

A reasonable choice

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The aim of this article is to inform about the study “A study investigating the benefits of group stabling in comparison to individual stabling of horses” concerning the different housing systems and livery yards in Germany. The horse owners’ selection criteria for the choice of a yard are another aspect that is described in this column.

The main housing system for horses in Germany is the individual box stall. This system was developed from the tie stall housing and is nowadays used in livery and private yards, in training or trade stables as well as in riding schools. The box stalls ten or fifteen years ago had no windows or only small ones. Meanwhile this has changed to bigger windows and half-height walls between two stalls. As a guideline it can be said that the minimum size of a box stall should be the double-height of the withers squared, with the smallest side of the box meeting a minimum of 1, 5-times the height of the withers. However, there is no housing regulation with specific information on the implementation of the animal protection law for the species horse in Germany. The box housing can be indoors and outdoors, furthermore a paddock can be attached.

The group housing on the other hand can be divided into the loose barn and the open stable. Usually the loose barn is a spacious inside stall for several horses, probably with attached paddock. This kind of housing is mainly used on breeding farms. The open stable is located outside on a pasture or paddock and the horses can choose if they want to be outside or inside. This system becomes more and more important nowadays.

The horse owners who participated in the study keep their horses mainly in individual box stalls with individual run-out (either on a paddock or pasture). 48,62 % choose individual housing for their horses with only little or no contact to conspecifics. 28,6 % stabled their horses in individual box stalls but with group run-out in the pasture or paddock. 14,3 % choose to keep their horses in individual box stalls with both individual and group run-out. Only 8,58 % keep their horses in open group stables.

The number of horses in Germany rose up to more than a million animals within the last 35 years. Most of these horses are leisure horses which are mainly used for recreational riding and as a compensation for the daily work routine of their owners. Nowadays only a small group of horse owners is able to keep their horses in their own stable. Within the last years livery yards became more and more common. The industry branch “livery yard” is an interesting alternative for agricultural businesses. Out of mere agricultural businesses around 15.000 horse farms emerged due to changes of occupancy.

In today’s situation, with the livery yard system, where horse owner and stable owner is not the same person; the supply and demand structure affects the stable choice. Therefore, the infrastructure of livery stables is quite significant. With regards to the research, for example, people do not want to spend an hour of their little leisure time in the car to get to their horse. In terms of animal welfare the facilities of the business can be of great importance. An indoor riding arena can be very important for the daily work with the horse, if the rider is employed and only able to ride after nightfall or if the weather does not allow riding outside. Furthermore the whole housing system is important, especially the size of pastures or

paddocks. Some horse owners are not able to take care of their horses on a daily basis and for them a livery yard with group housing and all-inclusive service will be the best choice.

During the research it became obvious that the reasons for choosing a certain housing system are depending on the living arrangements of the people, the assortment of livery yards and on the horse itself. For 57, 2% of the participants is the housing an important reason, closely followed by training facilities with 51, 48%. Therefore, livery yards have to combine the benefits for both, the owner / rider and the horse.

The term species-appropriate housing is used more often these days. A species-appropriate housing needs to consider the physiological and psychological needs of horses. The well-being of the animal is highly depending on the design of stables and paddocks.

On the one hand the group housing system has its benefits. 80,08 % mentioned the social contact and the company of other horses as an important advantage. 34,32 % said another advantage of group stabling is the possibility to move around freely and 25,74 % think that the natural way of keeping the horses, the movement and the company will lead to a calmer, even-tempered horse. In addition to that they mentioned that a relaxed horse is safer to handle for the owner / rider. On the other hand there are also some disadvantages. 57,2 % of the participants think that there is a higher risk of injuries than in individual stables, e.g. because of hierarchic fights or play fights. Due to those fights it is most of the times not allowed to shoe the horses, which is another drawback in the opinion of 17,16 % of the horse owners.

On the contrary the lower risk of injury was mentioned by 74,36 % of the participants as an advantage of individual housing. The individual care and feeding of every horse is another benefit according to 22,88 %. Additionally, 14,3 % said that this kind of housing is recommendable in a yard with high fluctuation of horses. As a disadvantage 85,80 % of the participants remarked the missing social behaviour in individual housing. 71,5 % mentioned the missing locomotion in individual stabling. Even if the horse has run-out in the pasture or paddock, the company of other horses would stimulate the locomotion better.

Only if a manager / owner of a livery yard knows all about the aspects of the different housing systems, the advantages and disadvantages, as well as the requirements and concerns of the potential customers, it will be possible to built up a successful and "horse friendly" yard.