

FEATURE ARTICLE

# A STABLE SOLUTION?

Gill Nurse visits a livery yard in Germany where the horses live in stables with a difference

It sounds like a scenario from the future: your horse lives contentedly outside with his friends in a group at livery and is fed the exact amount of concentrates and minerals to meet his individual needs, by an automated machine, throughout the day. His social needs are met by the herd and he is encouraged to keep moving to reach his food, water and indoor rest area, as they are all sited well apart from each other on a mud-free surface. Yet this is no futuristic imaginary scene. Hundreds of equestrian yards throughout Europe work on the Active Stable system originally designed by Thorsten Hinrichs, an agricultural engineer.

Stephanie Neubourg is the owner of a large livery yard in northern Germany where she keeps riding horses and retired horses in such a

system. Her yard is so high tech that she is even able to regulate the access laminitic horses have to the pasture using a special automated gate and a microchip on each equine. The retired horses with problems such as colic, asthma and arthritis benefit too, because they are motivated to keep moving. Her livery horses even have a play area with a hill to run up and down! She finds that the horses are definitely calmer and healthier since she switched from a conventional stable yard to this regime two years ago. Keeping the horses in groups meets their social needs and enables them to form friendship bonds. Another great advantage is that the horses are always ready to be ridden, as the rider doesn't ever have to wait for a large feed to be digested. The equines living at Gut Neubourg include show

jumpers, Western horses and Haflingers.

In some ways, the management of horses this way is more intensive than if they were stabled: they have to be carefully observed daily to check that they are eating well and thriving, especially as some of the retired horses have conditions such as Cushing's. Yet Stephanie Neubourg finds this is a very satisfying aspect of the management of her equines. She no longer has to carry water to the fields and the automatic drinkers never freeze in winter. The automated feeders can provide as few as 30 grams of concentrates or minerals at each automated feed if necessary. This is sufficient for some, in addition to hay, as it reflects the sparse provision of a natural habitat. Her equines have no access to grass paddocks

in the winter, but thrive in the yard. She feels that it is close to an ideal situation for the welfare of the horses in her care and refers to it as a 'paradise for horses'. The yard is designed for horses to live as naturally as possible within the confines of a limited space. By keeping the water provision, feeders and rest area at a maximum distance from each other, the horses are encouraged to keep moving even within the relatively small area of the yard. Instead of individual boxes, a rest area is provided where the horses can sleep, snooze or lie down whenever they want. The interior is equipped with so-called 'Softbeds', foam-filled mats with a tough outer covering of rubber, which mould to the horses' bodies when they lie on them. To provide a secure, mud-free surface in the

area used intensively by the horses, an interlocking grid system was laid below the soil level. The result is a shock-absorbing, elastic, safe surface which protects the horses' joints and encourages rolling and play. This area can also easily be cleared of manure using a tractor, thus considerably cutting down on labour and costs.

At the heart of the original concept are automated feeders. They liberate both horses and handlers, but most importantly, give the horses a motive to move and be active throughout the day. The horses have a transponder on a neck strap and this activates their individually programmed feed allowance. The computer controlled system lets the horse owner or yard manager programme the concentrates and minerals

for each equine and the horse can then access it at whatever interval the handler chooses, up to twenty times a day. The feeder has well-designed access for only one horse at a time, and the horses soon learn to use it, patiently waiting their turn. In addition, there are hay feeders which have been designed to give access times similar to those of horses in the wild, feeding naturally. However, for horse owners who have no alternative but to stable their horse during the winter, an individual concentrate feeder can be used to trickle feed throughout the day in his own box.

During a visit to north Germany to see the concept in action, I saw a small privately owned yard of four horses with all the Active Stable components

in its design. Previously a traditional layout of four loose boxes, it now contained a concentrate feeder, hay feeder and water trough. The four loose boxes had simply been adapted into a rest area by removing the partitions between the boxes and installing Softbeds. The horses roamed free within the yard and small paddock area on a secure surface. The flow patterns to encourage the horses to keep moving are all carefully worked out at the design stage.

According to Thorsten, horses do not urinate on the Softbed mattresses because they dislike the urine splashing their legs. So he always puts a 'horse WC' into the

design, outside the access to the rest area, which simply consists of a 6' x 4' rectangle of straw, and this can prove quite effective in encouraging them to urinate there.

Flow patterns encourage the horses to keep moving



If you have to stable your horse, it is well worth talking with other owners to see how you might implement such a system in your yard. It seems to reduce stress and make for a contented herd of horses.

