

Helping Hands In The Arabian Horse Industry

by Mary Kirkman



The scene at the Morris Animal Foundation Fundraiser.



Russ Vento, Bob Battaglia, Susan Drescher-Mulzet and Mark Mulzet.

This is the first of a semi-monthly series about Arabian promotion by individuals and organizations, offering techniques that could be adapted by others to attract more participation in the breed.

In a society with more than enough leisure activities—no matter whether the economy is weak or strong—Arabian enthusiasts have to work to attract new participants. The days of families growing up around horses, with a natural interest in breeding, riding and enjoying good individuals, are gone. Increasingly urban-based people must be introduced to the pleasures of Arabian horses. Longtime horseman Bob Battaglia and his partner, Russ Vento, have maintained a program of promoting their breed of choice, and this past year, they stepped it up a notch: Now their biggest promotional efforts benefit charities which help horses, as well as attract new faces to the Arabian community.

It is a simple formula. People who can spend up-close and personal time with horses find it easy to understand the importance of rescuing, protecting and caring for horses, as well as the importance of medical research into health issues relating to horses. That is the charity part. The Arabian benefit comes when the animals people

meet are, for the most part, the legendarily majestic horses of the desert—who also just happen to be very user-friendly for humans.

At Battaglia Farms, the program in 2008 was planned for maximum efficiency. Their two charities, Healing Hearts of Arizona and the Morris Animal Foundation, have diverse missions and so do not directly compete for support.

The idea of charity fundraising as promotion was born when the current Battaglia Farms was being built. Battaglia and Vento knew that their supervising veterinarian, Laura Harris D.V.M., and her husband, Glenn Shear, were deeply committed to the Morris Animal Foundation. When Shear became instrumental in the construction of the ranch, Battaglia expressed his appreciation by offering to host a fundraiser for the Foundation. Last year, when it was time to schedule the event, client Susan Drescher-Mulzet, chairman of the board for Healing Hearts of Arizona, was interested in doing a fundraiser for her organization as well, so she and Harris coordinated the two efforts. Using the same facility allowed them to cost share, so that more dollars earned could go straight to their missions—and the horses and horsemen got more exposure for their efforts as well.

The Basics

For the weekend, Battaglia Farms employed a few core precepts. First, although the facility was the same each night, the target audience and the ambience of the parties were not. Friday night's "Dining With The Horses," for Healing Hearts of Arizona, was geared for people new to horses, while Saturday's "A Night With The Horses," for the Morris Animal Foundation, appealed to those already within the equine community.

Second, a special, comfortable atmosphere was created. The farm was dressed up for the holiday season in gala attire; its thousand-foot driveway was lined with Christmas trees, glittering in the winter twilight. Guests were greeted first by valet parking attendants, who whisked away cars for remote parking, and then waiters offering glasses of champagne. The farm's expansive barn was set up like a dining room with a stage, hay bales marking off an aisle-like performance area that ran the length of the structure. In the aisle's center was a circle, where horses could be presented at a stand-up—and the reining horse could spin furiously, flinging a spray of dirt over those close up (usually delighting children).

The rest of the arena was devoted to tables dressed in black linens. On Friday night, for Healing Hearts' 170 guests, the centerpieces were made of carrots and candy canes, which could be dismantled and fed to the horses (candy canes rather than drops, to accommodate inexperienced hands). A string quartet serenaded the guests.

"Susan wanted something intimate, an evening with horses," Bob Battaglia says. "It was not formal, but it was done well, and slated toward families and animals, in a personal, comfortable atmosphere."

The following night, for 400 attendees, a statue of a lounging lion decorated the announcer's stage. Table decorations were sparkly branches and fiber optics, and the music was upbeat. The linen-dressed tables, as before, stretched away seamlessly.

"Bob and Russ did a fabulous job of turning the barn into a banquet hall," notes Laura Harris. "The enthusiasm and energy were huge."

The third precept was that more than just Arabian horses were included; adding other breeds broadened the events' appeal without diminishing the charismatic Arabians.



Betty Welton and Susan Drescher-Mulzet.



Dr. Laura Harris and Russ Vento.



The Entertainment

"There was something for everybody," says Russ Vento, who notes that the Battaglia crew was not the only driving force behind the galas. "We have a lot of great trainers in the Scottsdale area, and everybody got together to make a presentation for equines in general. The crowd was just blown away."

The entertainment was basically the same each night, although in some cases the equine faces changed. On hand were:

- Thiago Sobral of Thiago Sobral Performance Horses and TA Khalil, reigning U.S. National Champion in Reining 5 and Under.
- Chase Harvill, with Infinity CSP, former U.S. National Champion in Informal Combination, as well top ten in English pleasure and park.
- Amateur rider Olivia Stull, riding in native costume on EA Galaxy, a national titlist in show hack, side saddle and native costume.
- Bob Battaglia and Afires Vision, whose national championships and top tens span the English pleasure, driving, and park divisions.
- Shannon Beethe, riding side saddle on TL Hearts And Flowers, a multi-national champion in an array of divisions.
- Jeff Lovejoy of Lone Mountain Training Center and the elegant Penelope Krewse, demonstrating show hack.
- Chase Harvill and Second Sight, reigning Canadian National Reserve Champion English Pleasure Junior horse.
- Amateur Susan Drescher-Mulzet, with U.S. National Champion Astro Man, showing off in country English pleasure (they accounted for the 55 & Over title in 2008, so Drescher-Mulzet demonstrated not only the horse's talent, but the availability of Arabians for any age group).
- Bob Battaglia and Rubie Slippers, U.S. National Top Ten in English Pleasure.
- Roman Marcos of Emerald Hills Ranch and the rising five-gaited American Saddlebred star Our Sweet Addison, a winner at the American Royal.
- Dressage specialist Gintara Slavinskas and Catano.
- Austin Van Wyck and a selection of miniature horses.



The Charities And Their Importance

A key element in the drive behind the Battaglia effort was the track record of real service provided by the two charities.

Friday night belonged to Healing Hearts of Arizona for its “Dining With The Horses.” A sanctuary located in Willcox, Ariz., it was founded to take in abandoned, abused and neglected horses. It was originally designed to work primarily with the Department of Agriculture and other governmental agencies to house horses that had been seized by inspectors, but now, due to the dire economic circumstances (an estimated 500 horses a week from northern Maricopa County alone are bound for slaughter facilities across the border), it works with individuals and other animal welfare associations to rescue animals in need.

At its 54-acre sanctuary, Healing Hearts has the capacity to house 60 horses. Also on hand are goats, cows, pigs, rabbits, dogs and cats (nearly any abandoned, abused or neglected farm or domestic animal, although the focus is on horses). A full-time caretaker lives there, assisted by two part-timers and a growing number of volunteers. Horses are not only fed, housed and turned out, but also groomed, petted and played with to maintain the sociability necessary for their welfare.

The organization, which is modeled after the famed Best Friends of Kanab, Utah, has a comprehensive agenda. The urgency of the equine situation in the troubled economy is the highest priority now, but plans call for an expanded program of public education (particularly for children) in animal care and the state of the horse community. Also in the future is a veterinary facility and a full-time veterinarian who can offer low-cost spay and neutering.

On Saturday night, Morris Animal Foundation took center stage for “A Night With Horses.”

“There were 400 people from the audience who probably thought that Morris was a cat up until that night,” Laura Harris says dryly. “The Foundation was started by Dr. Mark Morris more than 60 years ago. The administrative costs are covered by endowment, so if you make a donation, 100 percent goes to research. It supports the industry through research—not on animals, but for animals.”

While Harris may be jesting about guests thinking of Morris only as the cat of television fame (most horse people are aware of the Morris Animal Foundation), she is not joking that there is a need to publicize the organization’s work. A selection of its projects includes mapping the equine genome; work on the development of the Potomac horse fever vaccine; improved pain-relief options for colic, laminitis and other diseases; a genetic test for carriers of Combined Immunodeficiency (CID); and the discovery that several forms of tying-up are inherited.

What is attracting special attention now is the Equine Consortium for Genetic Research, the first focus of the



Morris Animal Foundation Fundraiser speakers and the silent auction.





A view of the Healing Hearts fundraiser.

Foundation's international Equine Health Initiative. A five-year study based at the University of Minnesota, the Consortium involves 32 scientists from 18 top equine research facilities in nine countries, and will seek to identify genetic markers for equine diseases and conditions.

Dr. Harris puts the comprehensive program into perspective. "Let's say you have a barn that is full of horses, and you know that the chances are that one of them will develop laminitis or colic, or will become a cribber, or will be affected by navicular. To minimize laminitis, then, how do you figure out the ones you'll put on a low-carbohydrate diet and watch like a hawk? Right now, we just have to wait until something happens. But what if you could blood test all of them? Proactively screen the at-risk horses, and treat them differently from the beginning? What if we could find the genetic marker for navicular? Then you could just work that horse differently. For cribbers, you could house them appropriately. People might be afraid that we would just eliminate those horses, but when the condition is not life-threatening, we could just change their management."

A variety of donation alternatives are available, and funds may be earmarked for particular research projects, such as examinations of bone, gastrointestinal or neurological disorders, eye diseases, foal diseases, pain management, genetic research and a host of other studies, and contributions may be named in honor of deserving animals or people. Donors also may consider gift annuities, a variety of trusts, bequests and other avenues to benefit the Foundation.

In addition to the presentation of horses, which got the crowd in a good mood, live and silent auctions were held. Chase Harvill, as master of ceremonies, encouraged the crowd with friendly banter. "We're all glad you're here," he told the guests, "but pull out your checkbooks!" The result was more than \$57,000 earned that evening, and the promise of further donations throughout the year.

As importantly, the horse community became better acquainted with the Morris Animal Foundation. Veterinarians not only from

this country but internationally as well were in the crowd, along with representatives of Platinum Performance and a number of other equine-oriented companies. Several corporations which did not typically support "Arabian" events came aboard to help the Foundation, and one committed to underwriting the event next year.

It all started with an idea and a sense of commitment. "If Bob and Russ hadn't volunteered their place and basically shut down for two weeks to get ready, it wouldn't have happened," Laura Harris says. "Right now, this is the only equine-oriented event in the nation for the Morris Animal Foundation. It needs to be happening across the U.S. Anyone who wants to put on one somewhere else would be welcome; I hope someone takes hold of it, and I would be more than happy to tell them about things we've learned and how we do it."

The Ongoing Role Of Promotion

For Bob Battaglia and Russ Vento, the effort that went into preparing for the fundraisers was worth it. "Owning our own facility, Bob is always thinking of ways to introduce new people to horses," Russ says. "Our neighbors came, different people who've never seen horses. We didn't turn anybody away."

"Bob and the farm have always been involved in promotion of the Arabian horse, all the way back to the Arabian horse fairs," he continues. "In the past few years, we've done that with open barns for the public, and programs like Battaglia Camp, where amateurs come to work on their skills. That is open not just to clients, but to the public also. Our whole concept is that what we do should not always be about business and furthering ourselves, but about introducing people to the Arabian horse and promoting it in a different venue than just the show ring." 🐾