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HORSES IN CYBERSPACE

New series: Your guide to what's equine online

By Kate O'Hare

For many people, just the thought of idling on the on-ramp to the information superhighway is enough to give them the willies, especially when they're a lot more comfortable mucking out stalls and braiding manes than loading up software and hooking up modems. But with help from a computer professional (find a good one and stay in touch), it's really not that hard to leap into cyberspace; and newcomers will find a lot of horse people already there.

One of the easier ways to stick your big toe into cyberspace is through one of the commercial on-line services, such as America Online, Prodigy, or CompuServe. All offer access to that vast, interconnected grid of computer databases collectively called the Internet and to its point-and-click, lots-of-neat-graphics subset, the World Wide Web. They also offer lots of specially created information and services available only to their subscribers. For many people, this is a relatively painless way to see if they like the online world without huge expenditures in software or hardware. Think of it as cable television: all those channels out there on satellite, brought into your home by your local cable company, without your having to hook up a dish. As you get more adventurous, you may choose to link straight to the Internet itself; (set up your own satellite dish, as it were); but don't overlook what each of the services has to offer.

As part of an ongoing series about horses in cyberspace, this article focuses on America Online, one of the fastest growing and most consumer friendly of the online services. In just this past year, AOL, as it's known, has jumped from 1.5 million subscribers to 4.5 million, accompanied by some of the expected growing pains in terms of software and system glitches. But its cost is low: free software and hookup; ten free online hours the first month and $9.95 a month afterward, for which you get five hours, with a prorated charge of $2.95 for every hour over five. Some of the online services charge extra according to what areas you access, much like pay-per-view movies on cable; AOL, at least for now, is keeping a flat-fee structure with no additional charges. It will work either on a PC-compatible computer running Windows 3.1 or higher or on a Macintosh (although software development for the Mac seems to lag behind). If you're lucky, one of AOL's access numbers is just a local call away; if not, add long-distance charges onto your phone bill (although AOL does have some plans to deal with this, and more in the works).

For those completely unfamiliar with what online services offer, there are a few basic categories: the ability to download graphics and sound files, text documents, and software; the ability to carry on real-time conversations with other members by typing messages back and forth in "chat rooms," either on specific topics or just for general conversation; "bulletin boards," which consist of posted messages or comments in folders devoted to certain topics (there are scads, and you can create your own, if you like); e-mail (AOL allows you to send and receive e-mail to and from anyone else online, not just other AOL subscribers); and a huge variety of posted announcements, articles, photos, schedules, and more from a wide variety of information providers, including organizations, companies, magazines, newspapers, and TV networks.



Horses on AOL

But what about horses? Just a few months ago, AOL consolidated its equine areas into one neat package, called The Horse Forum. One fast way to negotiate AOL is to use keywords, which take you right to the specific area you want rather than having to work your way through menus. Keyword: Horse takes you to The Horse Forum, which then offers point-and-click access to five AOL sites that contain something to do with horses: Pet Care Forum, The Exchange (a hobby area), The Grandstand (a general-sports area); ABC Track (part of ABC Sports), and Race News.

Racing enthusiasts will no doubt slam straight to ABC Track or Race News, but most ordinary horse folk probably would get the most use out of PCF and The Grandstand—and there is a bit on rodeo and riding in the Exchange, under Outdoor Activities. PCF offers something for everyone who loves animals, with chats and bulletin boards devoted to much of what runs, swims, or flies, along with veterinary information. Under the Special Species area of PCF is a slew of bulletin boards (or message boards, as AOL calls them) devoted to animals large and small, including horses. Along with two boards containing folders for more than 70 horse breeds, the general Horse Message Board offers a vast array of topics. Here's a small sampling: Kids & Horse Showing Club; Insurance Q&A; Horse Books; Sidesaddle; Pen Pals; Farrier/Blacksmith Q&A; Boarding Stable Blues; Disabled Riders; Stallion Directory; State Horse Councils/Rescue; Beginner Adult Rider; Disaster Preparedness; and Equine Health. As with all AOL areas, there are huge libraries of old message-board postings and chat logs (watch what you type, they save everything) and graphics and sound files.

A new PCF area is Breed Information, in which the two "managers" are hoping to post a complete description and photo for every recognized breed and are actively seeking contributions of information. So far the Morgan, the New Forest Pony, the Quarter Horse, and the Tennessee Walking Horse are listed. There's a growing list of Equine Registries, Associations and Organizations; and an area of articles and alerts called Horse Health Information. One feature of AOL is regularly scheduled chats on specific topics. Among the horse chats are: Arabian; Peruvian Paso/Paso Fino; Horse Racing; Rodeo Chat; American Saddlebred; Hunter/Jumper; and Dressage. You can participate in the chats with your fellow horse lovers or just "lurk," which is kind of like electronic eavesdropping (but people may try to talk to you anyway).

As with all AOL areas, there are lists of sites on the World Wide Web that are applicable to horses. These can be accessed by just pointing and clicking, which takes you to AOL's Internet gateway and then to the specific website itself (it's a whole new vocabulary, isn't it?). But we'll save the Web for another discussion. There are also files called FAQs, which are common across cyberspace. FAQ is short for Frequently Asked Questions, and these files should be read wherever encountered. They can save lots of time and sometimes a little embarrassment for "newbies" (the cyberspace term for neophytes). Each AOL site also has a Welcome file, which gives an overview for first-time visitors.

The Grandstand's equine areas can be reached either through The Horse Forum or by its own Keyword: Horse Sports. Don't let the name of Post Time (Horse Sports) throw you—racing is only a small segment of the sports covered (the site's actual name is Horse Sports & Racing). HS&R has its own message boards, chat rooms, and libraries. Among the boards are Dressage (three of them); USDF & FEI; USET/Olympics; Horse Shows/AHSA; The Junior Riders; College Equestrian Team Competition; and Horse Sports Conditioning. The discussions range from techniques and tips to favorite gripes and a fair amount of scheduling and other information for horse shows.

Before you bypass ABC Track completely, it does include an AHSA event calendar, which at press time was current through last November. With

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