

California's Finest All Breed, All Discipline Equestrian Publication

RIDING

A woman in formal equestrian attire, including a dark blue jacket, white breeches, and a black top hat, is riding a dark brown horse in an outdoor arena. The horse is in a collected gait, possibly a dressage movement. The background shows a white fence and green foliage.

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A Chat with Olympic Bound Owner Akiko Yamazaki

Performance Sales International

Let The Games Begin!

Fires & West Nile Virus

Footings Solutions

The right riding surfaces are all about sand that doesn't slip away.

California is on the cutting edge of many technologies and societal trends, but we're behind the times when it comes to footing for equestrian sports. That's the observation of Footings Solutions' chief Hilo Nick.

She moved to California 15 years ago, from her native Germany, and has been frustrated most of that time by how hard it was to find footing that has the right amount of stability and cushioning. For the most part, the approach to arena construction and riding surfaces is the same as it has been for the past 30 years, most of it revolving around adding or subtracting rubber additives to the footing mix.

The owner of a small private stable in Santa Barbara's Hope Ranch, Hilo tried many materials and re-did her arena many times, all to no avail. "Whenever I went back to Germany, the footing was wonderful," she relays. "I decided to use their additives."

She first bought the materials just for her own arena, then partnered with select German companies to bring their products to the U.S. The resulting Footings Solutions line includes geo-textiles, a blend of synthetic felt and fibers, and a water absorbing additive, both for use with sand; the High & Low Tide arena system; and a high-tech engineered arena drag. All have been used successfully in Germany for the last 15 years. Four-time Olympic show jumping medalist Ludger Beerbaum and World Cup dressage contender

Ellen Schulten-Baumer are among the top German equestrians who use and endorse these products, in both cases the High & Low Tide arena system.

Sand plays a big part in the footing world, starting with the notion that the best riding surfaces for dressage and jumping simulate the sand near the water line at low tide, Hilo explains. The distribution of water in the sand is even here, and the surface is firm, yet cushioned. The High & Low Tide system provides an ideal way to create and maintain that beach-like riding surface.

The High & Low Tide system uses an arena liner that establishes a watertight basin on which the moisture exchange system is installed. Drainage pipes are laid out and then connected to sensors and a pump, which regulates the optimum water level underneath the riding surface automatically. Unreliable sprinklers become unnecessary.

The system is covered with a customized, high capillary silica sand blend. Adjusting the blend's water content is as easy as turning a dial. The arena will have equal moisture at every inch to create ideal footing and the moisture level can be adjusted for different uses, Hilo explains. "With a higher level of moisture under the top layer, the riding surface becomes firmer for jumpers and carriage drivers. With lower water saturation under the top layer, the riding surface becomes more pliable for the dressage horse," she says. "It is that simple to have an arena designed for convenience and optimal performance."

The High & Low Tide set-up is not something everybody can afford, but Hilo thinks that West Coast show grounds should consider it. She points to the success of the High & Low Tide installation in Wellington, FL. in 2000.

Sand 101

Footings Solutions' additives to a conventionally-built sand arena are the next best thing to installing the complete High & Low Tide, Hilo says. This is especially true when the cost is amortized over what is typically a very long life for such surfaces.

The additives are manufactured in Germany and consist of geo-textiles. Synthetic textile felt is ground into small pieces, then blended with elastic polyester fibers and mixed with a high-grade quality sand. This blend achieves the optimum footing, providing shear strength and spring.

"It's all about the stability of the sand," Hilo asserts. "I see a lot of footing in the Western United States that is too loose and has no stability. If it's loose, it's shifting, which makes the horse's job harder and puts more strain on their suspensories. The footing should offer enough resistance to allow push-off without the horse sinking too deeply. At the same time, it should help absorb some of the concussion when his feet hit the ground."

A high quality sand is essential to creating and maintaining the right riding surface, Hilo continues.

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"The next time you talk with your contractor or visit the quarry, explain that you want sand that is 'hard,' 'quartz,' 'glacial' and 'angular.' Unlike 'river sand,' which has rounded particles, the sand you want for your footing will be durable (silica/quartz lasts a very, very long time) and angular for better traction."

Good sand isn't cheap, she warns. "But don't be tempted to go with 'dirty sand' or 'river sand' or 'manufactured sand' — those not only won't provide the arena footing that you want no matter which additives you choose, they will also wear out much more quickly and decompose into stone dust in no time." Hilo says that the upfront expense of getting the right sand the first time around makes for an economical arena when measured over the long-haul.

She finds it unfortunate and a little ironic that so many Americans have purchased excellent European Warmbloods only to have them break down after a relatively short time working on the riding surfaces here. Since opening Footing Solutions in early 2007, Hilo has been tackling that problem one arena at a time. If her busy schedule is any measure, arena owners in California and throughout the country are catching up with European advances in arena footing. Certainly, the topic has been a hot one at the top hunter/jumper circuits on both coasts, and a trickle down effect may have triggered a higher awareness of the importance of footing in a horse's performance and long-term health.

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