

LATEST IN A WEEKLY SERIES



'It's a daunting responsibility – I hope he looks after me more than I can him'

FIVE minutes into my morning at Nick Alexander's yard and I am already mucking out stables. A rapid introduction by head lad Mark Ellwood is all time allows before I'm left in the care of Gary, an eight-year-old gelding who surveys my attempts to clean his box with a careful eye.

I am here to spend the day as one of the stable staff and with the jumps season just around the corner, my eagerness to pitch in is welcomed at the Fife yard.

The recent months have been fairly quiet, with Alexander choosing to omit summer jumping for the first time in several years, but momentum is now building for the core season and an extra set of hands does not go amiss.

Thankfully, I'm no stranger to mucking out and Gary – otherwise known as That's A Given – is more than accommodating. He was fed an hour before by one of the four stable staff who live on-site but the bulk of the workforce arrives at 7am and immediately get to work tending to their charges.

There are 50 stables at Kinneston and almost all of the boxes are occupied, so labour is divided into barns. Three lots of ten stables occupy the bottom yard, while a short trek uphill leads to the top yard, which houses two buildings of eight and 12 horses respectively. Within that structure, each member of the team oversees around six horses and their early role is to get the stables clean and their horses ready for the day.

By the time I've cleaned one box, most of the staff have already finished two or three. The dirty bedding is hauled over and tipped in nearby trailers and I diligently head to the next stable with a gelding whose back legs I am warned to keep a note of.

A voice drifts my way: "He hasn't kicked anyone yet." It's only mildly reassuring.

Mornings are fast-paced and keeping to the clock is essential, but staff still carve out time to check in on each other. It is a job with unique, often unsociable hours and, with time off a precious commodity, strong friendships are regularly forged.

Secrets of Racing

Catherine Macrae goes behind the scenes to sample life in the yard of trainer Nick Alexander



These relationships become vital during the busiest hour of the day, and despite my muddling efforts the yard hums in harmony ahead of the work-riders' arrival at quarter to eight.

With the yard swept, stables clean and waters replenished we congregate in the tack room. Alexander is a meticulous organiser and the riding schedule is mapped out carefully in a large tome in the centre of the room, detailing 45 horses across four lots and two gallops.

It is a lot of information distilled onto one page but fortunately 'Catch' Bissett, former assistant trainer and now racing secretary, arrives to help me decipher the code. While some work-riders will be in the saddle all morning, I am wisely slated for a single lot – lessening my chances of ending up on the tally chart of fallers that graces the tack room whiteboard.

I'm billed to do a whole and two-halves on the all-weather with Clan Legend. What the numbers mean is something of a mystery but Clan Legend is not, having won 11 times for the yard, his most recent coming on Becher Chase day at Aintree in December. For someone expecting to be given a retired hack to ride, a stable stalwart is a more daunting responsibility.

Perhaps sensing the oncoming nerves, Catch assures me that Clan Legend very much lives up to his name. Dubbed Olly in the yard, the 12-year-old chestnut homebred is the picture of civility and stands quietly to be saddled, bar an understandable irritation when his girth is tightened. I hope he's prepared to look after me far more than I can him.

Saddle on, hat fastened, time to move. We set off across the cobbles and are the first outside Alexander's home, where the lot

gathers before heading out. Racing saddles aren't designed for feet-in-stirrup mounting, so there's a bit of a leap required on my part despite Olly's manageable height and the mounting block available.

The rest of the stable staff and work-riders filter in, some on yard favourites and the less fortunate, predominantly Ellwood and conditional jockey Bruce Lynn, tasked with the more temperamental horses. Luckily for now, everyone is on their best behaviour, and I try to follow suit by joining those walking round while we wait for the stragglers to arrive.

Each lot is split between work on the all-weather and the circular sand gallops, but to start with they all warm up together. We trek past the barn to an arena and proceed in single file, the pace quickly shifting into a trot.

Alexander takes up his place in the middle of the circle to survey the process and Olly begrudgingly trots on in the manner of someone putting up with me by obligation rather than with any particular enthusiasm.

There's a lot more kicking than I would have anticipated with a racehorse, but prior experience teaches me it is infinitely preferable to being bolted off with. We run through our paces and after switching reins and a leisurely canter, Alexander checks everyone knows the plan. Whole and two-halves. I remember the numbers, the practicalities of it not so much. "I'll pair you with Alice," he says, pointing across the arena. "Just follow her."

That I can do. Alice Marshall is the new assistant trainer and, although only four weeks into the job, seems more than adept at handling roving Racing Post reporters alongside her own ride Hombre De Guerra.

We split into a group of five and

Pictures: JOHN GROSSICK (RACINGPOST.COM/PHOTOS)



Dubai Days keeps a keen eye on what's happening in the yard as Catherine Macrae (left) gets a feel for life at Kinneston Stables

head to the all-weather gallop, a straight, wide track that pulls away from Loch Leven and up through the trees at the base of the Lomond Hills. First, we'll head right to the top in single file before twice climbing to the treeline, halfway up, in pairs. The whole and two-halves suddenly makes a lot more sense.

Marshall advises me to keep around ten lengths between us, a distance that turns out to be tricky to judge when your marker is springing into a gallop and firing off ahead of you. Olly may have been slow to warm up but he unearths a spark of energy as we round the railings at the base of the hill and he takes command, leaping off to follow the string.

It's no leisurely canter but we're not out to break a Kinneston course record either. Soon enough we are cresting the initial hill, striding along a level middle section before climbing once more, hitting the steepest part of the gallop as it passes through the treeline. My ride is a consummate professional and I savour the moment, painfully aware it is the closest I will come to race-riding.

This time in the saddle serves as an

essential tool for stable staff to keep abreast of their horse's wellbeing and in 30 minutes of work I learn more about Clan Legend's physique and mentality than I ever would have gleaned from the ground.

I learn that despite meandering back down to the base of the gallops there's plenty more energy in the chaser yet. When we bid to match pace with Hombre De Guerra the second time up the hill, Olly offers to surge on past the unraced four-year-old by Soldier Of Fortune. I also learn a gentle check is enough to quash Olly's ambitions but a slightly more assertive reminder is needed on the final climb, and we finish up the exercise no worse for wear, my dignity still intact.

WE REUNITE with the rest of the group and head back to the yard, making a detour to the bath, a long chute of Alexander's own design filled with spring water to both cool and clean legs after work. The horses seem to enjoy it and, coupled with a hose down and 40 minutes on the horse walker, there's plenty of

time allocated to allow the horses to unwind.

Relaxation may be on the cards for the horses but not so much for the staff. The return of one lot ushers in the start of the next, and while Clan Legend was showing me the ropes out on the gallops a ground team was busy juggling the care of the previous lot alongside preparation for the next.

I return to help them and I'm back on sweeping duties by ten, my earlier attempts to tidy the yard having clearly passed muster. Skipping out, fitting rugs and keeping the chickens out of the tack room are all on the agenda, intermittently broken up by taking horses off the walker.

My contributions are earnest but unlikely to be saving the yard much time, as I wait for barn manager Becca Innes to show me where each horse belongs. I'm just as grateful the horses seem to know their own way home, the path from walker to stable a familiar part of the daily routine.

It's a routine that also brings lunch at noon. Hay and cubes are on the menu, with more appetising things awaiting the staff when they clock off for their own break at 1pm.

Kinneston's operation is pretty

unusual, with staff given two days off every week as opposed to the more common day and a half, as outlined by colleague Lee Mottershead in yesterday's newspaper.

Alexander has no regrets about the switch, which takes him several hours of rota scheduling each week to facilitate, and believes it key to attracting and retaining a strong pool of staff.

"It's one of the best things I've ever done," he says. "The way I run things is that every member of staff can decide how they want to work. For some that's full-time, some part-time, and some is solely work-riding. It's so important to keep everyone mentally in the right zone."

The second shift begins at half-three and lasts for two hours. It's much more relaxed fare than in the morning, and everyone drifts off to their own barn to see through the end of the day. Afternoons are for grooming, skipping out and on Tuesdays weighing, with each horse brought to the scales to note their weekly weight.

Overseeing the process is head lad Ellwood, who checks each horse's legs as they pass through before sending

them on their way back to their stables to be rugged for the evening.

Stable staff are also given an additional job once their barn duties are fulfilled, ranging from the popular laundry detail to the far less desirable hitching up and emptying of the muck trailers. No-one is willing to trust me with a quad bike just yet, a decision met with as much relief by me as everyone else.

At 5pm, the trainer, assistant and head lad abandon their usual walkie-talkie communication in favour of gathering in the feed room, where they discuss each horse individually. For stable staff, it's time to give horses their dinner, stow everything away and complete final checks as we regroup on the cobblestones.

The day is done. Some of the staff head back to their homes while the rest drift off to see to their own horses, many of which are ex-racers from the yard.

I part ways knowing my muscles are going to be in some pain tomorrow but, more importantly, carrying a renewed appreciation for the work that goes on, often unnoticed, at racing yards every single day.

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