

So You Want To Be A *Working Student*

BY SUZANNAH EVANS



ABOVE: While being a working student can be an intense and sometimes thankless job, it is often some of the best hands-on education a young rider can find in the equine industry. PHOTO COURTESY C-SQUARED FARM

If you're serious about pursuing a career in eventing, there's no greater opportunity to learn the business than as a working student, where you can trade your long hours in the barn for a first-class education.

Network To Get A Position

Sinead Halpin, the top-placed American at Rolex Kentucky CCI4* this year, was a working student for international eventer Stuart Black, and later moved to England to work as a rider for William Fox-Pitt. She advises potential working students to reach out to the riders they want to learn from.

"I've heard comments of, 'You're so lucky to work with the people you've worked with.' I appreciate that, and I am very lucky, but it wasn't very hard. It was literally a phone call," Sinead said. "People don't realize, especially kids, how accessible professionals are. If you're willing to work, you can get into pretty much any barn."

Many professionals list working student opportunities on their website, or on yardandgroom.com and other classifieds sites. A short email, direct phone call, or even approaching a rider at a competition can help land you an interview.

Find the Right Barn

While all working students can expect long days in the barn, different riders will have different experiences to offer potential working students. The majority of your time may be spent with other barn staff and working students rather than the professional rider, so a good match is key, said Megan Kepferle, Sinead's head girl and barn manager.

"Most pros aren't in the barn all day. They come, they ride, they leave. That could be something that's unexpected," Megan said. "You need to get along with the people you're working with, because if you don't, you're going to be miserable; You're living with these people, seeing these people six or seven days a week."

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Megan stressed the importance of being honest about your expectations, and whether they match up.

"Don't waste time when you can go somewhere else," she said. "There's a barn for everyone."

Be Prepared To Work Hard

Make no mistake, a working student job can be grueling. Farm chores and horse care eat up the day, and in many cases, even riding is a perk. Time off is a rarity in many programs.

For working students, who are often in high school or college, the transition from school work to hard labor can be jarring.

"When I got here, I thought it was a tremendous amount of work," said Gillian Cowley, a high school freshman and working student for Courtney Cooper in Pennsylvania. "I didn't know if I was going to be able to keep doing it. Then I just sort of pushed on, and it got so much better. I learned to balance the amount of work with all the fun you're

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— Courtney Cooper

having."

A good work ethic is the most important thing Sinead took from her time at Stuart Black's, where there was no guarantee of time off or even a standard hour to leave the barn each day. With Megan's help, she tries to have more regular hours at her barn, but she still stresses the importance of a willingness to work.

"I think a working student is somebody who needs to come in and have a smile on their face and just go to work," she said. "That's the number one priority in my barn."

Soak Up Knowledge

The behind-the-scenes aspect of a working student position is a masterclass in how to run a top-tier barn.

"You're not just seeing the rider winning ribbons," Megan said. "You're seeing what they go through on an emotional level and on a financial level. You see what it takes to keep an upper level horse sound, which is a lot of work."

Sinead expects her working students to be helping in the ring as she rides, learning as they go. "I'm not going to be teaching them every day, but we should always have a conversation," she said. "I'll always ask, what did you see today, what did you notice about this horse?"

Not all barns will offer much saddle time, but Courtney Cooper's C Square Farm is an exception. With a large number of sale horses coming through, each of her three working students may ride two or more horses a day, an education in itself.

Anna Schmitt, a senior at York College and a working student at Courtney's this summer, learned to adjust her riding style for different horses.

"Maybe you're on a horse who is very strong to fences and pulling his face isn't going to work; maybe instead of two-point, you try sitting on that horse," she said. "You have to get on and not be afraid to try different things."

Did We Mention Work Hard?

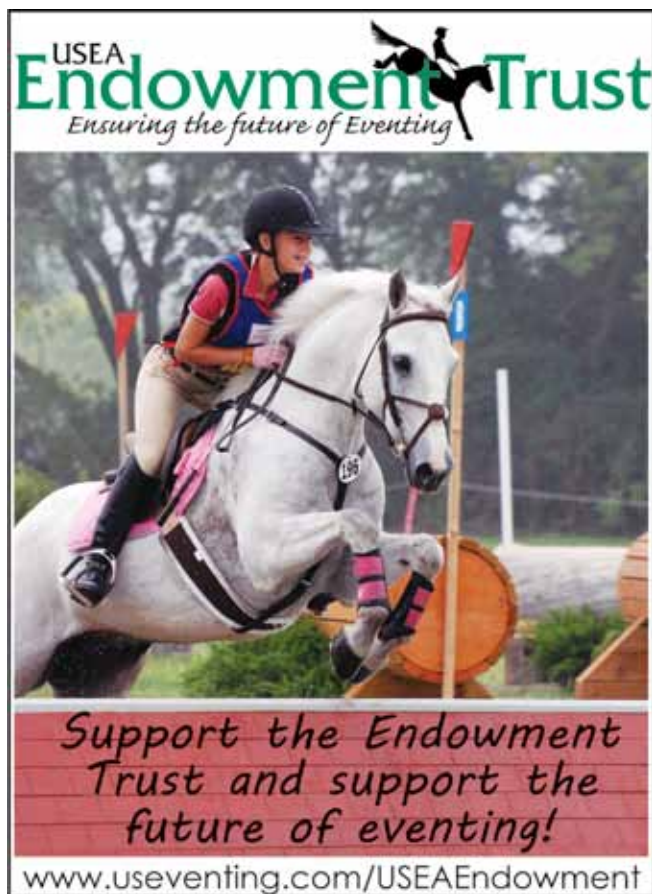
You don't have to be an expert rider or the world's fastest polo-wraper when you take a working student position. In fact, Courtney Cooper says she prefers students who come ready to learn as much as possible.

"I look for the same thing in a working student that I look for in a horse: a work ethic," Courtney said.

Maria Granello, a senior in high school, worked for Courtney this summer. "It's not as important how good you are but how hard you're willing to work, and how much you try. That matters more than talent," she said.

Speak Up If There's A Problem

Most professionals want a commitment from a summer to a year, but high turnover is a reality in the working student world.



Long days often full of grunt work for no pay can be a drag for students.

The best thing to do is to approach your manager, whether it's a barn staffer or the rider, and discuss options for keeping your head.

"The worst thing you can do is keep it to yourself and be in a bad mood, then all of a sudden pick up and leave because something is going on at home," Sinead said. "Communication is incredibly important."

Sometimes working student positions just don't pan out. Speaking frankly but professionally with your boss can help you ease out, and the rider can even help you find another position in a more suitable barn.

Enjoy Every Opportunity

The event world is small, and working in a professional's barn will expose you to the top trainers and horses in the discipline. There's no better way to find out if you really have the stuff to run your own barn.

"If you roll up your sleeves and scrub the buckets and shine the brass, then you can sit by the ring and watch Advanced riders take lessons from Mark Phillips and David O'Connor," Megan said. "It's really cool to be able to trade your blood and sweat to be exposed to that caliber of education. Five years ago, David O'Connor was a poster on my wall and now I have inside jokes with him."