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Every Step They Take

Here are the latest trends and technologies for arena footings.

By Stephanie J. Corum

Regardless of the performance discipline of your barn, the footing underneath the horses' feet is important. What meets those hooves can literally help the hardworking horse or harm him. The footing in your arena should absorb shock as well as provide stability and traction. Footing that is too deep or loose could put your horse at risk for soft tissue injury, but if the footing becomes too hard, you can get concussive injuries.

There are many factors to consider when installing or improving your arena footing. They include: the amount of traffic, working discipline(s), cost, availability of materials, geographic location, climate, and the amount needed.

DO THE JOB RIGHT

Of course, there's much more to an arena than good footing. There is the site layout, proper grading,

drainage and most important, the base layer. Experts generally agree that it doesn't matter what kind of top layer you use if you don't have a sufficient, consistent base. When planning your riding area, it is best to contact professionals for their advice.

With other aspects of your arena correctly planned, you are ready to decide on the top layer. What is the best footing? Michael Donovan, principal of Equestrian Services, LLC, answers, "The best footing for you is the one you like the best." There are many different mixes, depths and bases, and each combination can act completely differently. "The bottom line is try it before you buy it," Donovan says. "Find someone who has it and find a way to go ride on it."

Depth can be more important than the footing itself. One to three inches is suitable for most English disciplines. In Western sports, reiners pre-

fer footing that is deeper than for Western pleasure horses or barrel racers. The depths here are usually two to five inches depending on type of riding and surface. Donovan stresses to start with less than you think you need, because it is difficult, even for experienced contractors, to mix and spread the footing precisely. "It's like buttering your toast with a shovel," he says. Secondly, it's much easier to add footing than it is to take it out.

Below are some of the popular footings choices. It is best to contact individual manufacturers (see sidebar) for specific amounts and cost analysis. Regardless of your selection, footing is a significant investment, so be certain of what you want.

TURF

Mother Nature typically knows best, and this is true even with arena footing. Natural grass turf is excellent for horses. It provides a firm base, free drainage and is self-regenerating (with restricted use). Its biggest drawback is maintenance. You must have a well-established stand of grass and then keep it properly mowed. Too much traffic, and it gets worn down. Too much rain, and it's easily torn up. Too little water, or freezing in the winter, can make the ground rock hard. Still, the ideal turf scenario is what many other footings try to replicate.

SAND

Sand arenas are very common because of ready availability and reasonable price. Sand varies by particle size, shape and hardness. For example, beach sand consists of round particles, which don't hold together well and don't make for good footing. In contrast, irregularly shaped particles,

Taking Care of Business

Another new innovation is not so much a footing as it is a system. The Riso Horse 2000 was first developed in Germany and is now appearing in the United States. Drainage pipes are laid over a watertight basin, and then the top layer consists of special sand. Sensors automatically regulate the water level under the arena. It works with an "ebb and flow" concept, where water is extracted when too wet and supplied when too dry. During heavy rains, the system pumps away excess water to eliminate puddles. This system has been very well received, but it is also extremely expensive.



Photo by Katie Rixner for Riso Horse 2000

like washed concrete or quarry sand, work well. Medium- to coarse-sized particles that have been washed to remove silt and clay work the best.

All sand surfaces require proper dragging and watering. Sand can become very dusty and loose when it is too dry, and it can freeze in the winter if there is too much moisture. Sand can also be abrasive and wear horses' feet, and over the years, it does break down, so you will need to replace it eventually.

In recent years, polymer- or wax-coated sand has been developed to allow horses to work regardless of environmental conditions. As the name implies, the sand particles are individually coated with wax or a synthetic polymer, which reduces dust, and protects against drying out or freezing of the surface. Its durability depends on the purity of the coating, and this procedure does significantly increase the cost.

STONE DUST AND WOOD CHIPS

Also known as blue stone, stone dust is another common arena footing, again because of its reasonable price. It can work very well, but requires significant maintenance. Even more so than sand, it can be very dusty if not watered properly. Also, when it gets too dry and compacted, it becomes very hard. Sand mixed with bluestone helps keep it from getting too compacted.

Wood chips and peat moss provide good cushioning. Added to other materials like sand, either can work well as long as the surface is kept properly watered. If it gets too dry, it will become slippery. The biggest drawback is that, as natural products, wood chips and peat moss wear down and decompose. They need to be replaced every two to three years.

RUBBER

For the environmentally conscious, shredded recycled tires (with steel belting removed), sneakers, conveyor belts, etc., can be an excellent option. However, there are also companies that manufacture rubber pieces specifically for arena footing. Rubber bits are typically mixed with sand or stone dust to provide additional spring and help with drainage. Though such



Rubber products provide extra give in the footing and keep dust down.

Photo courtesy of Equi-Tread



A new surface called Polytrack made its debut at the racetrack. The material is a combination of polypropylene fibers, recycled rubber and silica sand with a wax coating.

a mixture still needs occasional watering, it usually requires less water than sand alone. It stays in place and provides good cushioning and shock absorption. Generally, this surface only requires being "smoothed out" after riding. However, the rubber floats to the top eventually, and the sand will begin to compact against the base. Donovan recommends harrowing it more aggressively as needed to "un-stick" the sand and mix the materials back together.

POLYTRACK

The talk of the horse racing industry is Polytrack, which is a combination of polypropylene fibers, recycled rubber and silica sand with a wax coating. Created and manufactured by Martin Collins Enterprises in England, the first Polytrack training facility was installed in 1987. It made its U.S. debut in 2004 when Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Kentucky installed it on

its training track. It also made an appearance here as the footing for the 2005 World Cup in Las Vegas.

The surface is very kind to horses' legs—it provides consistent stability while also supplying the necessary give. It maintains uniformity, even as the weather changes. In an outdoor situation, it comes with a full drainage system based on vertical drainage. It does require a specific base system, but can be used both indoors and out. One challenge is finding the proper sand, but the biggest drawback is that it is very expensive to produce.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

There are many factors to consider, and professional advice is recommended. Shop around and look for specials during the winter, which is the off-season for arena installation. Take your time, weigh your options carefully, and then get out there and enjoy your arena! [sm]

For More Info

Here is a listing of several footing companies:

ComfortStall—www.comfortstall.com, 1-888-307-0855

Equestrian Footing—www.equestrianfooting.com, 1-877-536-9572

Equestrian Services, LLC—www.eqsv.com, 1-877-467-7307

Equestrian Surfaces—www.equestriansurfaces.com, 1-800-809-7298

Equi-Tread West—www.equi-tread.com, (306) 869-2357

Fibar—www.fibar.com, 1-800-342-2721

Footings Unlimited—www.footingsunlimited.com, 1-800-972-7251

Group Summit—www.groupsummit.com, 1-800-782-5628

Midwest Equestrian—www.midwest-equestrian.com, 1-800-321-0699

Perma-Flex—www.perma-flex1.com

Polytrack—www.polytrack.com, (859) 254-3412

Riso Horse 2000—www.risohorse2000.de, (561) 762-3472

Surefoot—www.rubberecycle.com, 1-888-463-6846

Surfacing Resources—www.surfacingresources.com, (260) 432-2515

Stabilizer Solutions—www.stabilizersolutions.com, 1-800-336-2468

The Rubber Man—www.therubberman.com, 1-877-275-8253