

# EQUUS EXTRA

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## ***PUT AN END TO BARN DRAMA!***

- Conflict resolution skills
- How horses are affected
- When it's time to move on

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# PUT AN END TO BARN DRAMA

ADOBE STOCK

While it's impossible to prevent all discord at the barn, conflict resolution techniques can help solve problems, restore calm and enable everyone to enjoy their horses.

*By Joanne L. Belasco, Esq.*

**T**o people outside the horse world, the idea of handling unpredictable animals that weigh upwards of 1,000 pounds seems nothing short of death-defying. But, for many of us, the challenge of working with horses is not nearly as daunting as contending with the other volatile creatures we sometimes encounter at the barn. You know what I'm talking about: barn drama and the people who create it.

If you don't frequent a boarding stable or large riding facility, you may not have firsthand experience with the simmering tensions—and worse—that sometimes darken the atmosphere where horsepeople gather. But barn drama is fairly common (some would say inevitable) where individuals who have invested time and money on equestrian pursuits share amenities and interact regularly. Trouble may start with something minor, perhaps a borrowed currycomb or a disagreement





about training philosophies, but things can get ugly with surprising speed. And when they do, disputes may lead to shouting matches, whisper campaigns and outright criminality involving vandalism, theft or even assault.

Indeed, local papers and riding newsletters occasionally chronicle the fallout from this phenomenon. The next time you see a headline about an act of vandalism at a barn—for example, the unauthorized shearing of a horse's tail—suspect a barn dispute gone bad. The topic has even been covered by the Wall Street Journal, which in 2014 published a story called “What the Hay? ‘Barn Drama’ Puts Riders on Their High Horses.” The article describes the problem this way: “Take a group of passionate, opinionated individualists. (Riding, a solo activity, doesn’t attract ‘team players.’) Give them a consuming hobby centered on a delicate, expensive living creature. Put them in close quarters ... and let the backbiting begin.”

Barn drama takes a toll on individuals and is a drain on the horse industry. It can shatter relationships, tarnish joyful events and even threaten the

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livelihoods of horse-industry professionals. It's a common reason why people change boarding facilities, switch trainers, leave riding clubs and stop participating in shows or other events. In short, barn drama has the potential to destroy the dreams people have spent a lifetime pursuing.

Yet many people who have weathered the worst effects of barn drama assume that their experience was an exception, or that the problem was of their own making. Worse, many barn owners, trainers and other professionals

responsible for equine community infrastructure don't appreciate just how devastating equestrian grudge matches can be. But with clear policies and commonsense methods for resolving issues, it's possible to head off many barn disputes entirely and to keep those that do occur from escalating to the point that lawyers and courts become involved.

For starters, the law—or at least the elements that underpin legal agreements—can be used to encourage clear and positive communication among individuals, which in itself can defuse tensions and offer a path toward resolution. A framework that includes written contracts that spell out mutual expectations, including rights and responsibilities, for all who board horses, use services or participate in other activities will help to insulate a community against the most common causes of barn drama. But if problems still arise, take another page from the legal profession and apply conflict resolution tools to de-escalate the situation, protect important relationships and preserve the quality of life for all involved.





## CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS FOR EQUESTRIANS

The idea of resolving issues without lawsuits has been gaining traction in the legal community for several decades. Proper screening protocols, written contracts and clearly communicated rules can go a long way toward preventing disputes and other problems, but there's no way to eliminate barn drama entirely. When it does occur, however, there are ways to de-escalate the conflict well before the parties involved resort to legal action. While entire books are written—and courses are taught—about conflict resolution, you need not be a lawyer to apply these nine techniques for de-escalating and finding a solution to the problem at hand.

**1 Foster a team approach.** We're all at the barn because we love horses. Many facilities talk about having a family atmosphere. While that may not be a good analogy for people

## CASE IN POINT HEAD GAMES



Barbara ran a boarding barn serving riders of all disciplines, although most boarders rode an English discipline of some kind. She decided when she opened her barn to establish a rule requiring all riders, no matter the discipline, to wear helmets. This requirement was written into the barn rules that every boarder signed along with the boarding contract.

Marie was interested in boarding her horse at Barbara's barn. As they walked around the facility together, Marie commented to Barbara that she was surprised everyone was wearing a helmet, even the Western

riders. Barbara explained that this was required. She asked Marie if that would be a problem, but Marie said it wasn't a big deal.

Marie began boarding at the barn and right away problems arose. She would ride bareheaded and when other boarders made comments, she would simply say that she left her helmet at home or needed to get a new one. Some boarders began to resent being required to wear a helmet, when Marie didn't. They began to talk behind Marie's back and then would loudly comment on her not wearing a helmet, making sure she could hear them.

Barbara noticed Marie's lack of compliance with the barn rules. She spoke with her, reminding her everyone was required to wear a helmet when riding, with no exceptions. Marie said she didn't realize the barn rules were going to be enforced but thought they were just suggestions. Barbara reiterated they were rules that needed to be followed and that if Marie did not wear a helmet she'd be in violation of the boarding agreement. Barbara also offered to let Marie out of her boarding contract with no penalty if she wanted to move to another barn.

with dysfunctional families, the sentiment is one that is important to keep in mind. Everyone needs to realize and recognize that the barn functions best when everyone's actions support the barn, people who board there and their horses. This attitude doesn't mean that everyone has to ride together or always agree about things. But it does call for letting people know that they matter, listening to them and making sure they know that what they do at the barn affects the atmosphere and success of the barn. A shared vision

of a successful barn is the first step to ensuring everyone continues to have a good place for themselves and their horses.

**2 Address problems quickly so they don't escalate.** We have all had the experience of being in conflict with someone and not saying or doing anything to address it. It's hard to deal with these situations, but we know that failing to do so actually causes them to fester and get worse. We tend to think about what happened over and over





## CASE IN POINT A “WANNABE” TRAINER

Amanda was a beginning rider who had watched several DVDs featuring one particular trainer and had gone to many of his clinics around the country. She bought a green filly and found a small facility to board her. Unfortunately, Amanda felt that she knew more than the other people at the barn. It wasn't long before Amanda was telling everyone how she thought they should ride and train their horses. She even criticized the conformation of boarded horses and the tack other riders used.

The barn owner, Jessica, saw the other boarders becoming more uncomfortable and decided to intervene. She scheduled a time to talk to Amanda in private. She listened to Amanda's concerns about the way other people were training their horses. She then asked Amanda to listen to her in the same manner. She did not criticize Amanda's newfound knowledge. She explained some of the training techniques used by other boarders to Amanda, and why those techniques had been cho-

sen instead of others.

Amanda found it hard to listen at first but Jessica was careful to avoid putting her on the defensive. As a result Amanda listened and, while she told Jessica that she thought she would stick with her own training method, she understood that there were many valid ones to choose from so she wouldn't be judging others for their decisions. When Amanda's unsolicited critiques stopped, the other boarders didn't immediately warm up to her, but the tension in the barn eased significantly. Ultimately, everyone got along.

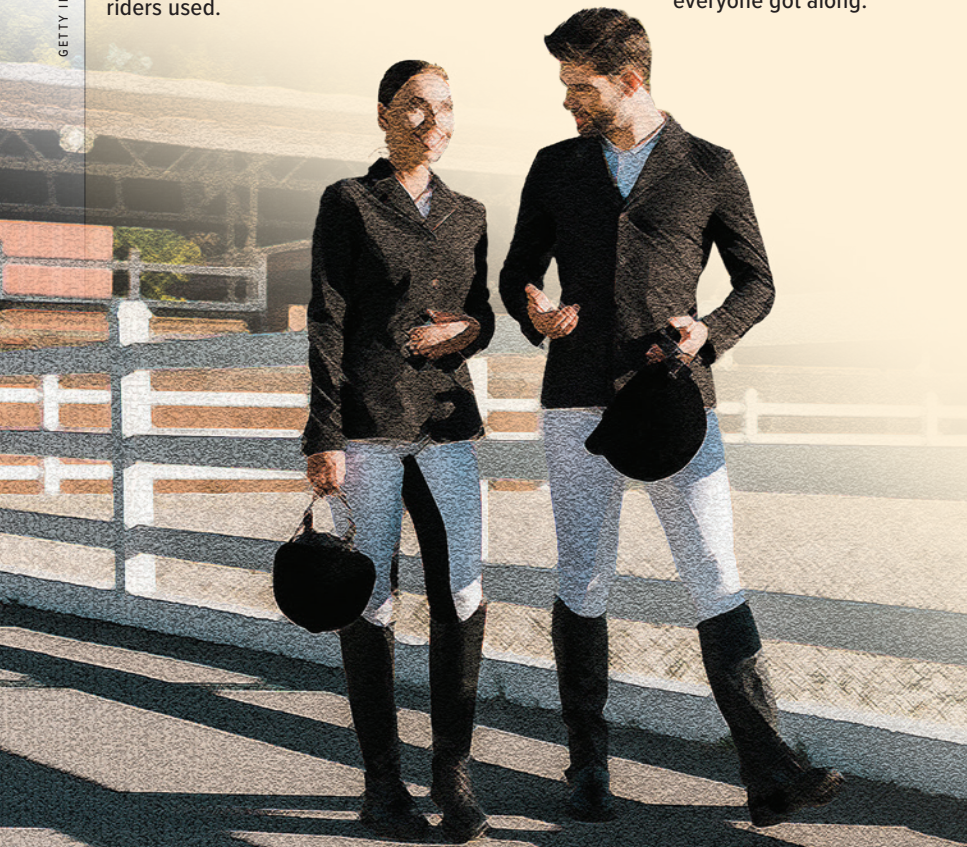


and get angrier and angrier. Then, if additional things happen, the situation becomes explosive. It's better for everyone to address problems as soon as possible in a productive and calm manner.

**3. Don't gossip about the problem to others.** It can be tempting to complain to others instead of talking to the person directly or bringing the problem to the attention of the barn owner. The person you speak to depends on your specific situation, and you need to use your best judgment. But idle gossiping does nothing to solve the problem.

**4. Focus on the issue, not the person or horse.** Whether you are dealing directly with the other party or the barn owner has been asked to intervene, limit your discussion to the problem and avoid veering off into personal attacks against the person or her horse. This focus requires the realization and acceptance that we don't always get along with everyone.

That is simply a fact of living in a so-







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ciety, and one that we must all accept. For example, if a complaint involves a boarder leaving her tack all over the barn, don't make the discussion about how that person is unorganized or messy. The issue is that the tack takes up space and may be in the way. Focus on that and find ways to resolve it.

**5. Really listen to the other person.** Listening is an underappreciated skill nowadays. In our fast-paced culture we need to slow down, be patient and receptive to what the other person is saying. One important concept is opening up your heart and mind to what that person is saying. Softening to the other person's statements does not mean you are wrong, a bad person or admitting guilt. It simply means that you don't put up walls between you. To resolve a problem, you'll need to have a true conversation, and that can only happen if both parties are really listening to each other as well as speaking.

**6. Use "I" statements when discussing the problem.** Once we start using "you" language, it's far too

easy to escalate into blaming the person for the situation instead of working to resolve it. When you use "I," you accomplish several goals. First, you ensure that you aren't attacking the other person. Second, it causes you to stop and think about what is really bothering you. Third, it allows the person doing the listening to hear how the situation is affecting someone else—perhaps in a way they never have before. In the example of tack being left around the barn, someone saying "I can't put my tack anywhere when I saddle up if there is a saddle in that spot already," clearly explains the problem and lets the other person see how her behavior is causing an issue for others, one that is actually easily solved.

**7. Be prepared to agree to disagree.** Even in the best situations, sometimes we just need to agree to disagree. One of the main situations where this can arise in barn drama involves training techniques. There has been a huge proliferation of training systems over the years, and as we all know, discussions can become quite heated

about them. While disagreements such as this should not create a problem, they can certainly make a barn atmosphere uncomfortable. In situations such as these, the best course of action is to honestly agree to disagree—which also means not continuing to talk about it behind the other person's back.

**8. Get a neutral party involved.** Sometimes situations are so serious—perhaps because they involve potential for injury or large sums of money—that a professional is needed to resolve them. Someone trained in conflict resolution or mediation has the skills and experience to help the parties involved in a nonjudgmental, unbiased way. It may even be that a conflict resolution workshop or seminar benefits the entire barn so that people can see that being in conflict isn't unique to them or their barn. In fact, they may even learn skills they can use away from the barn.

**9. Drop the issue once it's resolved.** Arrange to discuss the issue somewhere that will allow privacy



**CONFLICT HAS A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON HORSES:** The more we learn about the horse-human relationship, the more we understand how much people's behavior and mental attitude affect our horses. When you are upset by barn drama, your horse knows it and is likely to be more nervous and agitated as a result. It's not that people have to be happy all the time at the barn, but issues need to be addressed rather than allowed to fester because that ultimately will work against the welfare of the horses at the barn.

and enough time to reach a resolution. And when you achieve agreement or come close enough to satisfy each party, move on.

Resist the temptation to mull over discussions once they have finished—we all find ourselves thinking we should have added something we didn't say at the time. But let those feelings go—to do otherwise will

jeopardize all of the progress you've made. If you feel you cannot drop the issue, then you need to think long and hard about why you feel that way and whether further discussion is warranted or will accomplish anything. Sometimes, as hard as it is to admit to ourselves, the situation has been resolved, and we have to work on ourselves at that point.

**B**arn drama needn't be something that prevents us from enjoying our horses. We can work to prevent disputes and, if they do occur, address them in healthy ways. The thing to remember is that we are all in this because of what we all—even with horsepeople we dislike—have in common: we love horses and want to enjoy our time at the barn. 🐾

**About the Author:** Joanne L. Belasco, Esq. has worked as a horse professional for 20 years through Tapestry Institute and Understanding the Horse, and has been a member of the Massachusetts bar since 1993. Her online law firm Windhorse Legal combines the two fields to provide the horse community with contracts, counsel and business consulting.

## CASE IN POINT TIME TO MOVE ON



Susan had ridden for many years but after a bad fall, she had become fearful. She kept her horse, Angus, at a barn that had many different levels of riders, different ages of riders, and different disciplines.

Recently, the barn had become so busy that Susan had decided to ride in the evenings because the indoor arena was just too crowded at any other time. Riding with others, many of whom were younger and apt to spend more time cantering and jumping, made Susan more and more anxious. There were some days she simply went to the barn and

just groomed and hand-grazed her horse because she was too scared to ride in the busy arena.

Angus also changed once the barn became more successful. The gelding pasture had more horses in it than ever before, and the usually mellow geldings had started to get into fights. Angus, a normally calm horse, was becoming more and more agitated.

Because there were more people at the barn, there were often arguments about who could use the cross ties. Sometimes people argued over the wash stall

and other amenities. Whenever this happened, Angus became so tense that Susan would usually decide not to ride him.

Susan wasn't sure what to do about the situation. She spoke to the barn owner who suggested longeing Angus and to just "get on and ride" to get rid of fear. When Susan asked what the barn owner's plan was if more people wanted to board there, she was told new boarders would be welcome to help make the barn more successful. It was clear that barn no longer met Susan's needs, so she made the difficult deci-

sion to leave for a smaller, less busy property.

About two weeks after settling in to the new barn, Susan noticed a marked difference in Angus. He was no longer agitated and upset. Susan also found that the other boarders were supportive in helping her get over her fear. That support and the quieter energy helped Susan and Angus develop a great relationship, and Susan looked forward to each ride they had together.





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