

TRAINING, BOARDING & BUYING

Big Sky Equestrian Center set to open its doors in Sacramento area.

by Kim F. Miller

Dana Todd is excited for move-in day at Big Sky Equestrian Center in the Sacramento area's Orangevale. As of early December, that day was imminent and 32 horses were poised to settle into the newly-constructed eventing training and boarding facility.



She would like it to be open already for a number of reasons, topped by the ability to – finally, maybe, possibly – get some sleep.

The amateur eventer is one of those freakishly productive people. She works full-time as a computer engineer at Intel and competes seriously enough to earn the Preliminary title at the Area VI Championships in September and, in early November, to move up to CCI* and finish 10th at the Galway International Event aboard MMS Amadeus.

Committing to that last show so close to Big Sky's opening was "maybe poor planning," Dana admits with a tired laugh. Her phone rang with last-minute questions from contractors and crews throughout the competition. Giving "Jax" a bath before jogs, she finally handed the device over to a friend to answer while she tended to her horse.

"A lot of people have told me how much they wish our place was already open, but trust me, I wish that more than anybody." She loves sleep, but hasn't had much lately as the facility owner's endless to-do list begs for tasks to be checked off.

Likely to be open for business by the time this issue is out, Big Sky Equestrian Center is the fulfillment of a long-time dream for Dana. "I've always looked at people whose jobs align with their hobbies, or people who own their own business, and thought, "Wouldn't that be awesome?'" She never thought such an opportunity would arise through the equestrian world until she and her trainer Lauren LoPiccolo talked about it a few years ago. The event trainer has managed stables for 10 years and offered insights about what works and what doesn't. She provided excellent insight that helped Dana crunch the numbers to see if building her own place might be financially feasible.



Thirty Acres

Finding an ideal 30 acres set the ball rolling. Dana and her previously non-horsey husband Bryan Todd closed on their property in June after several months of investigating what would be possible per permitting restrictions in Sacramento County. As with most new facilities, they found that process daunting as equestrian endeavors seem to fall into a no-man's land when it comes to building regulations. Classification as an agriculture endeavor seemed the best fit, but lacking that option, the County defined Big Sky Equestrian Center as a commercial property. "Like we were Target," Dana says. Of course, the facility will generate the traffic of horse owners, but nothing near the comings and goings generated by retail outlets that dominate the commercial classification.

“What we were blindsided by the most were impact fees,” Dana relays. “I understand the need for them. They enable the County to be able to maintain the infrastructure around our facility. For example, to maintain roads to an extent that corresponds with the amount of traffic your place generates. That’s where being classified as commercial really hurts.”

But the Todds got through all that and are in the nice position of having two trainers poised to move in with their clientele on day-one. That’s Lauren LoPiccolo’s LL Equestrian and Megan Rafferty’s Vintage Farms.

Throughout the planning process, Dana has been confident that Big Sky’s amenities will be in demand. “The local area has bits and pieces, but not the full picture of amenities we have.” A 200’ by 120’ covered arena is the biggest draw. That’s a large space to ride in through Northern California’s considerable rainy season and in the summer, when the roof keeps the arena relatively cool.



Safe Enough For My Horse?

Design elements driven by horse safety are another big draw. Dana used her own somewhat high-strung Jax as a virtual guinea pig when thinking through each aspect of the facility. “I based the whole thing on asking is everything safe enough for my horse?”

One result is 24’ runs off of each stall, made of six-foot welded wire panels. Air flows freely through the walls and neighbor horses can see each other, but they can’t nip, kick or otherwise physically pester each other. The runs are fully matted so horses can enjoy the great outdoors during wet weather when deep mud and muck might otherwise confine them to their stalls for months on end.

Dana also employed an idea she's surprised not to have seen elsewhere: having the stall runs open onto a pasture for easy turn-out. At Big Sky, between two and five stall runs open onto the same big paddock. Horses can be easily rotated, alone or with the owner's consent, together, to spend several hours at leisure every day or night. The design is a labor-saver and risk-reducer, too, eliminating the staff time and risk involved in leading horses to pasture that's separated from stabling.

The groomed, 10'-wide galloping track following the property's perimeter is a boon to boarders and a draw for eventers far and wide. The property has rolling hills and about two-thirds of it is covered in oak trees, making for scenic conditioning work. The days of hauling 45 minutes to find anything like it are over for Dana and the fellow upper-level eventers who dominate the first wave of Big Sky boarders. "We are often galloping every five days and the fact that we can now do it at home is going to be so nice."

Excellent footing is already installed in the covered arena and will be a priority for the two planned outdoor rings. One will house a standard-size dressage court and the other will be a large arena suitable for show jumping.

Twenty-four hour on-site supervision and security cameras throughout the property ensure a safe environment and speedy responses if something is amiss.



The Tack Barn

Although the horse's needs came first in the Big Sky design, human-oriented aesthetics have

their place, too. The “tack barn” is one of Dana’s favorite features. It’s separate from the stall barn and includes an office, the two trainers’ tack rooms and three boarder tack rooms. Each of these houses individual seven-foot-tall tack lockers built by Bryan.

Not a “horse guy” before he met Dana, Bryan envisioned traditional wood barns when she first shared her Big Sky vision. When the maintenance realities of wood barns were explained to him, he understood Dana’s preference for metal structures. The tack lockers, however, gave him an avenue to indulge his rustic visions. They are handmade of recycled shipping pallet wood that captures that “pretty wood barn look,” Dana says.

A sound system delivered by ceiling speakers in the covered ring and stable area is another people-pleasing plus.

Dana acknowledges that Big Sky would never have come this far without considerable help. The two trainers, Lauren and Megan, have been critical throughout and will continue to manage the facility during the hours Dana is at her full-time job, which she plans to keep for the foreseeable future. Boarding will initially be limited to clients of Lauren and Megan, both of whom welcome eventers, dressage and/or hunter/jumper students and horses.

With 32 of 45 boarding options already spoken for, and flexible capacity for pasture boarding, Dana may open residency to non-training clients in the future.

Her father, Richard Pashley, a retiree, volunteered to be a critical stand-in for Dana and Bryan and has been an invaluable asset in getting the facility up and running. Dana says, “Without the help of my dad acting as project manager through the entire process, while Bryan and I are at work, we would not be opening so soon.” Long-term plans include the couple building a home on the property. Hopefully, Dana will be getting good nights of sleep long before then.

Dana has high recommendations for the contractors who helped turn her dream into Big Sky Equestrian Center.

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Written by Kim F. Miller

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