

# AQHA eBooks

The Full Spectrum  
of Arena Care:  
From Building to  
Maintenance



**JOHN DEERE**



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Whether you're in the market to build a new arena, or you're interested in learning more about maintaining the surface of an existing arena, several experts weigh in on various elements that go into creating the best possible footing for your horses. Surfaces should vary depending on the disciplines practiced, and climate should be taken into consideration when it comes to the amount of water needed to keep the arena surface supportive and safe.

AQHA corporate partner John Deere provides the professional equipment needed to care for arenas of any size. John Deere is driven by integrity, quality, commitment and innovation as it provides customers around the world with work equipment and has been a trusted supplier of equipment and service to the equine industry for generations.

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# Building an Arena From the Ground Up

*With these tips, planning an arena of your own doesn't have to be overwhelming.*

**By Abigail Boatwright**

If you are like many American Quarter Horse enthusiasts, much of the time you devote to working with your horse is spent in arenas. Whether it's to hone your skills or to avoid muddy trails, arenas hold an important place in the landscape of your equine facility. Three arena designers offer tips on what to consider if you are building an arena.

## **Determine Your Needs**

Matthew Johnson, owner of Equine Facility Design, says before he begins an arena project with a client, he likes to discuss the ways the client plans to use the arena, what their future goals are and what their budget looks like.

"We talk through all of the different paths they might take, and discuss how size, construction and budget might factor into it so they can make the best decision," Matthew says.

You might be dreaming of a huge indoor arena with high-tech footing

and stadium seating, but unless you have a sizeable chunk of change, you may have to revise your vision. Arena design consultants Bob and Jim Kiser suggest evaluating what you need and what you can realistically afford before you begin building your arena.

"We see it a lot," Bob says. "People have an idea of what they want to do, but then when they go through the process of designing it, in some cases they start to see it is going to cost way more money than what they anticipated to do it right. So then they have to start downsizing, and often that affects the footing."

## **Indoors or Outdoors?**

Bob says the size of your arena and whether it's indoors or outdoors will be the biggest factors to your overall cost. Footing will be the other big expense, and you'll also need to invest in maintenance equipment to care for your footing.

Outdoor arenas are a wonderful

place to experience nature with your horse. Matthew says he enjoys riding outdoors, especially when the arena has a nice view of his hometown, Portland, Oregon.

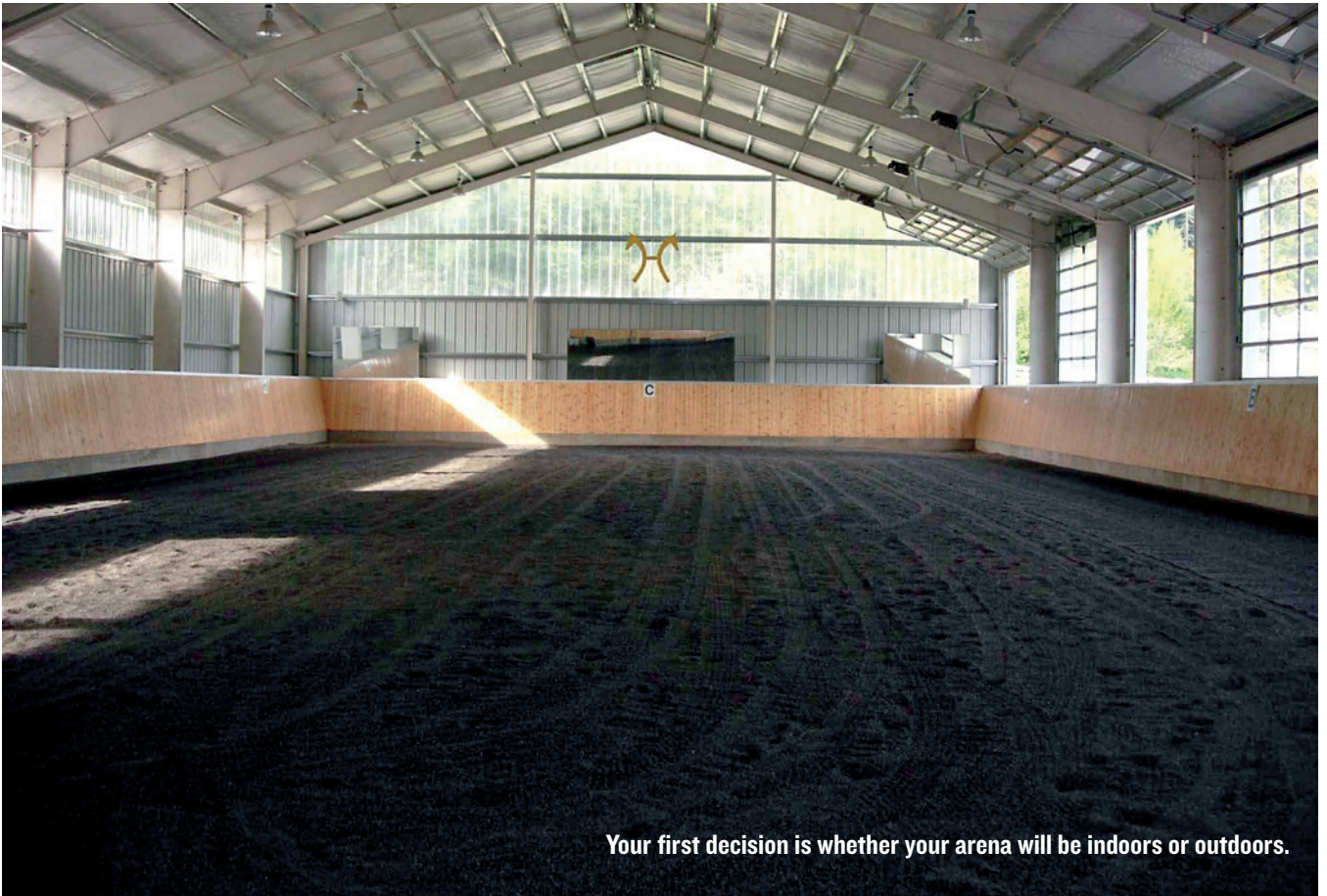
"Everyone likes to ride outside," Matthew says, "until it's really hot, or cold, or raining. But I think most people would say they want to ride outside."

Outdoor arenas work for owners who don't need to ride every day and can take a day off when the weather is bad. They are also ideal for clients needing large arenas, where covering them would be cost prohibitive.

For an outdoor arena, the main benefit you'll see is lower overall cost compared to an indoor facility. However, all three experts agree that preparing for and installing the footing to withstand weather elements is far more complex and expensive than constructing the floor of a covered facility.

"Just putting in the base footing for





Your first decision is whether your arena will be indoors or outdoors.







Viewing areas for spectators is one upgrade to consider for your arena.

an outdoor arena, I would say, is twice as expensive to construct as a covered arena,” Bob says. “It requires a lot of grading, a lot of drainage work, and your material selection is more limited outdoors because it’s more weather-sensitive. Sometimes you’ll have to ship material from a distance, which also adds to the cost.”

The base beneath the footing will be more expensive outdoors, and Matthew says depending on the footing you choose, you might have to replace the footing sooner outdoors due to weather.

“The lifespan of your footing may be longer indoors because it’s not exposed to the elements,” Matthew says. “Even if you don’t ride on your outdoor arena, it’s going to go

through the natural cycle of seasons so the footing will degrade. Indoors, if you don’t ever ride on the surface, it won’t break down as fast.”

An indoor arena will cost more overall to build the structure, but all three experts say the benefits outweigh the negative.

“On an indoor arena, the biggest benefit I see is that you can ride in it every day, no matter what,” Bob says. “The footing is also less expensive and much less complex to install.”

For serious riders who need to ride rain or shine, cold or hot, the Kisers say an indoor or covered arena is almost a necessity, if you can afford it.

No matter what type of arena you choose to build, your footing is a

top priority and should be carefully considered.

### **Make Footing a Priority**

Outdoor arenas require a substantial base of hardened material and provision for drainage, says Matthew.

Indoor arenas do not require the same type of base, but your specific needs for the arena will dictate the type of base required.

“An indoor horse show facility often has a mixture of sand, silt and clay in the arena,” Bob explains. “It packs together and forms its own base when you work the material. Your equipment will maintain that base at a certain level.”

Outdoor arena bases range from

finely crushed steel dust to a clay with various hardeners added to it.

“You can’t just pack down clay and put sand on top of it,” Bob says. “That hardly ever works, because that clay base material absorbs water and becomes soft. When horses go over the surface, it starts mixing the clay with sand. I’ve seen it actually suck shoes off of horses.”

The options available for footing today are overwhelming. Matthew says there is a footing for just about every type of rider in the world.

“When it comes down to choosing a footing, it’s really a discussion about what you want to do with your arena, how much you want to invest in your footing and a discussion of the life cycle of that footing,” Matthew says.

The gradations of sand and combinations of sand, silt and loam are endless, Jim says. If you are looking for low or zero maintenance, artificial footings containing fiber or other materials are also available.

Your best bet is to seek the advice of an arena builder to determine the



**BOB AND JIM KISER** have worked in the arena industry since 1988. Based out of Gainesville, Texas, the father-and-son team are arena design consultants. They also specialize in arena maintenance, and they have invented revolutionary equipment that includes the Kiser Dragmaster. They maintain the footing at world-class events that include the AQHA world championship Shows, the National Reining Horse Association Futurity and Derby, National Reined Cow Horse Association events and National Cutting Horse Association events. They have worked the ground for the FEI World Equestrian Games since 2002.

right footing for you. Matthew recommends riding on the footing you are interested in purchasing before making your final decision.

“We find people in the area with a specific footing and try to schedule a ride for our customers to see if they like it,” Matthew says. “If you can ride on the footing, that’s where you’ll really determine if you like it or not.”

### **Amenities, Upgrades and Resale**

Many horse owners use arenas for turnout, and if you plan to use your arena this way, you’ll want to consider fencing the arena. Your options range from a relatively inexpensive pipe fence to a kick wall to a 5-foot

slant wall that prevents knee and leg injuries for riders.

Lighting is another feature to consider, especially if you plan to ride during the winter. While outdoor arenas are mainly limited to stadium floodlights, Bob says indoor arenas can use more energy-efficient fluorescent lights.

Ventilation is also important for indoor arenas. Bob recommends doors that roll up to get maximum airflow.

“Doors that roll up are the best of both worlds,” Bob says. “The arenas are totally enclosed in the winter, but in the summer, it’s totally open. They have the same advantages as covered arenas. They have a lot of air pulled through. It’s an expensive option, but if you can afford it, it’s the best one.”

Other options include windscreens that roll up and big-blade fans. Jim says the fans move so much air that you need to factor in extra watering because the fans can dry out your



**MATTHEW JOHNSON** is the owner of Equine Facility Designs in Portland, Oregon. For more than 17 years, Matthew has designed and managed equestrian facilities of all sizes and scopes from around the world. Matthew services all disciplines, specializing in English event facilities.



# BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before you start building your arena, your most important task is figuring out your budget. Jim and Bob Kiser say they've seen owners forget to include some key figures in their calculations, causing them to run short of funds before the project was completed.

## **Avoid the pitfalls of arena construction by considering the following items:**

**Site Selection.** You'll want to estimate the cost of preparing the site, which includes the total amount of dirt that needs to be moved for the site to be ready for arena or building construction.

- What is the total area of the site?
- What material is available on site, or will it have to be brought in from a different location?
- Are there drainage issues that have to be addressed in site development?
- Which types of drainage system will be most effective?

**Arena Footing.** The Kisers say the cost of arena footing is often overlooked or underestimated. Avoid scrimping on what should be the most important part of your arena by factoring in the cost upfront.

- What is the total arena area?
- How much does your desired material cost?
- Is your material available onsite, or will it need to be delivered?
- If you are considering artificial footing, what is the cost of maintenance equipment?

**Miscellaneous Expenses.** Several other expenses need to be included in your initial budget.

- What maintenance equipment will you need for your chosen discipline, traffic and footing?
- How will you contain the footing around the edge of the bottom of your arena?
- Are you going to build a fence around your arena? What will it cost?

footing.

If you want to add more amenities to your facility, Matthew recommends spectator seating. Other amenities you can consider are speaker systems, air conditioning and heating.

"The first upgrade I'd suggest would be viewing areas," Matthew says. "They could be terraces,

rooms or decks. They are typically elevated above the surface of the arena so that people aren't looking through a fence."

Just because you've settled on a particular option for your arena doesn't mean you can't upgrade in the future. Matthew says he has many clients return after building an arena to install more amenities they

planned for in their initial meeting.

"Sometimes we have clients who simply wanted an arena and who then decide to put a roof on it the next year," Matthew says. "A few years down the road, they might want to put kick walls and siding in to handle the wind. You can actually grow into your facility if you plan it right."

# Thrifty Success: Creating an Arena on a Budget

*By making do with what's available, amateurs create places to ride that fit their budgets. Read on for some ideas on how to create suitable riding surfaces that don't break the bank.*

**By Katie Navarra,**

**A** AQHA exhibitor Kadra Gore of Grant, Oklahoma, learned early on that it is possible to be successful in the show pen, if you ride by making the best use of the space you have. Her father found a flat spot on the family's property in Southeast Oklahoma and used her grandmoth-

In 2014, Kadra Gore and Rebel Jim McCloud were Level I champions in performance halter.



LARRI JO STARKEY



er's garden disc to work up the ground. Her grandfather was a local highway department employee. When orange cones became too sun bleached and battered to be used on the road, he brought two home and plaited a rope out of baling twine so Kadra could practice working a gate. The family dug up a few railroad ties and those were used as ground poles.

"I was so proud that my horse could go over those poles at the lope and the trot without

hitting one that I couldn't wait for our first show," Kadra says. "The day of the show, my horse would not go near the poles because they were painted. We had never thought to paint them!"

After that show, her mom went to the local supply store and bought the mis-mixed colors of paint sold at a discount. The paint was applied to the odd-shaped railroad ties Kadra already had – buying landscape timbers was too expensive.

Kadra continues to use this thrifty approach in riding and training her horses. Her 80-acre ranch has one flat spot. That's become her 40-foot by 60-foot arena. She found an abandoned disc on their land and repaired it so she could keep the dirt turned over.

Kadra's cleverness and can-do attitude has served her well. She

was an AQHA Level 1 champion in performance halter with Rebel Jim McCloud at the 2014 AQHA Central Level 1 Championships. In 2015, the pair were the American Ranch Horse Association novice amateur ranch trail world champions, novice amateur ranch roping world champions and the novice amateur all-around reserve world champions.

### **A Flat Spot**

With planning and a willingness to improvise, it's possible to create an area that is safe, functional and budget friendly. Like Kadra, amateur exhibitor Melissa Price of Carriere, Mississippi, has found ways to make her space work for her.

Melissa competes in halter, showmanship, trail and horsemanship with her 16-year-old gelding, Hez A Radical Romeo. The pair earned their first grand in halter in October 2018 and finished fourth in Level 1 amateur trail at the 2013 Nutrena East Level 1 Championships.

When Melissa purchased her property in 2004, setting up a riding area was a priority. The naturally hill land had only one flat spot. That's where she has carved out a modest space to school "Romeo."

"It's in the middle of the pasture," she explains. "I keep it mowed short and let the grass grow up around the edges."

The native soil in south Mississippi is a mix of sand and clay. The moderate climate makes it possible to ride nearly year-round. But excessive rain can limit the arena's usability.

"When we get several days of rain, it can get tricky," she says. "I just do trotting, bending, flexing and a lot of lateral work if it's too wet so that at least I get a ride in."

A flat, level spot is ideal for setting up an arena, but Kadra says that there are advantages to having space that isn't level. Negotiating varied terrain teaches horses to pay attention to their feet and drive from behind.

"I've gotten a lot of work done in between terraces," she says. "You just have to be aware that it's going to make them work a little harder and they will probably pick up their head a little."

Over time, Melissa has gradually expanded her riding space to its current size of roughly 90 feet by 150 feet. She has done this by filling in holes. She uses dirt from other areas on the property and hauls it with a cart that hooks to the back of the riding lawn mower. And she sees the rail-free space as a benefit to keeping her horse from relying too much on the fence.

"Sometimes the rail is beneficial and other times it becomes a crutch,"



she says. “If I decided to put a fence up, the area is exactly the size that works for me.”

Lights might extend the hours an arena is usable, but Melissa says that she has enjoyed many sunsets from horseback. The set-up works well for her and one horse. She tries to avoid working strictly in one area to avoid pounding down one area more than another. If she had more than one horse, the surface would

likely not hold up as well as it does, she adds. Her riding area isn’t fancy, but it is functional.

“Don’t get wrapped up in what you don’t have: It’s the work you put in that makes the best shows,” she says.

Kadra is happy with her arena, but then she decided she needed a round pen in which to work with her young filly, Smokin Hot Irish, aka “Katie.” For \$400, Kadra bought a

few panels and positioned them near an existing pipe fence to make the most of her investment.

“It’s been the perfect set up for getting her started,” she says.

## **More Traditional Arenas**

Creating a more formal area in which to ride is an investment, but with creativity, the build doesn’t have to break the bank.

MELISSA PRICE



Amateur exhibitor Melissa Price has created a riding area in a pasture to achieve her show goals.





**Melissa Price has a DIY approach to preparing Hez A Radical Romeo for the show pen.**

worked fulltime, and Frank took in a few horses for training. Denise currently shows The Sheik in all-around events.

Before sculpting out a 75-foot by 100-foot arena, the couple studied the land's natural properties and chose a spot that did not need excavation or tree removal – a site that was naturally well-drained.

“Learn where the water flows on your property and send it in that direction,” Denise says. “We worked with what Mother Nature gave us and then installed drainage that sent water in the direction it naturally flows.”

For the Hoffmans, the ideal location turned out to be a space close to a pond. It was an area away from the house, but convenient to the barn. During heavy rains, the pond can overflow into the arena. Because the area has a good base and drainage, the space is firm enough to drive a truck and trailer onto it even when there is standing water on the surface.

Then Denise and Frank evaluated the land's soil composition – it was clay. Knowing that was too dense, they began hauling in river sand. Denise estimates they hauled in 40 truckloads during 12 to 18 months. The goal was to create a blended soil that resulted in a firm base while allowing water to filter through and a

The number of horses using the arena, how often it will be ridden in and the discipline all factor into the costs. Boarding stables and facilities with plans to host events have more to consider and invest. For horse owners who intend to school their own horses, the investment is far less. And if the facility is built to last,

the value stretches through the years.

Amateur rider Denise Hoffman of Kiln, Mississippi, and her husband, Frank, built a facility of their dreams more than three decades ago. The attention to detail has resulted in an area that has withstood 36 years of regular riding. The couple both





Denise Hoffman rides The Sheik in all-around events. She and her husband, Frank, built a barn that has lasted 36 years.

LARRI JO STARKEY

footing that supported the horses and absorbed concussion.

“We worked with an individual who owned a tractor and a back blade so he would spread out the sand for us,” she says. “Then we would drag it several times a week to get it level and the depth we wanted.”

## Getting What You Need

Designing a riding space that meets

all of your needs – available materials, budget and discipline – is a process. It can be tempting to rush through the planning stage, but taking the time to evaluate your needs and match those priorities to a surface material will lead to greater satisfaction once the project is complete.

Maintaining the riding area is as important as getting it set up. Riders who are handy, or have a handy

partner, don't need brand-new or the latest equipment. Kadra says paying \$1,000 or more for a rotary arena groomer wasn't in the budget, so she used an axle from an old baler and had help building a rotary arena groomer.

With careful planning, strategic building and routine maintenance, you, too, can create a riding area that helps you achieve your riding goals.



# School of Dirt: The Best Footing for Your Discipline...

*Are you ready to add the surface to your arena? Learn how to craft the best surface for your horses from these industry experts.*

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**By Abigail Boatwright**

Whether you've recently built your own arena or you simply want to provide the best surface possible for your horse, arena care is just as essential as using the proper footing. In last month's American Quarter Horse Journal, we discussed what to consider before building an arena.



In this articleHere, the creators of ArenaWerks and Kiser Dragmaster equipment share their insight on the ultra-important maintenance of arenas. You'll learn why maintenance is necessary, what equipment you need and how to care for your arena.

## Why Maintain?

From the structure or fencing to the footing itself, building an arena is a sizeable expense. Arena expert Jim Kiser of Gainesville, Texas, compares neglecting your arena footing to purchasing a Bentley car and then deciding to match it with the cheapest tires available.

“The primary focus in caring for your arena is to maintain your investment in the entire program – your horses, the arena and equipment,” Jim says. “Unless you take the time and effort to maintain it, it's been a wasted investment. Your depth, material mixture and moisture content need to be monitored. Everything in maintenance goes back to keeping your arena in the shape it was when you built it.”

Caring for your arena properly not only protects your footing, but also your horses' health, says ArenaWerks creator Randy Snodgrass.

“You want to maintain your arena

Water application is crucial to good footing.



for the horse's health, for the rider and the horse's safety and so that you don't create lameness in your horses,” Randy says. “An arena that's too slick is dangerous, and an arena that's too dusty affects your horse's breathing.”

A key component of preventing injuries lies in maintaining your base, Randy says. An uneven base can cause your horse to flounder.

“A lot of people just look at what the top of the arena surface looks like and think if it's pretty, they have good ground,” Randy says. “But they may have ridges underneath the top, and when a horse steps from the smooth base to a ridge, they can twist an ankle. Or if they stop hard around a barrel and hit that ridge, they can really hurt themselves. That's why a smooth, level, even base is extremely important.”

## Choosing Equipment

Protecting your base is a huge part of prolonging the life of your arena footing. Bob Kiser, the other half of Kiser Arena Consultants Specialists, says this task is the most important part of your equipment's job.

“You need to have a drag where you can control the depth very accurately with it,” Bob says. “With our equipment, we can adjust our cutting edge to where it will recompact the base. We can actually help a base and protect it.” Jim says regardless of budget or discipline, the top requirements of arena care equipment include maintaining the integrity of your base, proper depth and moisture content of your footing.

“We try to design pieces of equipment that are versatile enough to handle any situation,” Jim says. “I'm not sure there is any one drag that is



perfect for every situation. But we design equipment that can fit many people's budgets and still do the job."

Three components are needed to care for your arena, says Jim.

"Any drag should have an attachment that levels your footing, one that works the footing and a finishing attachment," Jim says.

If you've got a smaller arena, have few horses to work or don't own a tractor, both the Kisers and ArenaWerks have created equipment that attach to ATVs or tractors. However, you'll need to keep your arena material in mind when choosing your implement.

"A higher clay content generally requires a more aggressive drag because riding on that surface compacts it more than one with a higher sand content," Jim says. "You'll also need to consider

how heavy your attachment is. An implement that weighs 50 pounds vs. one that weighs 500 won't be as aggressive on a material with higher clay content. Conversely, footing with an extremely high sand content doesn't need as much weight."

If your arena has any type of base, whether it's clay or limestone, Bob cautions against using a tool with ripper teeth.

"Do not use a drag with ripper teeth when you have a base mate-

## OUTDOOR ARENA CARE

While both indoor and outdoor arenas may have similar footing, your care will dramatically differ because of weather conditions. Bob and Jim Kiser stress the importance of patience after a rainstorm.

"The worst thing you can do to your outdoor arena is drag it when it's too wet," Bob says. "You need to let that arena dry out as much as possible just the way it is and then work it really shallow. Don't get out there and plow through mud and around the edges of water. It will ruin your base."

Working an arena when it's wet causes the often-softened arena base to get mixed with your top material, causing bogs and holes, and requiring you to replace your arena material much sooner than if you had waited.

Bob says an arena left alone will percolate water to the surface, which will hasten the drying process. If you drag the arena before this point, you'll dry the very top but slow the deeper layer from drying.

"It's actually a little better for a lot of types of footing to let it dry a day longer than you think it should before you work it," Bob said. "And that also goes for riding on it. That way, you won't run the risk of ruining the base."

If your arena has standing water or material squishes around your feet when you walk on it, Bob says you should wait another 24 hours to use the arena. The one difference lies in arenas with limestone bases. Bob says you can work that type of arena a bit sooner than one with a clay base because the material doesn't expand.

Randy Snodgrass recommends sealing your arena using your drag equipment if you anticipate rainfall.

"If you can get out there and drag with a roller attachment, the water will run off the surface much easier than if you left it open with hoof prints," Randy says. "Once the top is no longer muddy, you can open it back up and work it."

Randy says outdoor arenas require much more water to maintain proper footing because of the sun's drying effect. Jim says wind erosion will also become a problem if you don't diligently apply water to your outdoor arena.

rial," Bob says. "Those ripper teeth repair your base."

will eventually get into your base material, and you'll end up having to

Choosing equipment can be overwhelming. Randy suggests consult-



Smoothing out trenches and putting dirt back where it came from is the best way to restore it. Move obstacles, such as barrels, when you can to maintain even use of your arena.

ing with knowledgeable contacts to get educated on the options available.

“Talk to friends who have arena equipment and like or don’t like what they’re using,” Randy says. “Go to horse shows to see what they use, or go to trade shows and speak with vendors and drag manufacturers to see what you really need to purchase.”

### The Moisture Factor

Water is extremely important to good footing, Randy says.

You can transform an arena from mediocre to a vastly improved surface with the right amount of moisture. Dust and mud are the enemies

of an ideal arena. Maintaining the proper moisture is an ongoing task, and Bob says unfortunately, it’s not

an exact science.

“The moisture requirements of an arena are determined by the event,



Whatever your discipline, consider how you use the arena to plan how to best restore it.



## ARTIFICIAL FOOTING

the type of footing and even the temperature,” Bob says. “For most people, you want to put on enough moisture to keep your dust down and make your footing more stable. But you have to be careful of adding so much water that it starts soaking into your base, which makes it soft.”

Jim says each discipline requires its own amount of moisture in the ground.

Barrel racers need more moisture content than reiners, due to the nature of the event.

Randy says pleasure horse events such as the Reichert Celebration often require enough moisture to dampen as much dust from the air as possible, without creating a sticky surface.

So how much moisture is enough? A happy medium between sticky and dusty, but all three experts say you need to take a walk to make that call.

“You’ll have a basic guide when you can walk across your arena and the ground just packs, but doesn’t stick to the bottom of your foot,” Randy says. “It shouldn’t make a big ball. If it balls up, it’ll also do that to your horse’s feet. It’s always easier to go back and put more water on your ground than to try to dry it out if you get it too wet.”

Watering your arena with a hose is a bad idea. Coverage will be

Artificial footings run the gamut when it comes to care requirements. Bob Kiser says many artificial surfaces require less drag work to maintain. Some require much more water than natural materials, but others require none at all.

“My advice would be to choose an artificial material that does not require water at all,” Bob says.

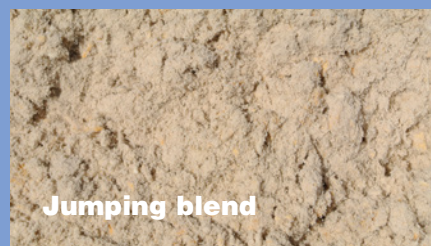
Often, artificial material needs to be worked in a different way. Jim Kiser says he works artificial footing from the top down to level, reblending and recompacting it. This process might require different equipment, but not always. Research your material to determine what equipment you’ll need.

uneven and it will take a long time. Jim advises against using sprinkler systems because they, too, water the surface inconsistently. Both Jim and Randy recommend using either a drag with a water attachment or a water trailer to moisten your footing. In any case, plan to include an apparatus that can shut the water off from your seat to avoid overwatering.

“I see a lot of people that rig up their own water wagon, but they lack



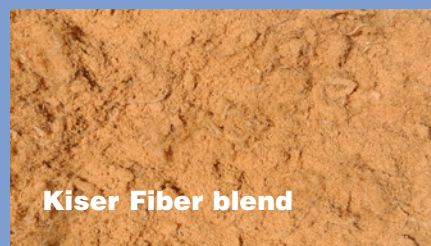
**Dressage blend**



**Jumping blend**



**Westernblend**



**Kiser Fiber blend**

a shut-off,” Jim says. “They have to jump off of the tractor to turn it on and off, so when you turn it off, you apply double, triple and quadruple coverage at the ends of your arena.”

Randy says every time you drag your arena, you dry out the top of the footing. You’ll want to replace that water equally to maintain the moisture content. You can tell if it’s time to water if a horse trots across the arena and raises dust puffs with each step. By watering at that point,

you can avoid having to take the time to apply a larger quantity later.

## **Arena Care Techniques**

Consider your material content, specifically the sand to clay ratio, before determining how to care for your arena, Jim says. An arena with a high clay content will require dragging to loosen compaction.

“In arena maintenance, you’re always looking to bring that material back to where it originally came from,” Jim says. “In a reining arena, the material will be displaced against your end fences from the horses stopping. So the number of horses being ridden and how much you are stopping them will determine the frequency you need to reclaim that material back to the rest of the arena.”

In a pleasure horse arena, compaction occurs on the rail, forming a trench around the arena. Your purpose there will be to smooth that trench out and get the footing consistent again. In

a cutting arena, one area of the arena is typically used for most of the work, often on one side. Jim says you’ll want to reclaim that material and bring it back to the center of the arena.

All three sources cautioned against longeing your horse in the

same spot in your arena. The tight circle causes dirt to be thrown to the outside of the arc, digging a trench down to the

base that can’t be fixed easily. If you must longe, change your location each time and work the arena carefully afterward.

“Even if the surface has been smoothed out, that rut from longeing will turn into a soft spot,” Randy says. “It will make your arena inconsistent because the base has been compacted unevenly.”

Bob encourages arena users to move obstacles every few days to level the entire arena.

“If you run barrels, don’t leave

your barrels set in the same place all the time,” Bob says. “If you do reining, don’t do your spins and stops in the same spot every time. If you jump, move your jumps every few days. Whether or not you have a base, if you don’t do this, you’ll start to establish holes if you don’t move.”

Though caring for your arena can be time-consuming, Bob says it’s time well-spent preserving your investment.

“The main point of dragging your arena is to maintain that arena,” Bob says, “not only because it makes it better for your horse to perform on, but because it’ll make your arena last longer.”



BOB AND JIM KISER have worked in the arena industry since 1988. Based out of Gainesville, Texas, the father-and-son team are arena design consultants. They also specialize in arena maintenance, and they have invented revolutionary equipment that includes the Kiser Dragmaster. They maintain the footing at world-class events that include the AQHA world championship Shows, the National Reining Horse Association Futurity and Derby, National Reined Cow Horse Association events and National Cutting Horse Association events. They have worked the ground for the FEI World Equestrian Games since 2002.



Based in Joshua, Texas, RANDY SNODGRESS has worked with arena footing for 22 years. The creator of ArenaWerks equipment, Randy has maintained the footing at horse events hosted at major equine facilities in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Oklahoma City and Fort Worth, Texas. He cares for the ground at the Reichert Celebration and numerous breed events.



# Arena Grading: It's in the Drag

*Arena care is important for horse health and show success.*

**By Abigail Boatwright**

**H**orse people are always in pursuit of perfect arena conditions. Walk around any arena, and you are sure to hear someone commenting on the ground. What's the big deal?

Jim Kiser, the official arena caretakers for the AQHA World Shows, the National Reining Horse Association Futurity and Derby, the National Reined Cow Horse Association and National Cutting Horse Association major events, knows his dirt. Jim, of Kiser Arena Specialists, said he has two goals when working an arena during an event:

1. Make it the same consistency throughout the event.
2. Make it safe.

"If you let some of the barrel racers, the cow horse riders and the team ropers ride on hard, slick ground, you'll end up getting somebody hurt," Jim said. "You might need to end up making the ground heavier; compromising what might be 'perfect' ground just because it's a little safer."

Randy Snodgress of ArenaWerks Equipment said he works the ground to make the footing level and consistent.

"(Dragging) helps reduce lameness and injuries in horses' legs," Randy said.

## **The Tools**

"Working up an arena is a combination of what the actual material is and the kind of equipment you use," Jim said. "I can take really average ground, and if I have the right equipment, I can make it good ground. I can take great ground, and if I don't have the equipment, it becomes poor ground."

Jim attaches an all-purpose tool to a tractor for his work.

"There's just not much that I can't do with that piece of equipment," Jim said. "I've got the water system on it to keep the ground a consistent moisture content. I've got the scarifier teeth – the rows ripper teeth – to break up hard ground. It's also got a leveling blade that I can use to keep

the arena level."

Randy said the type of tool he uses depends on the type of ground being worked. For a sandy ground, he recommended something to smooth and level. For ground containing more clay, he said to use an attachment that will dig deep to break up the material, then will smooth, level and fluff it.

For people who can't afford to buy a big tractor and equipment but still want to make their arena look good, there are other options.

"You want something that will make your ground consistent and keep it level," Jim said. "Those are the things you are going to look for in a piece of equipment. Jim recommends equipment that will break up, level and water the ground.

Randy said some tools can be attached to a pickup truck or an all-terrain vehicle instead of a tractor to work the ground.

## **Drag Patterns**

Jim uses several.

“There are some events, like the cow horse and the reining, where some parts of your arena are going to take a lot more use and stress than other parts,” Jim said. “It’s not just reining, but if you stop there 20 times, you are inevitably going to move some dirt from those stops. I use different drag patterns that allow me to bring that dirt back and keep it even.”

For speed events, working cow horse, reining and several other events, Jim likes to drag the arena every five rides, though it doesn’t always happen that way.

“You run a certain amount of horses, and that ground starts getting deeper and more worked up around the barrels. The deeper you are in those barrel classes, the more at a disadvantage you are, because that ground is going to get a little bit heavier.

“In the reining, they all go down and stop in the same spot. If you run very many horses on that ground, they start moving the ground around, so you have a deep spot and a thin spot. We drag to try to keep the playing field level.”

### **Indoor vs. Outdoor Care**

One of the main differences Jim compensates for between an outdoor and an indoor arena is moisture content.

“If I use 500 gallons of water in (an



Learning how to care for your arena can save you money and time.

indoor arena) a day, that probably keeps this ground about where I want it,” Jim said. “At this time of year in the summer, outside in an arena this size, 500 gallons wouldn’t even be close to enough.”

### **Rain, Rain, Go Away**

Another consideration for outdoor

arenas is excess moisture. Too much rain delays riding, but dragging too soon can damage the arena.

“People have the tendency to want to get back on their ground as quick as they can,” Jim said. “A lot of people do that before the ground is actually ready.”

“Water has to percolate up, and



that ground will actually dry faster if you leave it alone,” Jim said. “Your better arenas will have a base, and if you get on that too soon after a rain, you are at risk of being detrimental to your base. It’s just a matter of patience. But if you have an arena that doesn’t have a base – that’s pure sand – it’s not as critical.”

On the other hand, waiting too long to drag can cause the ground to harden.

“There is a limit there as far as leaving it alone,” Jim said. “I think a lot of people would be really surprised, if they were to try it both ways and really monitor what worked the best, they would be surprised that their ground would be ready faster if they’ve left it alone.”

Jim stressed waiting for the ground to dry out to avoid punching through to the base underneath the top soil.

“You have an arena that has a clay type base to it, and you get out and start riding (too soon), you’ll punch a hole in your base,” Jim said. “It’s not going to be very long before you are going to start to really struggle with that base.”

### **Drag Time**

Jim said one thing he sees at some facilities is not enough time spent dragging the arena.

“People expect to be able to drag

## **PERFECT GROUND**

- Know your event’s ground specifications, and consider the experience of the riders.
- Use the best equipment for the job you can find: something to break up hard ground, level and water the arena.
- Vary your drag patterns and compensate for dirt displacement
- Monitor the moisture content of your arena and realize that an outdoor arena requires a lot more water.
- Don’t try to drag or ride too soon on wet ground; this can damage your base.
- Set aside enough time to drag your arena thoroughly and frequently



their arena one time a week and have it be good, but it just doesn’t work that way,” Jim said. “A lot of it depends on the amount of use that the arena is getting.”

He said a professional trainer’s arena will need a lot more attention than the average amateur rider’s arena that might see one or two horses a day.

“If they want their ground right, it’s something that takes time,” Jim said.

“A lot more attention to the detail of keeping it level. If they have the capability, they need to monitor the moisture content. It’s like anything: The more that you put into it, the more you’re going to get out of it.”

“The main guideline that I can give you is just work the ground consistently,” Randy said. “Don’t let it go too long in between workings. It takes work and preparation to keep your arena in good shape.”





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