

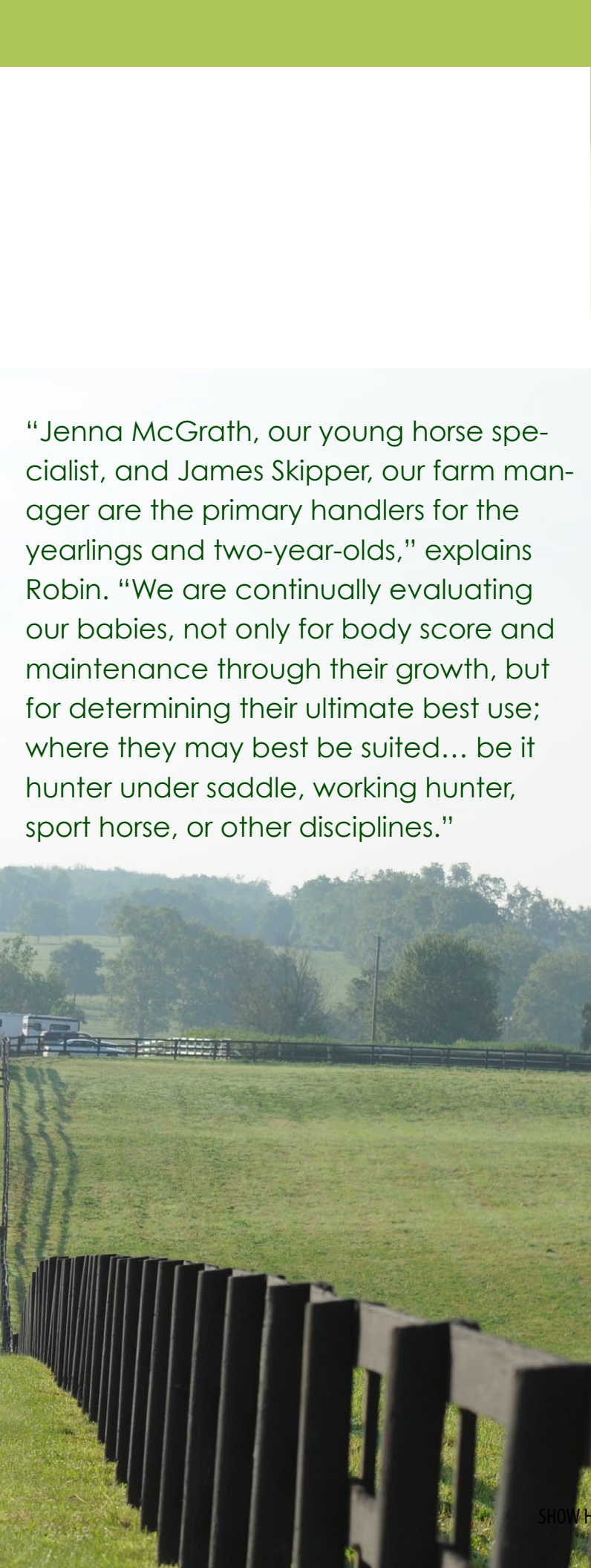


DeGraff Stables' Secret Ingredients to Healthy and Trainable Youngsters Behind the Scenes of DeGraff Stables at Liberty Farm

Since January, Robin DeGraff has been sharing her “Secret Ingredients” to raising healthy, happy and champion-potential babies. Show Horse Today, along with DeGraff, has covered stallions, mares, and weanlings, and now we have moved on to some of the most important steps in a young show horse’s career: yearling and two-year-old year. We are hoping you can learn more about how large-scale operations run their business, as well as take away some ideas for starting your own horses and foals. As always, remember that a trained professional is an asset when starting out!

By Gabrielle Sasse





“Jenna McGrath, our young horse specialist, and James Skipper, our farm manager are the primary handlers for the yearlings and two-year-olds,” explains Robin. “We are continually evaluating our babies, not only for body score and maintenance through their growth, but for determining their ultimate best use; where they may best be suited... be it hunter under saddle, working hunter, sport horse, or other disciplines.”

“As an owner trying to raise the best prospects we can for the markets we are breeding for,” Robin continues, “a lot of our success has to do with the evaluation and recommendations we receive through interaction with our support team. Our veterinarian partners, lead by Dr. John Park at Park Equine for internal and sports medicine, Dr. Victor Torres; chiropractor and acupuncturist, Dr. Connie Brown for general veterinary assistance, Darrel Nice, our equine dentist and Rob Spencer, our equine podiatrist, all combine to provide a high level of service for our horses.”



“The result is invaluable for the fast growing athletes we are raising,” explains Robin of her process. “Our utmost focus is the extreme level of care our horses get. We employ our ‘Buy With Confidence’ strategy from the day the mating of the stallion and mare is planned through foaling, and it is interesting for me, as a result of this article series, to ‘step back’ and see how much we actually put into our young stock all the way through their growth, nutrition and handling by the time they are ready for a purchaser.”

“I find that the experts we deal with at our farm are really partners in our business,” Robin remarks. “Everyone has a different knowledge base to draw from, and looks at horses differently. When consulted, they try to make suggestions that we can use to base decisions on.” The constant vigilance regarding the maturing of Robin’s stock is key to their healthy growth and show pen success. “And we all have one goal,” Robin reinforces of her team’s dedication. “We are dedicated to ensure that there are no surprises for that new horse owner when they get a young one from us.”

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I was able to speak to James Skipper, DeGraff Stables' farm manager. James says his biggest role is in “evaluating - weight, condition and trying to figure out where each individual stands, and make suggestions on what their skills are. The vets and farriers provide the best care. I'm more of the evaluator-put the horse in front of the right people to get them to the right place in the right time.” However, he says he will fall into the “low man on the totem pole” role and do whatever needs to be done around the farm, which includes cleaning, catching horses, holding, you name it. “No one on my staff gets away with just watching,” James remarks. “We are all involved [with the horses] because they need to be handled by as many people as possible to get them different feels.”

Robin, James and Jenna team up with a few other knowledgeable individuals and trainers to evaluate all of the babies. James says he “tries to be open minded and use other

people's opinions versus just my own. It creates more of an honest go to make sure the horse goes to the right spot- shows, or broodmare band... we try to fit our horses in the hands of people who will be successful with them. My goal is to provide the best horse it can be, for the person.”

Robin further explains their care-taking process of the youngsters. “There are opportunities that we have to do things less expensively but we don't take shortcuts,” she insists. “That goes to our core belief on what our end product is. We don't skimp on vaccines, we start checking their feet at just a month old for conformation issues. We do what our farrier, vet, dentist and the AAEP suggest for young horses.





Every foal in DeGraff's program gets a conformation exam at three weeks old. Robin's farrier, Rob Spencer, who has 25 years of experience, weighed in on young foal hoof care. "My job is to follow and chart the foals. We start charting their conformation and corrections around 4-5 weeks old, all the way until they leave the farm." Rob explains that they keep dedicated to making corrections as needed so that the "horse can be

as correct as possible and reach the highest point in its career as it can."

"Our goal is to get them as straight as we can, and keep them as sound as we can, so they can be as competitive as possible in their field and stay there longer," Rob says of his role in young horse feet and leg care. "The biggest impact you can have on these horse's legs, as far as conformation and cor-

rectness, is up to 18 months of age.” He goes on to explain that after 18 months, their growth plates and ability to be correct is pretty set. “After that age, we try to balance mismatched feet. It’s a very common thing we see in the breed. For the show horses, we try to balance the amount of effective toe break over versus posterior support to make the feet function close to normal as possible. This means the stride length is exactly the same. We try to achieve that so that these horses move to the very best of their ability.”

Dr John Park is not only DeGraff’s vet, but also helps with the conformation exams. “We look at the foals at walk and at rest to evaluate any conformation deviations that need to be corrected or fixed by the farrier,” explains Dr. Park. “We look at the horses at 4-6 weeks, then after another 6 weeks will

look at any that may have had deviations. Otherwise, we will evaluate all of the yearlings twice a year.”

“Usually with the quarter horse breed, corrective surgery is a very minimal procedure. In 80-90% of these horses, there is very nice conformation, and I’m just in a consultation role to make adjustments as needed. If there are any defects, (most are as yearlings at the knee) I may recommend corrective trimming to help the leg,” Dr. Park continues. “Their growth plates are not ‘closed’ until they are 2 year olds or older, and sometime the radius’s rapid growth is a cause for surgery. We do an internal growth plate fixation that is left in for 4-6 weeks and then is removed.” Dr. Park mentioned that DeGraff’s horses have only had two or three of these surgeries in the last three or so years.





“The most important thing you can do for young horses is preventative care. I work closely with Robin’s farrier to coordinate ways to fix any deviations. I will perform x-rays as needed, especially if there is any swelling in the leg or joint issues, and talk with Rob to discuss corrective measures. As long as the yearlings are growing well without any issues, I don’t do much with them other than evaluate.”

“I myself am a big believer in letting a horse be a horse,” says Dr. Park of young horse care. “The more they can get outside and run... it turns out a better individual. The horse gets to run, and is designed to be outside. Don’t overfeed, over supplement or try to make them grow too fast, as that is when I see a lot of problems. Don’t really push the

two year olds until their knees are closed.” Equally as important as healthy legs, are healthy teeth, in order for the youngsters to get the proper nutrition. Veterinary dentist Darrel Nice has been working for DeGraff since 2002. “We check the foals early to ensure there are no problems with bite alignment or other issues,” he begins. “Weanlings



have their first dental in December, which includes balancing cheek teeth, floating, incisor reduction, and wolf teeth extractions. This helps to insure proper mastication. All broodmares and stallions are seen once a year, and two and three year olds are seen twice.” These annual checkups help give all of the horses a pain free, healthy life.

DeGraff doesn't only have health and foot professionals in her toolbox. Jenna McGrath is Robin's young assistant, and she really enjoys the time spent working with the malleable yearlings and two year olds. James Skipper is Robin's farm manager, who “wears many hats for us and thankfully he wears them all exceptionally well,” says Robin. The pair works as a team along with DeGraff's vet, farrier, and blacksmith, as well as the occasional chiropractor or acupuncturist visit, to help ensure the offspring

will be ready to go on to the winner's circle.

Jenna has a set program in working with the yearlings to get them used to all sorts of things they may experience, not only as show horses, but just to be respectful, well-rounded individuals.

“We continue getting them used to tying, grooming and hauling,” begins Jenna. “And then begin teaching them to lunge in very short, quiet sessions. When it is warm enough, we incorporate bathing into lunging routine, which really helps start desensitizing them.” The grooming routine continues, with Jenna working on clipping, pulling and banding, or braiding, manes. This sort of quiet introduction to show horse matters makes it easier on the handlers and less stressful on the horses.



“Around May 1 we start evaluating a couple long line prospects,” Jenna continues. This fits in with Robin’s evaluation program to best suit the horse for its job. Robin remarks, “We try to pick a couple of prospects to get to the shows every year. The early developers for the Longe Line, or the ones that we can do the sport horse in hand classes as yearlings. As we aim for 3 year old events, not the 2 year old futurities, with our big, fast-growing prospects, we schedule working with them in an arena situation for a week, then off for a couple weeks.” To keep them fit and handled in the off weeks, the staff utilizes the euro-cisor and hand walking.

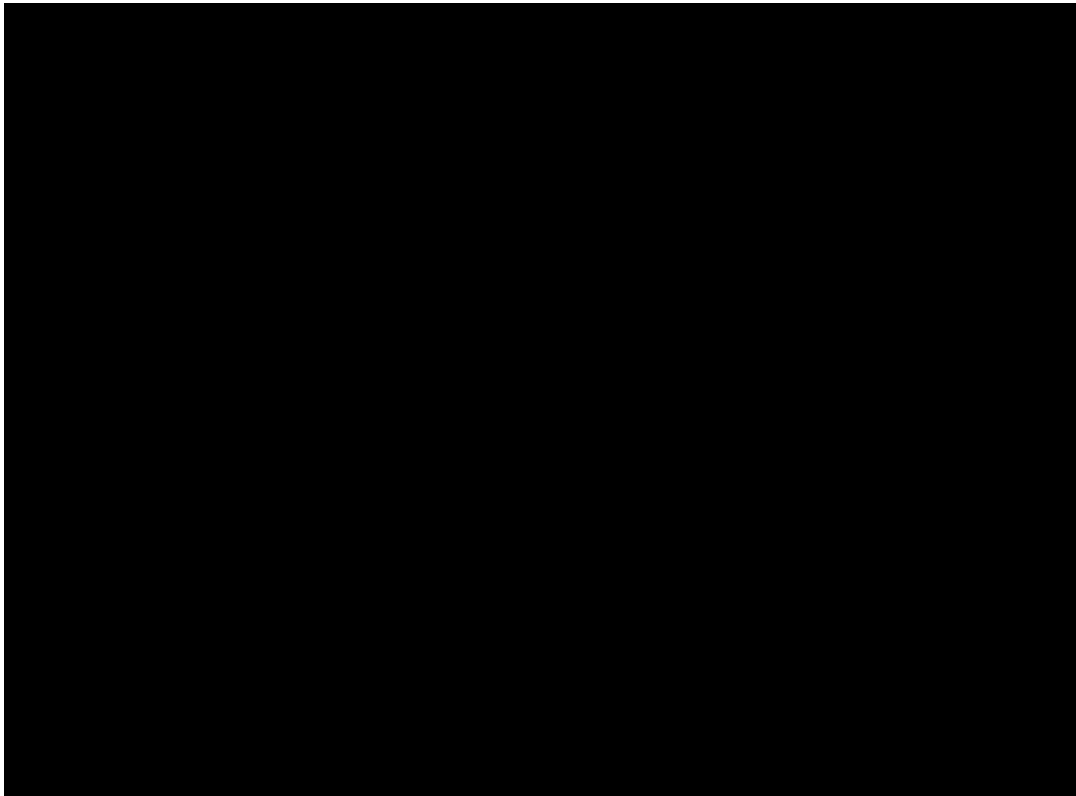
Jenna picks back up: “About the beginning of July, they start to fit into surcingles. We tack them in the stall. When using a girth, we slowly adjust until tight. For every hole you go, we will walk left and right circles so they can get the feel of the girth pinching them. That way when you get out of the stall and they are used to how the girth feels, both you and the horse will be less likely to get hurt.”

The youngsters are put on a hot walker, as it is a useful exercise tool and many trainers use them. “After a few bucks, they settle right down,” laughs Jenna. “After they are used to that, we add a bridle in the stall. We put them back on the walker, and then we attach side reins loosely. We gradually



tighten the side reins over time to get use to contact in their mouth. When using the side rein, bridle, and anything else that could get hooked on something in the stall, it is best to remove all buckets so they can’t catch on anything,” she recommends.

“As they start to get strong enough, we move to the English saddle, then western saddles,” she continues. The babies are already used to having a girth around their middle from the surcingle, and bit contact from side reins. “By late August/September, we begin ground driving them. I continue to work on driving until they sell, or until I start riding them during their two year old year.”

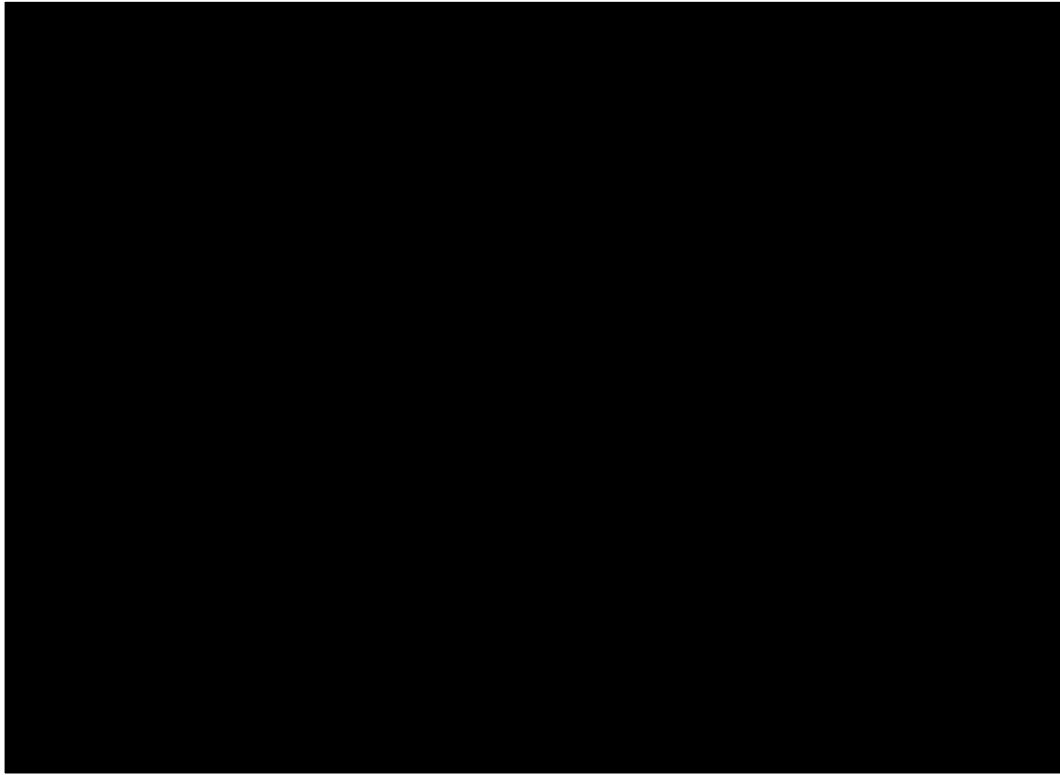


After the yearlings become two year olds, and have mastered ground driving, Jenna begins to get on the prospects. “I start in the stall, turning their heads toward me on both sides until they learn to stand still with their heads bent. It is safer this way. If they are scared and their head is toward you, their bodies will move away. Then I start the process of putting a foot in the stirrup. I do both sides. Every time they are good I make a big deal out of it. They thrive on the praise.”

“Next, I climb up both sides and lay over their back,” she continues. “I pat and rub the opposite side so they get the idea that I may very soon be on both sides of them at once! Then when they seem ready, I get on. It greatly varies from horse to horse. For some it could take one day and others a month. It is worth it to wait, because the less stress you cause them to start, the less time you take going back to fix it.”

Jenna begins by asking the horses to walk, turn, stop and back in the stall. Then gradually as they are ready, they move to bigger spaces and faster gaits. "It's really about reading the horse and knowing when they are ready to move to the next stage with confidence," she enforces.

"Once the commands are secure, we start trail riding, riding in company more closely, and doing local schooling shows," Jenna continues. "We are fortunate for our location. The Kentucky Hunter Jumper Association offers classes for green horses where they can walk/trot around poles if they are

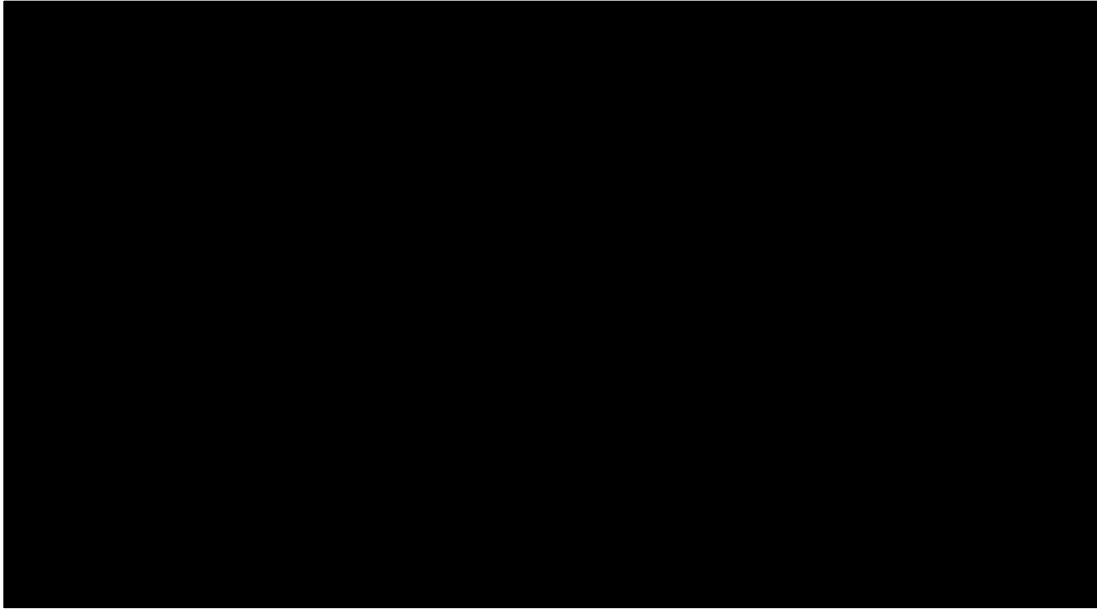


not comfortable in traffic yet, and they also offer walk/trot under saddles for a green horse."

Reinforcing Robin's timetable, the two year olds get, at the most, 90 days of riding. "It's usually a schedule of riding a week and turning them out and letting them be horses for a few weeks," the women explain. "The Indian Artifacts [offspring] are very quick studies," Jenna points out. "If you show them something once, generally you can build on it even after time off. We do not usually show our horses as two year olds

because they are so growth-y." Being larger hunt horses, they are slower to reach full growth and Robin wants to ensure their health. Jenna finishes, "My major goal is to try to make every experience as pleasant as possible, so that moving forward is as easy as possible."

James effectively sums up DeGraff's program. "My other goal is to raise horses that Robin can be proud of. We shoot for the top, but I'm trying to build the best horse. Try to create a better horse each day and every year. Be successful. You can't just breed one



and expect the horse to do on its own- how you teach it to react and not just how it's bred. [You have to] compliment its best abilities, and give it a chance to do what its good at."

He finishes by saying, "We want to raise horses that are not just an expense account, but have the opportunity to be successful and win. If I don't think the buyer can get the animal where it needs to be, I'll tell them up front, and state the reasons why- too hot, not big enough, conformation... etc. I'm not out to make a dollar, just winners. We want our purchasers to be successful with our prospects. The dollar will come with that. Friendships, services and relationships... those are all important to me."

Robin concludes, "I believe that our farm is

very special and it is a 'feel' you get when you enter our gates. From James' welcoming smile to Jenna's quiet competence, our people are not just 'putting in their time'. They sincerely care about each animal. And you can see the result in every paddock. The horses all come willingly to the fence and with their ears up. They want attention from people. Truly the key ingredient to our success of raising healthy and trainable prospects is our group effort. The horses are sound, healthy and sane thanks to every one's efforts."

For more info on yearlings, visit [here](#), and for more info on the two year olds, click [here](#), or visit DeGraff's website. Thank you to all of the gentlemen, Robin, and Jenna for taking time to share your secrets to growing a healthy animal.



ROB SPENCER

Rob Spencer has had 25 years experience shoeing and caring for equine feet, and currently shoes in seven states on a regular basis. Originally from Florida, he went to school in Oklahoma and has also lived in upstate New York where he met his wife. He has traveled to many countries and all over the U.S. to work on horses, as well as shoeing multiple World and Congress champions over the years. Rob is now located in central Kentucky.



DARYL NICE

Daryl trained Quarter Horses and Paints for 15 years, including World and Congress champions. "I floated my first horse in 1988, and became a full time equine dentist after completing a schooling apprenticeship and doing continued education. Now here I am today working for the trainers and breeders that keep the Quarter Horse industry moving," says Daryl. "I would like to thank all my customers, including Liberty Farm/DeGraff Stables for the opportunity to work with them all these years."



DR. JOHN PARK

Dr. Park, DVM is a Kentucky native, who went to The University of Kentucky for his undergrad in animal science and to Auburn for his veterinary degree, graduating in 1997. "I grew up on a farm," Park says. "My dad was a farmer." Park started his own ambulatory practice for two years, then built a mixed animal clinic with an associate. In 2004, he moved strictly to equine medicine, and in 2010 built his current full service practice and equine hospital. This facility, located in central Kentucky, employs eight total staff who provide 24/7 care for their patients.

www.parkequinehospital.com

Please visit www.DeGraffStables.com for the latest in information regarding all stallions: **DGS IndyGo**, **DGS Vestastic**, **Frosty The Goodbar**, **HBF Iron Man**, **Hes A Cool Hotrod**, **Hot Lopin Sensation**, **Indian Artifacts**, **Invite The Artist** and **PR Tells A Tale**. Flyers, contracts, breeding fees, discounts and the ability to book and pay on-line are all available. The www.WhatWork4.com website has detailed stallion information, offspring photos, and offspring for sale information for the DeGraff Stables owned horses: **DGS IndyGo**, **DGS Vestastic**, **Indian Artifacts** and **HBF Iron Man** (co-owned). Visit often for deals and the latest updates!

