

CHRISTA LESTÉ-LASSERRE, MA

# Safe and Sensible Stallion Housing

It's time to rethink how we stable our studs



Traditionally, many stallions have been stabled alone or only with other stallions, but mixed company might do their minds (and libido) some good.

**A**fter being rescued off the island, Alec housed the Black Stallion in his suburban backyard. And we all know what happened after that: scary garbage truck; inappropriate fencing; wild, crazy Arabian galloping through city streets in search of other horses—probably not the ideal way to house a stallion.

While few stallion owners would find themselves in the scenario Walter Farley described in *The Black Stallion*, many do find themselves faced with less-than-ideal housing situations. To make sure you're maximizing your stallion's health, security, and well-being, we've gone to sources worldwide to learn the latest about stallion stabling. Ideas have evolved significantly over the years, giving us not only a new look at housing but also at stallions themselves.

## Breaking Down the "Bad Rap"

Stallions are crazy, right? Powerful, unpredictable, dangerous, completely guided by their testicles with no thought for anyone's safety, including their own.

Well, some might be like that. But if they are, maybe it's because we made them that way. "Are stallions intrinsically high-strung and dangerous, or have we conditioned them to become so through the way we manage them from their earliest years?" says Mathilde Valenchon, PhD, of the University of Strasbourg, France.

"In the wild, stallions live harmoniously with other horses once a stable hierarchy has been established," she says. "And they need that social life. Stallions are just like any other horse in that they're not meant to live isolated

lives. Our management of them—treating them as scary and dangerous and always separating them—could be making them scary and dangerous."

It's a concept Paul Loomis, DVM, CEO of Select Breeders Services, a network of 25 stallion-semen-freezing laboratories worldwide, seconds. "Stallions by their very nature aren't necessarily any more difficult to handle or work with, although they might be a little less predictable," he says. "Part of that could be due to the way they're raised, though. A lot of behavioral issues come out of human fear, because some handlers are afraid of stallions just because they're stallions. And their exaggerated or negative reactions to everything the stallion does just makes things worse."

## Togetherness: Lone Stud No More

In recent tradition, many stallions have lived in stallion barns, alone or isolated from all other horses except other stallions, says David Scofield, DVM, Dipl. ACT, also of Select Breeders Services. But that's problematic, welfare-wise, for a species so dependent on social interactions. What's more, researchers have recently shown that housing stallions together, away from mares, can cause a drop in both libido and fertility.

"Essentially, keeping stallions together away from mares recreates the hierarchy status you see in wild bachelor herds—even if those stallions have no physical contact with one another in the barn—which are associated with low testosterone," says Loomis. "Getting a stallion out where he can see and vocalize toward a group of mares is usually enough to give him the sense that he's protecting those mares, and puts him in a harem herd status, which brings up testosterone levels."

Housing stallions as a bachelor group before housing them next to mares, however, could further improve fertility, say

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Swiss researchers. Recently, a team from the Swiss Institute of Equine Medicine (University of Bern and Agroscope), in Avenches, found that stallions had increased sperm count when housed next to a single mare—after first spending eight weeks in an all-stallion environment. That situation resulted in higher fertility than if the stallion was housed immediately next to the mare without first going through the all-male (bachelor) experience, they reported.

### Touch and Feel

During breeding season, stallions can be permitted to have limited physical contact with each other. One of Loomis' clients has an open window between every stall in the stallion barn. "People are always asking, 'Don't you see lots of injuries?'" he says. "But they don't. Just more contented horses."

Researchers at Agroscope, Swiss National Stud, in Avenches, developed the "stallion social stall," which has partial ground-to-ceiling openings between bars that allow stallions to make body contact, short of letting the shoulders pass through. Their trials (see [TheHorse.com/37487](http://TheHorse.com/37487)) revealed only one kind of injury: self-injury from rubbing against or hitting the bars. In further studies they padded the bars to limit self-injury, and researchers at the French National Stud in Le Pin (Normandy) also tested these with their breeding stallions, with promising results.

"Even in completely desocialized stallions (that have always been separated from other horses), partial-wall openings between stalls can be a safe solution," says Valenchon. However, one of the stallions in the study never stopped showing aggression, she adds. So she advises discretion and careful surveillance, particularly with stallions that have never had contact with other horses.

The success you'll find with this housing arrangement depends on stability, our sources says. Observe stallions' behavior to make sure they get along, and pair the same stallions together consistently.

Outside the breeding season, stallions can live harmoniously in a makeshift bachelor herd at pasture, Valenchon says. Swiss researchers tested their National Stud horses in a group pasture environment for several months, well out of



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vocal distance of any mares. While the arrangement was successful, with stallions respecting a stable hierarchy and making wither-scratching buddies, it required expert management in the early stages ([TheHorse.com/31929](http://TheHorse.com/31929)).

The researchers recommend owners interested in trying these techniques refer to their studies for more information.

### Freedom and Fences

Like any horse, a stallion needs the mental and physical relief associated with turnout. Constant stalling can lead to vices, including stereotypies such as cribbing and weaving, but also self-mutilation and even "misplaced aggression," say Loomis and Scofield. These vices only complicate matters with a horse that already has a reputation for being "difficult" simply because he's a stallion, they say.

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DR. PAUL LOOMIS

Outdoor exercise also keeps stallions fit for the strenuous task of breeding, our sources say. Thrusting, flexing the hocks, and mounting and dismounting a mare or phantom require significant physical effort that can be hard on joints and even

the cardiovascular system, especially in older stallions. "Exercise is one of the most overlooked aspects of housing breeding stallions," Scofield says.

Turnout time for stallions during the breeding season requires good paddock design. This doesn't mean you need 10-foot game fencing, though. Better yet, think horizontal rather than vertical. "I'd rather see double fencing than higher fencing," Scofield says.

Granted, stallions probably need slightly higher fencing than other horses—at least to chest level, recommends Scofield. But fences shouldn't be so high that the horse is trying to escape beneath them, as he risks injuring himself.

Wood plank fences or metal pipe fences work well for most stallions, he says, but he recommends building a second fence a few feet further out, in a larger perimeter, in case they manage to break through the first one. Regardless, an aisle space between a stallion paddock and any other paddock is essential, to keep him from having direct, unplanned physical contact with other horses.

Double fencing is far better than trying to build a fence that just won't ever break, says Loomis. "We once had a client with very sturdy oak fencing," he says. "Then a dog got into the paddock and ran their young stallions into the fence. One of them did manage to break it—but that hard wood popped back right into his chest, causing severe injuries."

For most stallions a second average-height safety fence is sufficient. But, in rare cases, stallions known for escaping can benefit from a tall chain-link barrier as the second fence. With spaces too

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small to trap a hoof and with an elastic “bounce-back” quality in the case of impact, it’s a solid and secure way to contain the most motivated escapist, says Scofield.

“It’s less aesthetic, for sure, but it can be useful if you’ve got one of the 5% of stallions that would actually need it,” he adds.

### The Stable Tenant

The stallion that’s primarily a sport horse rather than a breeding horse can live peacefully and comfortably—especially if he’s been conditioned to do so, our sources say. The key is being both smart and consistent.

“Use a different handler or at least a different halter or bridle for taking him to a workout compared to the breeding shed,” Loomis says. “Lead him in one direction out of the stall for breeding and another for exercise. He’ll quickly learn when it’s time to work and when it’s time to ‘play.’”

He probably won’t need a specially designed stall just because he’s a stallion,



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Double fencing or an aisle space between stallion paddocks and other paddocks is essential.

Loomis says. But if he’s housed in mixed company with mares, geldings, and other stallions, you might consider how his neighbors are lined up. Don’t put a mare between him and another stallion, for example. And don’t pair him up with another stallion and keep mares just across the aisle. Either keep him in a row of all stallions, with no mares across the aisle, or keep him where he’s the only stallion

for several rows. Once you’ve decided on a setup, do your best to maintain consistency, avoiding changing his neighbors.

If you’re going to a show, respect that same logic. And anytime you put the stallion in a new housing situation, watch him for the first 24 to 48 hours to see how he reacts. “If he’s spending all his energy walking the stall because of some mare, he won’t compete well the next day, and



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it's not good for his welfare," Loomis says.

Keep in mind that each stallion is unique. "Some do better in mixed company than others, which has a lot to do with their personality but also their past experiences," Scofield says. "So know your stallion, and plan his housing accordingly."

### The Small-Farm Stallion

While many stallions live in specialized equestrian and breeding centers, plenty lead comfortable lives as single stallions on small farms. "It's not uncommon to have a stallion in the field with a small herd of mares in small (professional) breeding operations, and this usually works out quite well," Valenchon says.

Mimicking natural conditions, stallion management on a small farm gives the horse the harem stallion role, protecting his herd of mares and inseminating them naturally. With his physical and emotional needs met, the stallion has little need for special equipment or fencing—although doubling up fencing is still a smart idea.

While it might seem idealistic, responsible management of such a herd still requires expertise and experience, the scientists warn. "You need the right stallion and the right set of mares to be able to live in that close proximity with one another," says Scofield.

### Welfare, Safety, and Economics

Concepts about housing stallions are evolving, Valenchon says, moving away from the confined, isolated conditions of years past. "It makes sense economically," she adds. "A happier horse is going to be a less dangerous horse. That means fewer injuries to himself, to other horses, and to his handlers—hence, lower veterinary bills and medical expenses." Scofield and Loomis agree. Stereotypies and aggression stemming from stallions' frustration and boredom can lead to damaged equipment and structures as well as horses and handlers, they say. Fewer behavior issues also mean less wasted time during management or in training.

"I've seen resocialized stallions stand better for the farrier compared to when they were always isolated," Valenchon says.

And then there's the improvement in fertility and breeding productivity that can come with exposure to mares.

### Take-Home Message

Today's stallions can benefit from enriching social interactions and more outdoor freedom, making them better adjusted and less likely to show aggressive

behaviors. Their improved welfare might even have a positive influence on their athletic and reproductive performance. But most of all, better housing means happier horses. 🐾

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