STABLE ENVIRONMENT

RESEARCH INTERNSHIPS AT KER

PHOTOGRAPHS | CATHERINE BISHOP

Taking barn chores and equine physiology lectures in stride, Chrisley Barnett, Sara Brewington, and Maegan DeForest have enjoyed the opportunity to learn new skills while assisting with a nutrition study. Chosen for the position on the basis of education, hands-on horse knowledge, and references, interns are able to add research experience to their professional credentials.

The sun is just peeking over the central Kentucky horizon. The midsummer air is still cool, though the temperature will be in the nineties later in the day. A few early commuters are on the roads, but most sensible people are still asleep.

In contrast, things are hopping inside the research barn at Kentucky Equine Research (KER) where five young women are already hard at work. Attired in dirt-smudged jeans rather than white lab coats, these hands-on interns are vitally important to the research conducted at KER. Working directly with the horses every day, they are responsible for carrying out precise protocols and recording complex data. Correctly done, this research has the potential to yield important new knowledge about equine nutrition and exercise physiology.

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>
> CHRISLEY BARNETT

KER offers internships on two levels, a twelve-month session and a three-month summer hitch. Applicants for either position must have completed several years of university study in equine or veterinary science and have a sound understanding of horse management and handling. Summer interns are unpaid, while year-long interns are provided with housing and a monthly stipend during their stay. All agree that the most valuable compensation for their time and efforts is the practical experience they gain.

A common interest in equine-related careers unites the interns, though they come from different locations and backgrounds. Chrisley Barnett is going into her senior year at Montana State University, where she is pursuing a double major in equine science and agribusiness management. An equestrian from an early age, she has ridden and driven American Saddlebreds, shown Hackney ponies in harness, and helped with mounted ranch work such as roping and branding. She has also done some trail riding, tried cutting horses, and would like to take a shot at barrel racing. At KER, Chrisley has enjoyed working with the horses, especially exercising them on the treadmill. "It's interesting to look at the different trials and see how the findings would be of use to my horse, or to any horse," she said. The internship has met her expectations, and it's been anything but dull. "Every day is different," she commented. "Not one day has been the same!"

Sara Brewington has completed her sophomore year in the animal science program at the University of Missouri and has been approved for enrollment in that school's veterinary college. Her experience handling Quarter Horses, Saddlebreds, and Thoroughbreds was gained during years of taking riding lessons, working at a therapeutic riding center, and volunteering at the university's horse farm. As to why she applied for the KER internship, Sara said, "I loved the idea of coming to Kentucky for the summer. There are so many opportunities here that are related to the equine industry." Sara has learned to draw blood and spin it in the lab's centrifuge to separate serum and plasma, and she anticipates expanding her knowledge as she talks to more KER staff members and visits feed mills and veterinary clinics in the area. Field trips are part of the intern experience, and Sara hopes to arrange a few days of shadowing an equine vet before the summer comes to an end.

A resident of New Hampshire, Maegan DeForest is a student at Cazenovia College in New York where she has finished three years of a professional studies degree with an equine business management specialization. Her years of horse experience—riding hunters as well as completing work-study programs involving the care of horses at camps and college stables—gave her the skills necessary for a summer working in equine research, and she intends to make the most of her Kentucky experience to learn more about the link between nutrition and metabolic diseases. "At school, nutrition is taught in a classroom," she explained. "Here it's interesting to see that knowledge applied!" So far, the internship has been everything she hoped for, and she's found the staff to be very helpful. "I like the barn work and the lab work…and I love the people!"

A summer can pass quickly, but what about spending a whole year working in a barn? For yearlong interns Lindsay Perry and Luisa Wood, it's been a challenging but worthwhile experience.

Early morning sunshine floods the barn as Lindsay Perry draws blood for a study on glucose tolerance. After spending a year in Kentucky, Lindsay has gained valuable experience in many facets of equine research.

LINDSAY PERRY

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Careful record-keeping is an essential part of intern duties. Data recorded by Luisa Wood will be used to calculate the results of a research trial.

LUISA WOOD

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Lindsay, who holds a Bachelor of Science degree in equine science from Limerick University in Ireland, is no stranger to working under unusual conditions, such as when she volunteered with a project to reintroduce endangered Przewalski's horses to Hustai National Park in Mongolia. Nevertheless, the severe ice storm that knocked out electric power to most of Kentucky last winter was not like anything she had experienced before. Frozen water buckets, darkened barns, and roads blocked by fallen trees made everyday chores difficult. In a way, however, carrying on without electricity was not greatly different than many other phases of the job. "I've learned a lot about planning and running a research trial," Lindsay explained. "Problems will occur, and when they do, you have to think on your feet and change something so you can continue with the trial. At the same time, you can't change anything essential or you'll invalidate the study. I've found that almost nothing in research runs completely smoothly, and dealing with living animals means you will have unexpected things happen."

Making the most of her time in Kentucky, Lindsay had done a lot more than just watching horses run on a treadmill. In her spare time, she's joined a volleyball league, toured a feed mill, gone to the Rolex Three-Day Event, watched weighing and condition scoring of foals, cheered on the horses at Keeneland Racecourse, hiked at Red River Gorge, attended the KER nutrition conference, spent time with the foaling manager at a large Thoroughbred farm, done some trail riding, showed a horse in a jumper class, and taken Bluegrass fiddle lessons. "There's a lot to do in Kentucky," she reported. "It's a great place to live!"

A native of Auckland, New Zealand, Luisa is working on an equine science degree from Massey University. After years of owning and riding horses, she was well prepared to step into the KER internship. "Working with racehorses and eventers made me realize that nutrition can make a huge difference in performance," she said. Though she had little previous experience in research, she had no trouble learning the protocols and quickly picked up the barn routine. Luisa has particularly enjoyed meeting and talking to the KER staff members, beginning with company founder and president Joe Pagan. "These people have a lot of experience in the industry. They've all been happy to help with anything I've asked. It's been wonderful working with people who are so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about what they do. This has been a really great, unique experience," she said.

After finishing her internship, Luisa will take a position in tech support with KER's Australasian office. "I'll answer questions on the nutrition hotline, do some nutritional evaluations, help with international clients, work with the sales and marketing staff, and maybe do some nutrition lectures later on."

Anyone interested in becoming an intern with Kentucky Equine Research may get more information by e-mailing research@ker.com. Applications will be accepted at any time.