

EQUINE INDUSTRY PROGRAMS

University of
Kentucky

UK AG EQUINE PROGRAMS FUEL A ‘BRAIN GAIN’

The University of Kentucky’s Ag Equine
Program keeps people in state

BY BYRON KING

AS PART OF THE GODOLPHIN FLYING START leadership program that was founded by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum of Dubai in 2003, 22-year-old Julie Witt has studied in Ireland and England and ultimately will do so in Australia and Dubai.

However, her equine educational journey first began at the University of Kentucky’s Ag Equine Program.

Witt, a native of New Jersey, is one of many who have parlayed her education into opportunity. Since the program’s launch in March 2005, 480 students have graduated from the Ag Equine Program, with most either landing immediate employment or continuing their education elsewhere, such as in pursuit of graduate school or a veterinary degree.

The program, one of the fastest-growing at UK, has been a boon to



Dr. Nancy Cox, dean of UK’s
College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment

UK COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE PHOTOS

students and to the commonwealth. According to university data from April 2019, 78% of students within the equine science major are from out-of-state, and yet the majority go on to work in Kentucky. This is known as “brain gain,” the addition of skilled, educated graduates into the workforce, and a trend not often seen

in Kentucky and many other southern states.

“I call this home right now, and I’m coming home to Lexington, most likely,” Witt said.

Home used to be Freehold, N.J., where, as a teenager growing up in the Northeast, she seemed headed toward one of two career tracks: horse trainer or

SCHOOLING SESSION

In this series BloodHorse will examine a few of the prominent college and community college programs for students considering careers in the horse industry. BloodHorse has previously profiled the University of Louisville’s Equine Industry Program, and in upcoming issues will profile the University of Arizona’s Race Track

Industry Program, Texas A&M Equine, and Bluegrass Community and Technical College’s North American Racing Academy. 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.

veterinarian. She worked with off-track Thoroughbreds, enjoying their retraining for secondary careers, and she followed her interest in veterinary work by “riding along” with a racetrack veterinarian at nearby Monmouth Park.

Before she knew it, it was time to make a choice for college, and a coincidence helped send her to UK, one of a handful of universities with an equine degree.

“I grew up my entire life on a street named Kentucky Way, and I’m like, you know what, might as well go for it, that sort of thing,” she recalled. “I went down, and it was single-handedly the best experience of my life to be honest with you. Growing up in New Jersey and you talk about the industry, people think you will be a trainer, be a vet, but you come down to Kentucky and you realize—not just with Thoroughbreds but with everything—that there are so many more jobs or career paths than you could ever imagine.”

Though the range of the equine program at UK is broad, its niche is different than those from the University of Louisville and the University of Arizona and other equine programs around the country. Examples of courses include equine nutrition and animal physiology within UK’s science focus, and can range to topics such as Thoroughbred sales and equine law for those with different interests.

“We do not have courses in the business of racetrack management that a place such as Louisville or Arizona would have, but we do consider ourselves to have a stake in the ground in safety with racing and that is with our racetrack safety program with Dr. Mick Peterson,” said Dr. Nancy Cox, the dean of UK’s College of Agriculture, Food and Environment.

Peterson, executive director of the Racing Surfaces Testing Laboratory, analyzed Santa Anita Park’s racing surfaces after a spike in racing and training fatalities there in 2019. He is a UK professor who teaches biosystems and agricultural engineering.

In another feature unique to its program, UK performs necropsy stud-



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

UK graduate Julie Witt: ‘...you come down to Kentucky and you realize there are so many more jobs or career paths than you could ever imagine’

ies of all equine fatalities that occur at Kentucky racetracks. UK’s necropsy program began in 2009, following two high-profile cases of catastrophic breakdowns: 2006 Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (G1) winner Barbaro, who sustained injuries in that year’s Preakness Stakes (G1) and was euthanized after suffering from laminitis in 2007; and Eight Belles, who was euthanized from injuries incurred after running second in the 2008 Derby.

The genesis of the UK program came in 2001 with the onset of mare reproductive loss syndrome, said James MacLeod, director of equine programs at UK and the John S. and Elizabeth A. Knight chair. UK researchers began studying the syndrome, which ultimately was traced to the inadvertent ingestion of eastern tent caterpillars by mares. He said it became clear there was a need for a specialized equine science program in Central Kentucky. Four years after the onset of MRLS, the UK equine program came into existence.



James MacLeod is the director of equine programs at UK

As it was at the time of MRLS, the Gluck Equine Research Center still remains at the fore of equine research and analysis. Its staff and findings provide resources for students.

“The professor calls over someone from Gluck, who is one of the world’s experts on that disease or that area, and that has happened in multiple classes,” said Witt. “Or they bring in guest speakers that we’re very lucky to have because we don’t have to fly them in. They come from 15 minutes down the road.”

Just as the availability of speakers is increased for in-class discussion, the university’s location in Lexington, the “horse capital of the world,” provides opportunities for students with hands-on learning. Many students

will adjust their class schedules to work part-time at nearby farms, and students are required to complete at least one internship to graduate.

During her time at UK, Witt was employed by consignor James Keogh, prepped mares for sales, volunteered at



UK COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

UK's Maine Chance Farm is home to up to 100 horses, spread out over several barns and more than 25 pastures and paddocks

Old Friends Farm, and also worked at Ashford Stud, WinStar Farm, and Three Chimneys Farm. She also completed a one-year internship at *BloodHorse*.

Other opportunities await at UK's Maine Chance Farm, where the university maintains up to 100 horses—depending on the season—spread out over several barns and more than 25 pastures and paddocks. This creates an environment for students to do “anything and everything,” from working with mares to prepping yearlings, said Courtney Schneider, director of sales at Shawhan Place and a 2015 UK equine graduate.

“It’s more hands-on than other programs. You’re not purely in the classroom 100% of the time,” she said. “You want to learn it? You’re going to learn about it at UK. There are so many opportunities available to the students.”

As a result of being involved in agriculture, considered essential during

the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these hands-on studies were able to continue with health and safety guidelines this spring, complemented by UK’s video lectures and meetings. In the midst of COVID-19, 30 internships were completed via remote work opportunities or in-person by following all social distancing protocols.

“We were a little curtailed but not as affected as many colleges would be,” Cox said.

Just five years removed from school, Schneider, 27, is vice president of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Farm Managers Club, an organization that includes many of the region’s most prominent sales and farm leaders.

“If all goes according to plan, I’ll be the president next year, which is exciting but a little intimidating,” she said. “I will be only the second female president and tied for the youngest

president we’ve ever had.”

Unlike the bulk of her UK equine program classmates, Schneider is Bluegrass-grown talent, born and raised in Frankfort—just 25 miles away from the university. Her sister, Kayla, is a junior in the UK program and has classes available to her that didn’t even exist during her sister’s time at UK.

Also, the UK program is now certified by the Quality Assurance Commons for Higher and Postsecondary Education, a recognition that its graduates are prepared with the skills necessary to enter the workforce.

“We wanted students to have every opportunity to grow professionally,” said MacLeod. “So it’s not just a job—it’s a career—and the young person can reach their material goals and reach their professional goals and still leverage their passion in ways that make it all interesting and worthwhile.” **BH**