

EQUINE INDUSTRY PROGRAMS

Bluegrass Community
& Technical
College

BCTC program
welcomes students
from many
backgrounds,
provides industry
opportunities



ONE SCHOOL, VARIETY OF PATHS

BY FRANK ANGST

PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT

AS RACING OPERATIONS MANAGER for Bradley Thoroughbreds, Aaron West wears many hats—from keeping racing and sales paperwork current to working as a concierge to ensure owners have tickets and any needed direction, and providing updates, posts, and photos to social media and the website of Pete Bradley's bloodstock operation.

West enjoys those various roles because he's working in a sport he's passionate about. And that opportunity has followed a rather atypical path that included an all-important stop at the North American Racing Academy at Bluegrass Community & Technical College in Lexington.

With a four-year degree from Ouachita Baptist University, West soon found work after graduation in the non-profit sector near his Little Rock, Ark., home. While that work paid the bills, he felt he was missing something.

While in college, West had visited nearby Oaklawn Park and had become captivated by horse racing. In the back of



The North American Racing Academy is based in Central Kentucky

SCHOOLING SESSION

In this series BloodHorse has examined a few of the prominent college and community college programs for students considering careers in the horse industry. In recent weeks BloodHorse has profiled the University of Louisville's Equine Industry Program, the University of Kentucky's Ag Equine Program, the University of Arizona's Race Track Industry Program, and Texas A & M's Equine Science Program. It's not intended to be a comprehensive list, but we hope it provides awareness of the educational opportunities available for young—or older—people considering an industry career.

West might not be the typical student, but then again, in some ways NARA might not have a typical student. Some are looking to exercise horses or compete as jockeys—the original focus of the program that has since added more emphasis on training in horsemanship for industry careers.

Some students are high school graduates looking for a fast-track into industry work. Others use their BCTC experience to get a jump on a four-year degree, gaining hands-on experience and some transferrable credits for when they enroll in four-year institutions such as the Ag Equine Program at the University of Kentucky or the University of Louisville's Equine Industry Program or at other schools. Other students are still in high school—yes, NARA even has opportunities to earn credits ahead of secondary school graduation.

NARA executive director Remi Bellocq said it's important that high school graduates have a number of options so that they can find programs that fit their needs.



Program director Dixie Kendall

“It does provide a lot of students who may not have the means or ability to do a four-year college program an opportunity to jump in and dip their toe in the water and get some really good solid, foundational workforce preparation and some really solid academic work,” Bellocq said. “They can then transfer that to UK, or any of the other schools, if they want to. Or they can go straight to work. We can get them started.”

Students at desks watching films on riding horses or reading about mucking stalls, are not common sights at NARA, where the traditional classroom setting is rare. With typically

his mind, he wondered if there was a career path for him in racing. He hadn't grown up on a farm and his family had not participated in racing or breeding, so he wasn't sure where to start. Through some online research, he discovered NARA. It proved a great fit.

Flash forward a few years and West has completed an internship that took him to Ireland on scholarship where he worked or interned at Darley and Irish National Stud. He has worked at William S. Farish's Lane's End Farm, and he's been in his current Bradley Thoroughbreds role for two years. West liked his initial career path, but racing has proved his passion.

“I enjoyed that, but I was using all of my free time on racing. I went to Kentucky a few times to go to the races and things like that; went to the Kentucky Derby (G1) for the first time in 2010 when Super Saver won,” West said. “Finally it was to the point where I was thinking, ‘This is what I'd really like to do,’ but I knew nothing about working hands-on with a horse. Just through research I found the NARA program. I decided to basically quit my job, move to Kentucky, and go back to school for two years. It's been a great decision.”

small hands-on classes of 12-15 students at its barn at the Thoroughbred Training Center, students figure things out first-hand. Those students garner further learning through NARA's extensive internship program. Students in the internship programs are located throughout the country and even the world. They continue their class work through online classes.

Through emphasizing hands-on experiences and internships, Dixie Kendall, program director for NARA, said students build inroads toward careers.

"We really are working on rebranding from that original concept of a jockey school to a workforce provider. For students coming in, and particularly those that are interested with hands-on positions, they may not be interested in the traditional academia that you see with four-year universities," Kendall said. "For them, they're able to come in, and in one semester take hands-on courses. And in just 16 weeks, they have enough foundational training that they're then placed in internships, so they kind of see that instant gratification in terms of getting into the workforce."

NARA offers workforce certificates for equine industry work, which leads to positions such as groom or barn foreman; for a career as an exercise rider, jockey, or an assistant trainer; and equine veterinary assistant, where students learn about equine anatomy, physiology, and health and lameness issues. Kendall noted that students don't necessarily have to pick one area of focus as the program—updated for 2021—provides a broad foundation.

Amy Heitzman, NARA's equine instructor and stable manager, believes that hands-on experience is valuable whether a student is going straight into the workforce or plans to complete a four-year college degree.



Remi Bellocq is the executive director of NARA at BCTC



Amy Heitzman is NARA's equine instructor and stable manager



Students get plenty of hands-on work at the program

“A lot of these four-year equine degrees are kind of research-based, and at the end of the day, you won’t use them in a lot of the management positions and a lot of racetrack management,” Heitzman said. “So (NARA) is really a great kind of midpoint for them to come to us and get that hands-on training they wouldn’t get with a lot of other programs. And if they have that initiative to expand on that, they can pursue a four-year program.”

Bellocq and Kendall noted that through the internship program, the school is constantly communicating with industry employers on what is needed in terms of preparation. That feedback keeps the school updating its training and students benefit from learning the latest points of emphasis.

“The internships have been a huge part of the program in the past, and they’re going to be even more important as we go forward. We have an advisory committee with individuals from big operations, such as Godolphin, and top trainers,” Kendall said. “We are

constantly keeping that dialog open with the industry, and what’s really important to us is that our students are coming out of the program employable. The reality is that they need the foundation, and then they need to get on-the-job training, and that’s what a lot of these trainers and farms are looking for. So we have students and they can kind of pick a sector, if they’re interested in breeding or if they’re interested in sales.”

As part of that feedback, Bellocq reminds industry leaders that they will need to provide workers with competitive wages and a comfortable lifestyle. While the students have a love for the industry, racing has to compete with other employers or risk losing those trained workers. He believes outfits that do make that commitment will see the benefits of trained workers who have a passion for the industry.

“Our employers are going to have to realize that you compete against the Amazons of the world, not necessarily against each other,” Bellocq said. “And I think a lot of guys, the Todd Pletchers

and Chad Browns, all these guys, are realizing that.”

Bellocq noted that every new employee might struggle a bit with a new atmosphere and maybe the speed of operations, but he said when you have a person who has enough commitment to the sport that they’ve educated themselves, those employees usually quickly adjust. That benefits employers.

Students at NARA can expect a staff that is passionate about putting students on an educational path or a career path they desire.

“It’s the best feeling in the world. I was a licensed trainer. I always tell people after I won my first race, I didn’t have that overwhelming sense of accomplishment,” Kendall said. “It wasn’t like, ‘Man I worked hard and this was all worth it.’ But when students get those jobs like Aaron West has—I can’t explain the feeling. I guess it would be the same as winning the Derby or something like that.

“To me, it’s the motivation. It’s why I’ve been doing this for 10 years now. That’s my motivation.” **BH**