School of Dirt

Learn how to care for your arena surface from these industry experts.

By Abigail Boatwright

Whether you’ve recently built your own arena or you simply want to provide the best surface possible for your horse, arena care is just as essential as using the proper footing. In last month’s American Quarter Horse Journal, we discussed what to consider before building an arena. In this article, the creators of Arena Werks and Kiser Dragmaster equipment share their insight on the ultra-important maintenance of arenas. You’ll learn why maintenance is necessary, what equipment you need and how to care for your arena.

Why Maintain?

From the structure or fencing to the footing itself, building an arena is a sizeable expense. Arena expert Jim Kiser of Gainesville, Texas, compares neglecting your arena footing to purchasing a Bentley car and then deciding to match it with the cheapest tires available.

“The primary focus in caring for your arena is to maintain your investment in the entire program – your horses, the arena and equipment,” Jim says. “Unless you take the time and effort to maintain it, it’s been a wasted investment. Your depth, material mixture and moisture content need to be monitored. Everything in maintenance goes back to keeping your arena in the shape it was when you built it.”

Caring for your arena properly not only protects your footing, but also your horses’ health, says Arena Werks creator Randy Snodgress.
“You want to maintain your arena for the horse’s health, for the rider and the horse’s safety and so that you don’t create lameness in your horses,” Randy says. “An arena that’s too slick is dangerous, and an arena that’s too dusty affects your horse’s breathing.”

A key component of preventing injuries lies in maintaining your base, Randy says. An uneven base can cause your horse to flounder.

“A lot of people just look at what the top of the arena surface looks like and think if it’s pretty, they have good ground,” Randy says. “But they may have ridges underneath the top, and when a horse steps from the smooth base to a ridge, they can twist an ankle. Or if they stop hard around a barrel and hit that ridge, they can really hurt themselves. That’s why a smooth, level, even base is extremely important.”

Choosing Equipment

PROTECTING YOUR BASE IS A HUGE PART OF PROLONGING the life of your arena footing. Bob Kiser, the other half of Kiser Arena Consultants, says this task is the most important part of your equipment’s job.

“You need to have a drag where you can control the depth very accurately with it,” Bob says. “With our equipment, we can adjust our cutting edge to where it will recompact the base. We can actually help a base and protect it.”

Jim says regardless of budget or discipline, the top requirements of arena care equipment include maintaining the integrity of your base, proper depth and moisture content of your footing.

“We try to design pieces of equipment that are versatile enough to handle any situation,” Jim says. “I’m not sure there is any one drag that is perfect for every situation. But we design equipment that can fit many people’s budgets and still do the job.”

Three components are needed to care for your arena, says Jim. “Any drag should have an attachment that levels your footing, one that works the footing and a finishing attachment,” Jim says.

If you’ve got a smaller arena, have few horses to work or don’t own a tractor, both the Kisers and ArenaWerks have created equipment that attach to ATVs or trucks. However, you’ll need to keep your arena material in mind when choosing your implement.

“A higher clay content generally requires a more aggressive drag because riding on that surface compacts it more than one with a higher sand content,” Jim says. “You’ll also need to consider how heavy your attachment is. An implement that weighs 50 pounds vs. one that weighs 500 won’t be as aggressive on a material with higher clay content. Conversely, footing with an extremely high sand content doesn’t need as much weight.”

If your arena has any type of base, whether it’s clay or limestone, Bob cautions against using a tool with ripper teeth.

“Do not use a drag with ripper teeth when you have a base material,” Bob says. “Those ripper teeth will eventually get into your base material, and you’ll end up having to repair your base.”

Choosing equipment can be overwhelming. Randy suggests consulting with knowledgeable contacts to get educated on the options available.

“Talk to friends who have arena equipment and like or don’t like what they’re using,” Randy says. “Go to horse shows to see what they use, or go to trade shows and speak with vendors and drag manufacturers to see what you really need to purchase.”

The Moisture Factor

WATER IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO GOOD FOOTING, RANDY SAYS. You can transform an arena from mediocre to a vastly improved surface with the right amount of moisture. Dust and mud are the enemies of an ideal arena. Maintaining the proper moisture is an ongoing task, and Bob says unfortunately, it’s not an exact science.

“The moisture requirements of an arena are determined by the event, the type of footing and even the temperature,” Bob says. “For most people, you want to put on enough moisture to keep your dust down and make your footing more stable. But you have to be careful of adding so much water that it starts soaking into your base, which makes it soft.”

Jim says each discipline requires its own amount of moisture in the ground. Barrel racers need more moisture content than reiners, due to the nature of the event. Randy says pleasure horse events such as the Reichert Celebration often require enough moisture to dampen as much dust from the air as possible, without creating a sticky surface.

So how much moisture is enough? A happy medium between sticky and dusty, but all three experts say you need to take a walk to make that call.

“You’ll have a basic guide when you can walk across your arena and the ground just packs, but doesn’t stick to the bottom

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trailer to moisten your footing. In any case, plan to include an apparatus that can shut the water off from your seat to avoid overwatering.

“I see a lot of people that rig up their own water wagon, but they lack a shut-off,” Jim says. “They have to jump off of the tractor to turn it on and off, so when you turn it off, you apply double, triple and quadruple coverage at the ends of your arena.”

Randy says every time you drag your arena, you dry out the top of the footing. You’ll want to replace that water equally to maintain the moisture content. You can tell if it’s time to water if a horse trots across the arena and raises dust puffs with each step. By watering at that point, you can avoid having to take the time to apply a larger quantity later.

Arena Care Techniques

Consider your material content, specifically the sand to clay ratio, before determining how to care for your arena, Jim says. An arena with a high clay content will require dragging to loosen compaction.

Whatever your discipline, consider how you use the arena to plan how to best restore it.

“In arena maintenance, you’re always looking to bring that material back to where it originally came from,” Jim says. “In

of your foot,” Randy says. “It shouldn’t make a big ball. If it balls up, it’ll also do that to your horse’s feet. It’s always easier to go back and put more water on your ground than to try to dry it out if you get it too wet.”

Watering your arena with a hose is a bad idea. Coverage will be uneven and it will take a long time. Jim advises against using sprinkler systems because they, too, water the surface inconsistently. Both Jim and Randy recommend using either a drag with a water attachment or a water

Smoothing out trenches and putting dirt back where it came from is the best way to restore it. Move obstacles, such as barrels, when you can to maintain even use of your arena.
a reining arena, the material will be displaced against your end fences from the horses stopping. So the number of horses being ridden and how much you are stopping them will determine the frequency you need to reclaim that material back to the rest of the arena.”

In a pleasure horse arena, compaction occurs on the rail, forming a trench around the arena. Your purpose there will be to smooth that trench out and get the footing consistent again. In a cutting arena, one area of the arena is typically used for most of the work, often on one side. Jim says you’ll want to reclaim that material and bring it back to the center of the arena.

All three sources cautioned against longeing your horse in the same spot in your arena. The tight circle causes dirt to be thrown to the outside of the arc, digging a trench down to the base that can’t be fixed easily. If you must longe, change your location each time and work the arena carefully afterward.

“Even if the surface has been smoothed out, that rut from longeing will turn into a soft spot,” Randy says. “It will make your arena inconsistent because the base has been compacted unevenly.”

Bob encourages arena users to move obstacles every few days to level the entire arena.

“If you run barrels, don’t leave your barrels set in the same place all the time,” Bob says. “If you do reining, don’t do your spins and stops in the same spot every time. If you jump, move your jumps every few days. Whether or not you have a base, if you don’t do this, you’ll start to establish holes if you don’t move.”

Though caring for your arena can be time-consuming, Bob says it’s time well-spent preserving your investment.

“The main point of dragging your arena is to maintain that arena,” Bob says, “not only because it makes it better for your horse to perform on, but because it’ll make your arena last longer.”

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Outdoor arenas require different care.
Water can counteract some wind erosion.

While both indoor and outdoor arenas may have similar footing, your care will dramatically differ because of weather conditions. Bob and Jim Kiser stress the importance of patience after a rainstorm.

“The worst thing you can do to your outdoor arena is drag it when it’s too wet,” Bob says. “You need to let that arena dry out as much as possible just the way it is and then work it really shallow. Don’t get out there and plow through mud and around the edges of water. It will ruin your base.”

Working an arena when it’s wet causes the often-softened arena base to get mixed with your top material, causing bogs and holes, and requiring you to replace your arena material much sooner than if you had waited.

Bob says an arena left alone will percolate water to the surface, which will hasten the drying process. If you drag the arena before this point, you’ll dry the very top but slow the deeper layer from drying.

“It’s actually a little better for a lot of types of footing to let it dry a day longer than you think it should before you work it,” Bob said. “And that also goes for riding on it. That way, you won’t run the risk of ruining the base.”

If your arena has standing water or material squishes around your feet when you walk on it, Bob says you should wait another 24 hours to use the arena.

The one difference lies in arenas with limestone bases. Bob says you can work that type of arena a bit sooner than one with a clay base because the material doesn’t expand.

Randy Snodgress recommends sealing your arena using your drag equipment if you anticipate rainfall.

“If you can get out there and drag with a roller attachment, the water will run off the surface much easier than if you left it open with hoof prints,” Randy says. “Once the top is no longer muddy, you can open it back up and work it.”

Randy says outdoor arenas require much more water to maintain proper footing because of the sun’s drying effect. Jim says wind erosion will also become a problem if you don’t diligently apply water to your outdoor arena.
ARTIFICIAL FOOTING

Artificial footings run the gamut when it comes to care requirements. Bob Kiser says many artificial surfaces require less drag work to maintain. Some require much more water than natural materials, but others require none at all.

“My advice would be to choose an artificial material that does not require water at all,” Bob says.

Often, artificial material needs to be worked in a different way. Jim Kiser says he works artificial footing from the top down to level, reblending and recompacting it. This process might require different equipment, but not always. Research your material to determine what equipment you’ll need.

BOB AND JIM KISER have worked in the arena industry since 1988. Based out of Gainesville, the father-and-son team are arena design consultants. They also specialize in arena maintenance, and they have invented revolutionary equipment that includes the Kiser Dragmaster. They maintain the footing at world-class events that include the AQHA world championship Shows, the National Reining Horse Association Futurity and Derby, National Reined Cow Horse Association events and National Cutting Horse Association events. They have worked the ground for the FEI World Equestrian Games since 2002. For more information about Kiser products, log on to www.abiequine.com/products or call (877) 788-7253.

Based in Joshua, Texas, RANDY SNODGRESS has worked with arena footing for 22 years. The creator of ArenaWerks equipment, Randy has maintained the footing at horse events hosted at major equine facilities in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Oklahoma City and Fort Worth, Texas. He cares for the ground at the Reichert Celebration and numerous breed events. For more information about Snodgress Equipment, go to www.arenawerks.com or call (800) 644-3724.