



BY NATALIE DEFEE MENDIK

— IT WAS A — DARK & STORMY — NIGHT — No, Really...

TALES FROM THE HORSE SHOW NIGHT WATCH

The Night Watch. No, we're not talking about Rembrandt's colossal seventeenth-century oil painting masterpiece in Amsterdam; we're talking about the much-needed and most likely under-appreciated folks who stay up at night, keeping an eye on our equine partners at horse events.

The ideal horse show night watch conjures the peaceful sound of horses contentedly munching hay and the sweet smells of shavings and leather, while the one-off, crazy, once-in-a-lifetime night watch experiences are something else entirely. So what exactly goes on in the barn at night?

THE GREAT MIGRATION

Corralling loose horses from a neighboring farm running amuck on the show grounds in the night: check. Withstanding 90-mile-an-hour derecho winds in a night-watch pop-up trailer: check. Finding a horse you didn't even know was stabled on the show grounds grazing next to a major highway: what?!

As a regular night watch fixture on the East Coast equestrian vaulting scene, Mike Strauss has experienced various things that "go bump in the night" while keeping horses safe at CVI Lexington, USEF/AVA Region IX Championships, and Great Falls/Topaz Spring Fest/Fall Fest, the best of which involves a horse discovered far from home deep in the night.

At about midnight on a show-arrival day, a county police officer knocked at the trailer door where Strauss was sleeping outside the competition stabling at Frying Pan Park in Herndon, VA, asking if they were missing a big, black horse. Together with the deputy, Strauss checked the barns, certain all horses were accounted for—at which point the deputy implored, "OK, but could you come get this horse? We don't know what to do with it."

Setting out with a trailer in tow, the officer led them to the horse, about six miles from the show grounds, on the far side of the intersection of the Fairfax County Parkway, a six-lane divided highway, and the access road to Washington-Dulles International Airport, a four-lane divided highway.

There in the dark (Strauss: "Did I mention she was black?") stood an enormous, 17-something-hand Percheron, braided and groomed to compete the next day. "I took one look at her and knew she was one of ours," says Strauss. The Good Samaritan who had found the horse held her in a terrified grip with an electric cord around her neck. "I took some convincing to get the frightened man to let her go," tells Strauss. "Once I did, I said 'Up!' and she hopped right in the trailer."

It turns out her team had arrived late that night, and not wanting to disturb anyone, had bedded her down in one of the older wooden barns next to the competition stabling. The big girl leaned on the door at some point in the night, and the rest is history.

The icing on the cake: the wandering mare was selected top horse in the show the next day due to her calm demeanor, a trait highly-prized in vaulting horses carrying young athletes performing moves like handstands. "No wonder," remarks Strauss. "She was sleep deprived—and so was I!"

REPEAT PERFORMANCE

Ellen Forbes of Simply Fabulous Pet Care worked night watch at competitions throughout the New England area. Like Strauss, she found night wanderings to be a recurring theme.

At a dressage show in Massachusetts, as Forbes was turning to walk down a stable aisle, during her middle-of-the-night check, she heard what sounded like a gunshot, only to find a horse had just kicked down the top and bottom portions of its Dutch doors, which were lying across the aisle as the horse stood sheepishly inside its stall.

At a large 10-day hunter/jumper show with hundreds of horses on Cape Cod, Forbes came across

a loose pony in the night. After spending hour upon hour combing all of the event stalls to find the missing pony's point of origin, she decided to bed him down until morning, at which time she renewed her hunt for the owner, pony in tow. Leading him through each barn and asking every person she came across, she finally realized he had come wandering from a property down the road.

After many interesting nights keeping an eye on horses, Forbes began to think it may be time to hang up her hat as a night watch after one show where she and a handful of braiders endured the creepy hang-out-and-chat nature of a strange man walking about the barns throughout night. "I was in my twenties," says Forbes. "I decided this probably just wasn't for me anymore."

ENCORE!

The business of night watch seems to enjoy some recurring themes: loose horses and strange people in the wee hours of the night. Kay Johnson of Sweet Dreams Night Watch caters to the Georgia sport horse crowd, focusing now mainly on dressage and combined training events at the Georgia International Horse Park outside Atlanta, where her sleepless nights on show grounds have featured the usual cast of characters.

At one competition, Johnson, her colleagues, and some helpful horse people on the show grounds found themselves in the dark and cold, pouring rain in the middle of the night trying to catch a loose horse for five hours. Each time they got near the runaway, the mare would take off bucking, leading them on a merry chase that covered the whole open show grounds, pausing just long enough to dive into grain buckets that were left outside stalls for the morning feeding before zipping away again. The next morning when the show office opened, Johnson popped in to explain the night's events, when a voice piped up, "Oh, yeah, that's my horse. She does that all the time. She's a real escape artist." No thank you, no acknowledgement. The clincher: the horse's owner was not even a paying night watch client (But sure did get some use out of their services!).

Meeting people in the night is not an uncommon event, either. As a popular venue for weddings, Fourth of July parties, and such, the horse park also features its share of intoxicated people wandering through the barns, wanting to pet and ride the (\$50K dressage) horses. Along with running into party-goers, Johnson has encountered the police in the night. Not wanting to disturb horses by flipping the lights on in the night, Johnson walks the dark barns with a flashlight. Appearing nefarious and stealthy, Johnson has found herself cornered by police, armed, and ready.

KEEPING IT REAL

Whether righting a cast horse, keeping an eye out for colic, catching loose horses that have managed to escape, or simply topping off water and feeding breakfast, night watch are surely the unsung heroes of the horse show, keeping all in the barns snug and tight. Keeping horses safe, and keeping it real! And no, they aren't available to cool your horse out after your round... 🐾

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