off, take roots and start producing show ring riders. From the fifth year on the program has produced at least one or two new customers to the show barn each year, whether that be lease or buy. They have seen many of the Groupon customers stay and continue at some level.

“I get giddy thinking about some of the kids who have come through here,” added Gove. “Sophia Vasapolli is one example. She learned to post here and then moved to leadline and now walk and trot. She wasn’t really fitting in or doing very well at school but she loved the barn. She loved riding. She did all the steps from lessons to leasing to owning and winning at the Grand Nationals on a horse that didn’t cost a fortune. The kid shrieked when they called her name out at Oklahoma last year. I get emotional thinking about what riding has done for her.”

Sophia rode Salem Front And Center to the World Champion 11 & Under Walk and Trot Classic Pleasure Saddle title last year and just won the 11 & under class here at New England Regional. She is one of many tots who have developed into confident young people with the direction and love of Kristin Logan and company.

“I’ve been here from the day we opened,” said Logan. “I have a passion for seeing that child walk through the door for the first time, teach them to post, watch them go through Academy and then make a victory pass at Oklahoma. That’s what thrills me. It’s like a horse trainer who develops a two-year-old. I have that passion for beginning students.

“Not many people want to devote this much time to a program. There are plenty of people who will teach lessons but they also want to train and show. I also believe in a strong relationship with my riders and their families. The kids are here five days a week. It’s a place to be outside of school activities where trouble is not allowed. We go to these kids’ graduations and have holiday gatherings. I cry when they go to college.

“What makes our program work so well is that we are a team, we all work together every day. Sarah [Gove], Richard [Boule] and I are interchangeable and we are here for each other. This didn’t happen overnight. It took seven or eight strong years to really get rolling. Early on we had a handful of lesson horses but we made it work financially by giving lesson after lesson ourselves. Now we have 11 lesson horses and three full time instructors. We give lessons here five days a week from 3:00 on. On Saturdays we have lessons all day and on Sundays our show clients ride all day.”

Besides passion, Logan credits education with the key to making Taylor River the program that is today. Meetings are held two or three times a year to prepare the different groups for what lies ahead.

“We don’t want to shock them out of the system,” stated Logan. “We move them from lessons to a half-lease to ownership. One step introduces the family to the next step. It is a progression that works.”

That progression has worked for several families, families that are extremely grateful that the steps were there for them to take and grateful for what it’s done for their children. The Shample family of Seabrook, NH, went from up/down lessons to a half-lease to a two-horse family.

“This whole experience has been phenomenal,” exclaimed Julie Shample. “Our closest family is 10 hours away and Taylor River has become our family. They told us at school that our son Spencer needed to get involved in something and we didn’t know what. We drove by a sign for Horse Lessons and decided to try it. Spencer is ADHD but the barn has an amazing effect on him. He is calm and centered around the horses. It stimulates his senses.

“Both of my boys (Spencer and Nicky) ride and even though this is such a girl driven sport we feel very fortunate to be a part of it. It is the boys’ safe haven. They ride three or four times a week and learn everything from the responsibility of taking care of an animal to competition. I guess you could say we are into this hook, line and sinker. We’ve made great friends whom I’m sure will be friends for life.

“We thought as the boys got older they might pull back a little but they haven’t. We started when they were so young. First with lessons, then wanting to compete at a higher level. We were very lucky they leased us Romeo. That was a bridge into the next phase of our life. That allowed us to get a taste of this and see what it was like to budget a monthly payment for this activity. I wish there were more horses for lease. It is such a great way for families to work their way into this.

“And Kristin [Logan] is so good. She can look at kids and help with what type of rider they should be: hunt seat, saddle seat, Western. This whole thing has been an amazing experience.”

A beautiful facility, a seasoned staff that works well together and a love for taking students from their very first lesson to the winner’s circle at New England and Oklahoma didn’t happen by accident. Taylor River has been carefully crafted into a nursery for developing young people side by side a world class training operation that has made its mark in division after division of the Morgan world. At the end of the day it’s the people and what they bring to the plan that ultimately decides success or failure. For Sarah Gove, Richard Boule, Kristin Logan and the entire Gove family the success of Taylor River is definitely a reflection of their dedication to people and horses alike.