

An Amateur Point of View

Dealing With This Economy—Think Outside The Box

by Russ Vento

A few weeks ago, when I was thinking about topics for this month's column, I realized that one was staring me in the face. Turn on the television or pick up a newspaper or talk to your friends, and you can't get away from it: It's the economy, or maybe I should say, the bad economy. We in the Arabian horse business are in a luxury activity, and I don't mean because of the high-end horses or the trainers or people with money. Horses in general are a luxury. They are not like a dog or cat that can stay in your house. They are not free to maintain, breed or show.

So looking at our longevity and what the future holds (which none of us know), I think we should all get creative. We should talk to our trainers, the breeders we work with, and our friends, and be helpful to each other. If we work together, we can get through this down economy. This isn't just about those of us who are in training barns; this is about all of us, including those in boarding stables and at home—anyone who has Arabian horses and wants to cut costs without cutting the enjoyment of their horse activities.

I have a few suggestions to start the ball rolling.

Showing

For those with trainers, our first move should be to sit down and talk. As I've said before, I'm big on making a plan for the year, but this year, let's *really* pay attention the bottom line. Making alterations to our budget is better than cutting it out altogether. When you choose your shows, maybe this year you don't list that out-of-state horse show, and stay closer to home more. If your goal is Nationals, you can still get your horse qualified and meet your end goal; you just change the course of getting there. Maybe you cut back to the essential events and skip the others. A few hundred dollars here and there adds up.

An obvious thought, of course, is to take a good, honest look at any horse who isn't a strong candidate for reaching your goal. Discuss with your trainer or really search your own mind: Is 2009 this horse's year to be 10th or better at the Nationals? Or would it be better to wait until next year? Should I save the expense of taking him to the Nationals?

There are also ways to shave the cost of going to shows. Is your neighbor going to the same show you are? Take a look at how you are getting there. If you both have trailers and they're not full, can you go together and split the cost of gas? If this is a close friend, someone you enjoy spending time with, why not split a hotel room too? Help each other out.

It almost goes without saying that if you ship your horse commercially, it would pay to examine the cost of hauling for yourself. If that would represent a savings, check with friends and maybe you could borrow a trailer. This assumes, of course, that you know how to pull a trailer and haul a horse.

For those who are campaigning for the Nationals, advertising is helpful. Maybe every time you have \$50 or \$100 extra, you set it aside. Start a piggy bank ('this is for regionals, this is for Nationals'). When you do something like that, you'd be amazed at how much adds up in four to six months.

And finally, maybe you just can't take your horse to a show this year, but you'd still like to go. Volunteer! There are never enough volunteers at a horse show, and not only does it help everyone, but it keeps you at the center of the action.

Breeding

Once again, it all starts with discussion. Let's say you want to breed to a particular stallion, but the stud fee is daunting in this economic climate. Talk to owners: "Hey, I how about I pay 50 percent of the stud fee now, and 50 percent later?" The other day, I mentioned this idea to a friend and got the response, "Do you think breeders will go for that?" My thought is that breeders need to for two reasons. One, some money is better than no money; and two, a breeder has to get product on the ground. Another option is for breeders to allow credit cards (at Battaglia Farms, we have for 20 years). We all just need to be workable.

Another thought in the breeding realm relates to embryo transfer. For those using embryo transfer, maybe this is the year they skip having three babies, and let their mare carry her foal. That saves a lot.

If you want to breed your mare, but simply can't afford the bigger names, consider a young, up-and-coming stallion, or a good son of a headliner. If you have a great mare, how about exploring the possibility of a foal share agreement with the stallion owner? You get one foal and they get the other, the first baby being yours and the second one you ship to them when it is weaned. Partnerships like this can be tricky because you may be doing business with someone you don't know, but it is worth considering. Who knows? It could be the beginning of a great friendship.

On this subject, I have one other thought. It may be sound radical, but it too is worth considering for stallion owners. There are a lot of people out there who have very good mares, but can't afford the \$4,000 to \$7,000 stud fee for some of our top stallions. Those stallion owners might take into account that the overall cost of raising a good foal by their stallion doesn't end with the stud fee. There is also the cost of raising and training the foal, and its vet care. If the stud owner is willing to discount the fee for those really good mares, the mare owners can apply their savings to the care of the foal. That is not only better for the foal, but it also establishes loyalty. By the time that foal is ready to train, you can bet its owners are going to do right by it.

Other Thoughts

Here's an idea that may be useful a number of different ways. Pay your horse show or training bills—whatever—with credit cards that are linked to point reward programs, and you can use the points to pay for some of your horse activities. For instance, if you pay training, farrier, veterinarian (if they're willing) and show travel expenses by credit card, before long, the points will help defray those travel costs. Gets the most out of those dollars! The same thing goes with stud fees. The points gained from the stud fee might cover the price of transported semen. *Don't go into debt with this.* Just use the card for expenses you would otherwise pay by check, but send that check to the credit card company rather than the vendor. It's all about getting creative.

Some ideas work in a broader spectrum than just showing or breeding. For example, the concept of shared expenses at horse shows can apply at home too. It's always cheaper if you buy supplies in bulk. Get together with other horsemen in your area and split a load

of hay or shavings. It saves a few hundred dollars, and as I said before, a few hundred dollars here and there helps.

Another thought is to investigate adopting a system like the utility company uses. Get with your trainer, if you have one and he or she is agreeable, and total up your estimated annual expenses. Divide it by 12, and pay that amount every month. Like the utility companies, at the end of the year, you either get a refund or make up the difference, which should not be much if you planned well. The point is that through the year, both you and your trainer know what to expect financially each month.

We talk a lot about people in training barns, but here are a couple of thoughts more for those who are in boarding stables or keep their horses at home. We are all trying to improve our horsemanship, no matter how tight the money might be. How about putting on a weekend clinic to advance your own knowledge at an acceptable cost? Get together with others, pool your funds, and bring in the most accomplished trainer you can afford. It doesn't have to be a big name that will include an airline flight; Arabians are nearly everywhere in this country, and the odds are that there is a highly-skilled trainer somewhere near you. You don't have to do a big set-up with fancy food—hot dogs and Cokes or coffee and donuts are great. (We as Arabian horse people always want to go to the extreme, but it is not necessary. What counts is that we just recognize our love of the horse and enjoy other people who love the horse, not going overboard on the small stuff.)

On the same weekend that you're doing the clinic, your group might also put on a tack sale. Do you have extra blankets that you're not using? Tack? Equipment? You can make a few bucks, and someone else can get what they need without having to pay top dollar. Open it to the public and attract even more response.

The Benefits Of Economizing

While figuring out how to trim our own budgets, we can also take a look at how to help others. Do you know, say, a little girl who has worked really hard, and wants so badly to go to Nationals, but her parents just can't afford it this year? If you have room in your trailer, share. Economizing on our money doesn't mean we should economize on our time and talent. If you can, help someone realize dreams that they might not otherwise be able to fulfill in this economy. Your reward might not be in dollars, but it sure will be wonderful for experience and feeling.

As I look at this economic situation, I truly don't think we have to lose anything big just because money is tight. We all can be more efficient, which is not a bad thing. And there are other positives: Doubling up in the trailers is certainly more "green" for the environment, and spending quality time with friends by sharing a hotel room can be a great experience in itself.

In fact, friendships can be strengthened in many ways. Does your neighbor need to use a tractor, and you can lend yours? Go for it. Volunteer to help out at your barn ("I know you've had to let some of your people go, so I could help you get horses ready?") I don't mean in place of paying bills, but just to help out. Another pair of hands to body clip, wash, groom, whatever, is always helpful.

My thought is that we just have to start talking. This is probably a good time to mention that as we all know, money is always uncomfortable to talk about. But we have to remember that we're all in this together. A lot of "big" people have lost money in this economy, and if we "small" people are hurting, we may be sure that many of them are

too. Okay, so there may be a few exceptions, but for most of us, this is a challenge. What we need to remember is to be careful about how we approach each other. We don't want to humiliate people by acting as if we think they are heading for the bread line. It needs to be more of, "You want to do this? Let's see. Let's make a plan and work it out."

It's so important that we find different ways to help people, and keep them involved and support them. We're horse people, and we need to help each other. Let's ask, what can I do? What's my part? The friendship and business relationships we develop and enjoy will make us stronger, and will make the breed stronger.

Let me know what suggestions you have for navigating this economic situation. If there are enough responses, I'll ask the *Times* to include them in the monthly newsletter.

For anyone who would like to email questions, topics, or comments, I can be reached at info@battagliafarms.com.

Russell Vento Jr. has been involved in the Arabian industry for 30 years, and since 1989 has been a partner in Battaglia Farms. He was honored twice with APAA Amateur Horseman Awards. To date, he has owned or shown 30 U.S., Canadian and National Show Horse national champions, and he now enjoys watching his daughter Skyler win on many of the horses with whom he was successful. He has been a Large R USAE/AHA judge since 1996.