

The Life of a Working Student

A dressage rider tells how she learned the ropes.

By Angelea Walkup



Courtesy, Angelea Walkup

The ever-abundant, yet often-ominous, job of working student can be a precarious road to travel. It can teach you the ins and outs of the horse world, general horse care and riding. It can establish you for the long term in your community as an equestrian professional or even lead you on a path to the Olympics, whether that be riding, judging, coaching, grooming or even the promotional aspect, working in media like I do. Let's be honest. The horse world is an interesting place to take up residence and is never short on wild tales, huge success or massive failure stories as controversies

abound. No matter what path you choose, beginning that path as a working student is a fabulous way to get in the starting gate. There have been articles written about working students, but few have touched on the nitty-gritty lifestyle. Here are a few things to consider, whether you're looking for your first situation or you are in one and have questions:

Are you able to work hard and do what you're asked? Whether you realize it or not, the trainer puts a huge amount of trust in you being near his or her horses and helping care for them. You should consider this when working with or around them and not be absentminded. Little things—forgetting to top off the water buckets in a stall on a hot summer afternoon or leaving a box blade in a stall after you've stripped it and replaced the shavings—could be devastating, if not fatal, to a horse and his owner or trainer.

At appropriate times, can you ask educational questions? Can you watch and learn? When I've worked for other people, even though the days are long and the work is hard, I would ask to take at least some time to watch the trainer work a horse. You can learn so much by simply watching the little things trainers do with their seat, hands and core, as well as the overall training process. Don't forget the warm-up, cool down and how the groom handles the horse before and after the ride.

Can you be on time? A manager at McDonalds or the local coffee shop would not be sympathetic that your parents drove and therefore made you late. When I was a working student in Spain, I had to take the metro, then a bus and finally walk over a mile to get to the stable. In cases like this, planning your time and always allowing for error is crucial. No matter how you get there, if you're late, you're simply late and, with repeat cases, you will probably be fired.

Can you do the dirty work? Situations vary significantly among working student positions, because trainers have working styles that differ tremendously. However, the basics remain the same for all. The work often includes feeding, mucking, cleaning and tack and blanket repair—basically all the dirty work. This work is done with the hope that the student will receive lessons in exchange. But, in many cases, the student position is a paying-your-dues scenario. If you're not happy with your working student position—the work or lack of lessons—then you might want to reconsider this path. I've never heard of a working student going to a trainer with a set of grievances, the trainer hearing them

out and then changing his or her ways. It just doesn't happen.

It's not a case of counting your lessons against your hours worked either, but rather counting your blessings to be in an environment where you can learn about how a good trainer does things. For example, watch how they ride, how they tack, how they care for their horses and how you can appropriately ask questions to learn even more from your experience. It's not about time in the saddle but, when you are allowed in lessons, you better be darn sure you've trained as much as possible to better yourself during those precious 30 to 45 minutes.

As a working student, you should realize you're constantly being watched and evaluated. This is not meant in a bad way. But, if you're seen as a hard worker who's fast learning and ambitious, this could lead to more responsible duties, such as learning to wrap a horse's legs and, perhaps, a groom position.

You must have personal incentive and be able to handle responsibility to advance. The trainer should not have to follow up on your work to make sure it is done. In short, a working student should be able to make the trainer's and/or barn manager's life easier.

I've learned much about the horse world and industry as a whole from my working student experiences—some good, some bad, but all educational and helpful to my long-term career with horses. It's often said—but sometimes not really heard—and oh so true: If you work hard, are ambitious and try with all your might, you can go far. 🐾

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