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Issue Archive

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Equine Program Far More Than Just Horsing Around

Tucked on the leeward side of a hill in the northeastern section of campus and surrounded by neat white picket fences are the University's horse barns. The structures are unassuming. Built low to the ground and painted a ruddy color, they exude a sense of simplicity and calm. Inside, the air is thick with earthy scents of caked mud, manure and sweet hay, and filled with the gentle sounds of horses rusting in their stalls.

Underlying the serenity of the barns is a vibrant equine program.

The equine program started in the late 19th century, soon after the establishment of the University as Connecticut Agricultural College. The College initially bred draft horses - the last two are honored by a grist mill stone monument outside the barns - but began to switch to breeding light horses, particularly Morgans, in 1931.

"The first Morgans the University acquired came from the U.S. government breeding program," says John Bennett, manager of the horse barns. "The U.S. Government began to distribute some of its breeding stock to land grant universities, because it foresaw a decline in the number of horses for calvary purposes and wanted to perpetuate the breed."

From the original four horses obtained from the government breeding program, the University's Morgan horse population has grown to 55. The remainder of the University's current horse population, which totals about 85, comprises other breeds, including Thoroughbreds, Quarter horses, and Appaloosas. Throughout the fall, spring and summer, these horses can be seen grazing in the rolling green field opposite the barns.

Horsepower

Draft horses, with their strong, sturdy legs, were used as a source of power in the early days of the University, says Al Cowan, professor emeritus of animal science who served as department head for more than 30 years.

The majority were used to haul coal, but one particular horse, Artimon, a French coach stallion standing 16 hands high (one hand is equal to four inches) and weighing 1,300 pounds, had the honor of pulling the president's carriage. When the hurricane of 1938 struck, draft horses were also used to supplement tractors in removing the trees that had fallen all over campus.

Students had to learn how to look after these animals, says Cowan, and that's how the academic aspect of the University's equine program began. Although the introduction of the tractor in the 1920s reduced the University's reliance on draft horses, the academic program continued after the shift to light horses.

The six generations of horses that have passed through the barns have provided hands-on instruction for students in the anatomy, physiology and nutrition of the equine species, as well as their breeding, training, and management.

Today, students interested in a career dealing with horses may enroll in either the two-year animal science program in the Ratcliffe Hicks School of Agriculture or the four-year bachelor of science program in the Department of Animal Science. Students in either program may select the equine science option. In the 2000-2001 academic year, about half of the 190 animal science majors chose this

concentration.

Career Options

Students who graduate from the program have a number of career options.

"Many study veterinary medicine, some teach, some become professional horsemen - trainers or polo players. Others become lawyers or write for magazines," says Jim Dinger, head of the UConn polo program and an associate professor of animal science. "While the majority of students do not go on to train or ride horses professionally, most will have horses and use them for recreation."

Equine science faculty also undertake research. During the 1980s, for example, Dinger's research with embryo transfers in horses helped UConn to become one of the first institutions to register a foal from embryo transfer.

Cameron Faustman, interim head of the animal science department, says a new horse science extension specialist is to be hired soon. He says he expects the specialist to initiate new research projects and to provide educational forums for youth and adult audiences.

The shiny trophies, brightly colored ribbons, plaques and pictures arranged in display cases throughout the barns are evidence that the extracurricular opportunities associated with the equine program are also flourishing.

The University offers active horse and polo practicums, or clubs, that are open to all University majors. Janice Callahan, a lecturer in animal science and coach of the equestrian team, says over the past 10 years, she has seen a 25 percent increase in the number of students participating in the horse practicum.

"Individuals don't necessarily have to be animal science majors to get involved with the practicums," says Bennett. "That way we attract people to our program both academically and athletically."

Winning Teams

The University boasts winning equestrian and polo teams, whose members are selected out of the practicums. The men's polo team won the National Intercollegiate Polo Championships in 1972, 1973 and 1974. The women's polo team won the Championships in 1996, 1997, and 1998. The women's equestrian team won the regional championship in 1998 and also made an excellent showing at nationals in 1999 and 2000, earning the title of reserve champions in both years.

Evidence that the University's riding and polo programs are growing has become more visible recently. Rising out of the low-lying barns is a new agricultural arena, whose construction was in part funded by the UConn 2000 project. Scheduled to be finished next month, the 150 by 220-foot arena will replace the old Ratcliffe Hicks Arena and will house equestrian competitions and polo matches.

"The new arena will make it a lot more comfortable to operate," says Bennett. "It's going to attract more people to the program and it's going to have an economic impact, because we can have more events here."

The University's equine program also encourages public involvement. A horse and tack auction is held in late April of each year and last weekend saw the first annual student-sponsored horse show at UConn. Riding lessons at the barns during the summer are also becoming increasingly popular. Callahan says there has been a 25 percent increase in enrollment over the past 10 years.

Rebecca Stygar

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Draft Horses Part of University Life



Like other land grant colleges, UConn once had draft horses for teaching, extension, research, and farm crop work. Draft horses are no longer used for these purposes, but the University still has light horses for equine science programs.

Archival photo courtesy of CANR

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