Dream Jobs: Horse Trainer

Elizabeth Latham Turned Her Childhood Love of Horses Into a Successful Career as a Trainer and Farm Owner

By Erin Hunt, Salary.com contributing writer

From a young age, many horse-enthusiasts dream of incorporating their love of horses into a viable career. Elizabeth settlers Latham is turning the phrase “do what you love and love what you do” into reality.

Latham runs her own farm in central New Hampshire called Cadbury Woods, where she teaches riding lessons and trains horses in the tradition of dressage. Dressage aims to use the horse’s natural abilities and athletic development to become more light, supple and attentive to the rider in all gaits and movements, working from the most subtle cues from the rider. The word dressage derives from the French dresser, loosely translated as “training.” It takes years of experience for both horse and rider to reach the highest levels, following a progression of training that has been established over the course of hundreds of years.

While many riders place emphasis on the competitive aspect of the sport, Latham focuses not on the show ring, but on developing the best athletic potential for each individual horse. Different trainers, even within the same sport, take distinctive approaches to training with varying philosophies. Latham incorporates the principles of classical dressage—those set forth throughout history—with a clear understanding of equine (and human) behavior and biomechanics for a more holistic approach.

Drawn to horses from a young age, she got her first pony when she was 10. Latham was mostly self-taught until the age of 16, when she was able to get a job to pay for lessons. As with many riders, she gained experience in tactful riding and problem-solving while riding different horses, including many animals no one else wanted to ride. She continued her education at the University of New Hampshire as an Animal Science major pursuant her instructor certification. During this time, she also began teaching lessons and training as a way to help pay for school. She continued teaching after graduation, but avoided larger, more commercial lesson programs. After creating a select base of students, she taught (and still teaches) one-on-one lessons to focus on the details and progression of each individual and his/her horse. In addition to horses, while in her mid-20s, she also started a successful aquarium business which she still owns and operates today. This aquarium business was a large part of her financial support, and enabled her to pursue her riding and teaching. Ultimately she was able to purchase Cadbury Woods, where she could develop her riding and training program.

For individuals pursuing this path, she emphasizes the need for a solid education and a marketable degree. Particularly in the early stages of a career, horses can remain a “treat,” something you still enjoy with that same passion and perhaps pursue on the side while creating a solid financial backing from another job source.

However, becoming a trainer or instructor takes far more than simply possessing a degree. One needs to pursue all of the riding education and experience available. As with many riders, Latham did not start out riding dressage. She has ridden and competed in various disciplines including hunters, jumpers, eventing, western pleasure and, of course, dressage. These diverse styles of riding can each provide a wealth of knowledge and different approaches to situations that can arise while riding and teaching. Most riders feel particularly drawn to one style of riding, and once they have settled on their discipline of choice, becoming a working student is an excellent way to immerse oneself in instruction and the opportunity to assist in training and day-to-day operations, often in a full-time position.

One of the most important factors for success, according to Latham, is personal balance. This includes both financial and emotional balance. The equine industry can be highly competitive and occasionally rather harsh, and there has to be flexibility to deal with that. An overly controlling mindset is not productive, and one has to maintain a sense of humility. There are three basic tenets that Latham applies to her time spent with horses that are a strong part of her philosophy:

1. Pay attention and be aware. By living in the moment and being fully present we can see the situation as it is.
2. Be astonished. By reconnecting with the untrained eye, we can see the beauty of the situation.
3. Share the wisdom. Teach others what you have learned.

If someone is unable to apply all of these elements to their interactions with horses, their own life, this career is likely not recommended, Latham said.

A typical day for Latham starts at 5:30 a.m. First she gets her two children, ages 10 and 13, out the door by 7 a.m. for barn chores (including feeding, mucking stalls and turnout). Those have to be finished by 8 a.m., which is when she starts teaching lessons. Lessons continue until around 11 a.m., and then resume again between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. During the time in between, she focuses on the horses she has in for training, generally up to four at any given time. After completing evening chores, she is usually in the house around 8 p.m. She does not schedule lessons on
weekends so she can spend more time with her family and focus on other aspects of her life.

However, because Latham competes in events, weekends often include shows. Generally, show season for dressage starts in the spring and continues into early fall, with competitions located all over the region. Recently, Latham participated in an event called Equine Affaire, the largest horse-related trade show and convention in the northeast. Latham rode a client's horse in a breed demonstration.

While this sounds like an intense lifestyle, Latham said it is also highly rewarding. For example, one of her personal horses, Cardos, was said not to have the potential to reach the upper levels of training and competition in dressage. But with hard work, Latham and Cardos have overcome the naysayers and are currently competing at Prix St. Georges, one of the highest levels of competition. Latham said another great perk is keeping in contact with her students. Some of her former students are now grown, but still express their thanks to her for giving them a strong foundation and skills to progress in their riding and in other aspects of their life.

Latham loves what she does, loves the horses, and loves the path she has created for herself. She maintains a sense of optimism and positive energy in what can be a difficult field, and that rubs off on her students and the horses. Latham said anyone interested in pursuing a similar career should set clear goals, but understand there are multiple paths to career happiness as a horse trainer.

"It's all about the journey," she said.

To learn more about Elizabeth Latham, check out [www.cadburywoodsfarm.com](http://www.cadburywoodsfarm.com).

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