

Houses of the Hunting Country. . .



A New Sporting Lifestyle:

EQUESTRIAN COMMUNITIES

by Diana Hunt

With the economic challenges this country is facing, it is a time to stop, reflect, and decide what really is important in life. For horse people, that would be finding a way to keep horses in their lives.

Enter what has become a big industry: *special interest real estate*. The baby boomer generation is hitting the retirement mark, many young parents are attracted to a simpler lifestyle where they and their kids can spend time outdoors as an antidote to stressed city life, and many home buyers have become eco-conscious, favoring pristine pasture lands over water- and labor-intensive golf courses.

It used to be that people attained a certain income and age level and moved to a golf community. But golf communities are old news, so last-century. What are sprouting like mushrooms in a manure pile now are equestrian communities, especially throughout the Southeast with its availability of inexpensive land. A few other equestrian communities are scattered around the country, particularly in Florida, California, and Colorado.

The interest in specialty real estate as a niche is growing. *PrivateCommunities.com* is a website that connects affluent buyers interested in acquiring property in a “Destination Amen-

ty Community” to those locations around the country (and a few Latin America sites as well). Of over three hundred developments, eighty-four sites are listed as having an equestrian component to them, from merely a stable as part of a golf or lake community to full-blown equestrian developments. What they all have in common is considerable protected open space. In 2005, *PrivateCommunities.com* had 2.1 million site visits; in 2007 that number grew to 3.6 million, even in the midst of foreclosure news.

Way back in the 1970s, polo player Bill Ylvisaker had a dream about an equestrian-

Tired of mucking stalls, mending fences, losing access to your old trails? Equestrian communities have mushroomed around the country. Are they right for you? Here are a few up-and-running examples.

based gated community. The Palm Beach Polo and Country Club in Wellington, Florida, which Ylvisaker built, is the result of that dream. However, it took another twenty years for the concept to really flourish.

McLendon Hills in North Carolina was in the forefront of the recent boom. Located on six hundred acres near the horse and golf center of Southern Pines/Pinehurst and the Moore County Hounds, McLendon came into being in 1998. There are now fifty homes built, and well over seventy percent of the lots are sold to people who view horses as their primary hobby. In addition to the twenty-four-stall barn and eight miles of trails, the larger lots are appropriate on which to build private barns.

Trendy Communities

A number of large, trendy equestrian communities are in the early stages of development in the verdant foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains along the North and South Carolina border. All are within easy driving distance of the Tryon Hounds and hunting land still under charter by the Green Creek/Greenville County Hounds near Landrum, SC. (The April 2008 issue of *Western Horseman Magazine* ranked Tryon as fourth in the country as a town where horses come first.)

It was White Oak Golf & Equestrian Center, an eleven hundred-acre master planned resort that lies between Tryon, NC and Landrum, SC that caught Bonnie Lingerfelt's eye. Bonnie has been hunting with the Tryon Hounds since 1969 and has been Joint-Master for the past fifteen years. She initiated the Foothills Equestrian Trail Association, serves on the board of Tryon Riding and Hunt Club, and on the advisory committee of FENCE (Foothills Equestrian and Nature Center which offers 380 acres of nature and recreation activities). Between her

community commitments and her job as a realtor, she has no time to take care of her horses. They always have been boarded, and Bonnie has always commuted to the barn. Buying into White Oak is about to change all that.

“One of the reasons we were interested in buying out at White Oak was because it is going to have an equestrian facility with a main barn and trails, which I like for walking too” she said. “It’s a good location, just a five- or ten-minute drive to six of our seven hunt venues, and there’ll be a clubhouse and other activities. Community living with horses for me is part of my recreation.”

The equestrian facility is being designed by Capt. Mark Phillips who has been hands-on in concept and design from the beginning. Initially, there will be fifteen miles of trails (plus additional separate trails for walking), and an indoor and an outdoor arena next to a twenty-stall barn. Another twenty stalls are planned for Phase Two. Phillips visited White Oaks in October to lay out the final stages of design and solidify the timeline for completion. The first phase is to be ready for use by the end of 2010.

“It’s obviously a well-planned community, nothing but first-class amenities,” Bonnie continued. “There’s a vineyard, they’ve used rock appointments, the land itself is appealing with White Oak Creek dividing the property almost in half. It’s a nice package with the golf course along the creek in a valley and the house lots above that, giving many lots views of the green golf course and the mountains in the background.”

The Lingerfelts purchased two-and-a-half lots to build on, but their time frame to build got pushed back. “Well, we had a time frame,” she laughed, “but it’s kind of like it might be a little bit longer!”

On the other hand, the developers have no debt, giving the community financial stability in the current economic conditions.

While Bonnie says she has not seen her husband, Charles, pick up a golf club in their thirty years of marriage, she thinks he might give the Arnold Palmer golf course a try.

“I think what he likes,” she smiled, “is that feeling of a community, a protected area where things look the same, a neighborhood feeling with a clubhouse to go have a meal or grab a drink with friends.”

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Aiken, South Carolina, a few hours south of the Tryon area, has become a lively center of equestrian development. This historic horse town boasts five hunts—Aiken (drag), Edisto River, Flat Branch, Whiskey Road, and Why Worry Hounds—in addition to nearly every other form of equestrian discipline. More than fourteen master-planned, gated equestrian residential communities are advertised, some of them for real, others still on the drawing board.

Lisa Mitchell liked the idea of being able to live on a horse farm but being free from the chores. Even though Lisa hunts with Aiken Hounds, it was precisely the polo and the club amenities that she and her husband, John, liked at New Bridge Polo and Country Club.

Opposite page: The rustic, Latin-style clubhouse at New Bridge is within walking distance of the houses. During polo tournaments the clubhouse is Party-Central.

Right: Virginia-based Equestrian Services, LLC is creating branded equestrian communities around the country. The Oaks, their first O'Connor signature development opened in Lake City, Florida this past October. Here, Chester Weber gives David and Karen O'Connor a ride around the thousand-plus-acre development.



“We looked for a couple of years for just the right place,” she explained. “When we were introduced to New Bridge we fell in love with it. John loves to watch polo, but he is a golfer. He’s never been on a horse, but he loves the horses.”

Having recently retired from her job as placement alumni director at Franklin Pierce Law Center in New Hampshire, Lisa and John purchased a small two-bedroom bungalow alongside Field Number One, with plans to later build a house and a barn on a larger lot. However, Lisa found she enjoys boarding her Cleveland Bay mare in town next to Hitchcock Woods, which frees her up for the extensive Aiken social life. From the stable she can hack to the Aiken Hounds meets and she has made an array of stable friends with whom she rides in the Woods. The Mitchells may build a larger house at New Bridge, but no barn.

New Bridge sits northeast of Aiken on 861 acres of open rolling fields lined with pines. Hundreds of polo ponies graze peacefully in the pastures, neatly raked sand roads wind between board fences and there’s usually some action on at least one of the five international quality polo fields.

Even though New Bridge is “sport-specific,” in that it is built around polo by polo players, anyone is welcome to buy into the community. The inspiration for such a community came from Las Tortugas Country Club in Argentina. Polo sponsor and player Russ McCall, together with nine-goal player Matias Magrini, made it happen.

“You either get it or you don’t; you either like it or you don’t,” said Lisa, referring to living in New Bridge. “You live on a huge horse farm; you have dirt roads. We love it because of that. Of course, the dust can be a downside but

that’s just part of it. There are all these wide open spaces and fields with horses, lots of horses, and there is a rhythm to this place. In the morning they exercise the horses, in the late afternoon they exercise the horses, there is always work to be done on the polo fields, you see farm equipment, there is always activity.”

She likes the seasonal rhythm as well.

“Fall and spring are busy with horses coming and going, polo daily—you get excited about that. Just about the time you think, ‘OK, it’s getting tiring,’ the eventers come in for the winter. Summer is totally quiet, and there is no activity, so you can’t wait for the fall, and it all starts up again.”

The rustic, Latin-style clubhouse is within walking distance of the houses. There is a pool and tennis courts, with social luncheons and other planned activities. During polo tournaments the clubhouse is Party-Central.

“Everywhere I look there are horses; I hear neighing,” Lisa continued. “When the foals are born (next door at the Embryo Transplant Center), we are encouraged to interact with them and help socialize them. I like the open space, the concept of living on a horse farm without the work associated with it. It’s an exciting lifestyle because of the horses, the beauty of them. We both feel there is a serenity being around horses, a spirituality about it. It is nurturing to the soul.”

It beats a golf cart going by your window, every time.

Slow and Casual

As much as New Bridge and White Oaks appeal to the fast-lane, upscale horsey set, down-home, low-key Hatchaway Bridge Farm is the exact mirror opposite.

Samantha Charles, publisher of *Sidelines Magazine* (a monthly magazine that covers personalities in polo, dressage, eventing, and hunter/jumpers), moved to Aiken three years ago and, along with a business partner, started her own equestrian development, Hatchaway Bridge Farm. She rides with Whiskey Road Foxhounds, currently apprenticing as a whipper-in. Samantha’s first exposure to foxhunting was with the Green Mountain Hounds in Sugarbush, VT, but that was secondary to playing polo. After moving to Florida, she continued playing polo and rode with the Palm Beach Hounds.

“That was in the very beginning,” she smiled, referring to the Palm Beach Hunt club, “when we wore polo boots and brown jackets.”

She was driving to Aiken four years ago to cover the polo pony sale and was listening to a book on tape on how to invest in real estate with no money down.

“The only time I made money was in selling some real estate, not in the nursery school business, not in publishing,” she explained. “First rule was to live in the town you buy property. I was ready to leave Florida, I thought I would buy rental property in a place I want to be, and that would be a good excuse to move there. I bought a cottage that weekend in downtown Aiken as a rental.”

Her idea of an equestrian center was a life-long dream. Frustrated by development taking over the Florida orange groves where she used to ride, pushing out and pricing out all but the highest-end equestrian pursuits, she wanted to buy a raw piece of land and start over and do it right. So far she has it right, and she has stayed true to her vision.

She purchased 230 acres of wooded, rolling land eight miles east of Aiken, divided it into eighteen lots, put in fencing, a four-acre grass derby field with a water feature, bank jump, three coops, and several stadium jumps, added a regulation dressage arena, and six miles of riding trails before a lot was ever sold.

“The big advantage for everyone,” she explained, “is that the maintenance for all of this is split by everyone living here through the homeowners’ dues. It’s not too expensive because we don’t have a clubhouse or a polo field.

“This has fulfilled all my expectations, but I had a big learning curve,” she admitted. “I did break Rule #1: don’t fall in love with your own development. So I was unwilling to make some of the changes a developer would have made, like lowering the lot sizes when the economy is not so good. But in the long run we’ll prevail, and we will sell all the lots to like-minded people.

“The truth is I enjoy riding with other people,” she continued, “but I don’t like being

The Oaks general manager and riding director Shelly van den Neste rides her dressage horse with the equestrian center in the background.



Lisa Mitchell lives at New Bridge and hunts with the Aiken Hounds. She likes the idea of living on a horse farm, yet being free from the chores.

in traffic or in a commercial development. I like being in the country but like being with my friends. Here, I can jump in the electric cart and go have a cocktail, I can have someone around but not looking in my window or breathing down my neck. If I want to go riding with someone I can call a neighbor. We spend a lot of time together with people in the development, we have dinner together, we have a nice community, but we do have that common interest. That’s one advantage of having a small development.”

Just to add to the fun, she started a mock hunt on Wednesday afternoons that meanders throughout Hatchaway. It began as a marketing idea by one of the realtors as a way to showcase the lots for sale.

“Let me be very clear,” Samantha stated. “It is a trail ride, a mock hunt. We have no hounds. We have two and a half couple of Wiener dogs (her dachshunds). They do “hunt” but not necessarily something we’re following. But they run around in the woods and sniff things, get under the horses feet but stay out of the way. They give up about halfway through the ride and return home. We have a great time. We ride for about an hour and have a pot luck dinner for two hours. Have we sold any lots by doing this? No, we haven’t. But we’ve had a good time, and it is a lot of good press for us, and word gets out.”

What to Look for

If you’re interested in looking into planned equestrian community living, there are a few things to keep in mind.

As with all real estate, it’s location, location, location. How close or far from town do you

want to be? Do the advantages of the shared amenities outweigh the restrictions? When do like-minded neighbors become overbearing? Is the developer or the homeowners association enforcing the regulations? Typically, seventy-five to one hundred percent of the lots have to be sold before control is turned over from the developer to a homeowners association. Do you agree with the developer’s vision? Has the developer provided all the infrastructure and amenities promised?

Equestrian Services, LLC is a Virginia-based company devoted exclusively to creating equestrian developments around the country. But the company has gone a step further. Like golf, they are creating *branded* equestrian communities. In fact, the first (David and Karen) O’Connor signature development opened in Lake City, Florida this past October with everything in place: a thirty-four stall barn, covered arena, round pen, a cross country course, pastures, and staff. The Oaks at Lake City offers 237 one to seven-and-a-half acre lots on 1,220 acres of oak trees and rolling hills. While no foxhunters have yet bought into The Oaks, the community is convenient to Live Oak Hounds in Monticello, while a bit further away is Misty Morning Hounds of Gainesville and the winter home of the private Woodfield Beagle pack in Miccosukee.

According to Equestrian Services president Jennifer Donovan, the advantage of buying into a branded community is the quality facilities, high-level horse care, and the guaranteed involvement by the signator. That guarantee is in place for the duration of the brand, which is licensed for ten years.

“The major advantage is the service,” Jennifer continued. “We have developed and launched a professional management company tied with the brand. The biggest problem in these equestrian communities is the turnover; trainers come and go and take their business with them. Like a golf management model, we created an entire company that is professionally staffed that manages the facilities. That’s really the most important piece, because our philosophy is about the type of experience you have. Think about a Ritz Carlton, Four Seasons model, put over that an equestrian staff professionally trained, first aid and CPR trained, with access to continuing education, a great job with benefits, vacation pay, and you have a place where you can actually make a living in the horse world by working for us.”

Equestrian Services is also in the early stages of bringing on board signature equestrian communities in California, Baja, Michigan, and Costa Rica.

If all this sounds like equestrian communities could eventually saturate the market as golf communities have, there is one built-in advantage. Untouched, raw land seldom goes out of favor. As Henry David Thoreau put it way back in 1854, “We can never have enough nature.”

Diana Hunt is a lifelong equestrienne. She has been writing about and photographing equestrian subjects for many years. She hunted with Bijou Springs and Arapahoe hunts in Colorado and has been a member of the Aiken Hounds and Whiskey Road Foxhounds in South Carolina.