



Friends, Forage, Freedom

THE BENEFITS OF GRAZING TRACK SYSTEMS

BY CAELAN BEARD

Grazing track systems are an alternative turnout system, designed with the thought of managing horses' grazing to promote natural movement, better health and more sustainable land use.

Rather than turning horses out in a traditional paddock, which are usually rectangular or square in shape, grazing tracks are relatively narrow but long, covering more distance, and may be connected in a circular route or several routes. Hay, water and salt licks might be placed throughout the track or at opposite ends to encourage horses to move more.

The track system is based on research by Jaime Jackson, a former farrier, natural hoof care practitioner and lecturer. Jackson's studies of wild, free-roaming horses in the U.S. Great Basin and their hoof health, compared to that of domesticated horses, formed the basis for his "Paddock Paradise" model. In 2006, he published his book, *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Boarding*, which has become a foundation for the track system.

According to Jackson's book, the Paddock Paradise model promotes safe, natural horsekeeping, hoof care and the healing and rehabilitation of lame horses by stimulating the way that horses naturally behave and move.

The model is supposed to be adaptable to almost all horse properties, regardless of their size and climate, and all equine breeds, regardless of use. In addition to promoting movement and, subsequently, more naturally shaped, healthy hooves, the book says benefits include:

- keeping horses from laminitis-prone pastures;
- minimizing the need for warm-up time before exercise;
- facilitating socialization between horses;
- and providing an effective means for diet and weight management.

Grazing track systems are sparking interest among Canadian barn owners. Advocates say the benefits are many, but they can come with a significant cost to install. However, depending on your property, a grazing track system can allow your horse to exercise while maintaining your paddocks, potentially letting grass, or even a crop, grow.

We spoke with three farm owners across Canada who are using these track systems, with systems ranging from simple to elaborate. They shared their experiences with maintenance, costs and how the track systems are affecting their horses' health.

Balancing Whispers on the Niagara Escarpment, Ontario

Martine Sudan owns the beautiful Balancing Whispers, located along the Niagara Escarpment in Ontario. The 50-acre property is managed by Brie Simpson, who also helped design and build their extensive track system.

Both Sudan and Simpson are passionate advocates for grazing tracks. Sudan had been curious about track systems for a while when one of her Gypsy Vanner horses foundered twice. It was the final push needed to commit to moving the horses to track life.

“We took the 15 acres of pasture, because they connected three different pastures that are connected with gates, and then designed the track inside of there, and started building the fences and ripping grass,” Sudan says. “We were limited by the existing fences that were there, because it’s just too expensive to change all of that, but we still managed to put a two-and-a-half-kilometre track inside those 15 acres.”

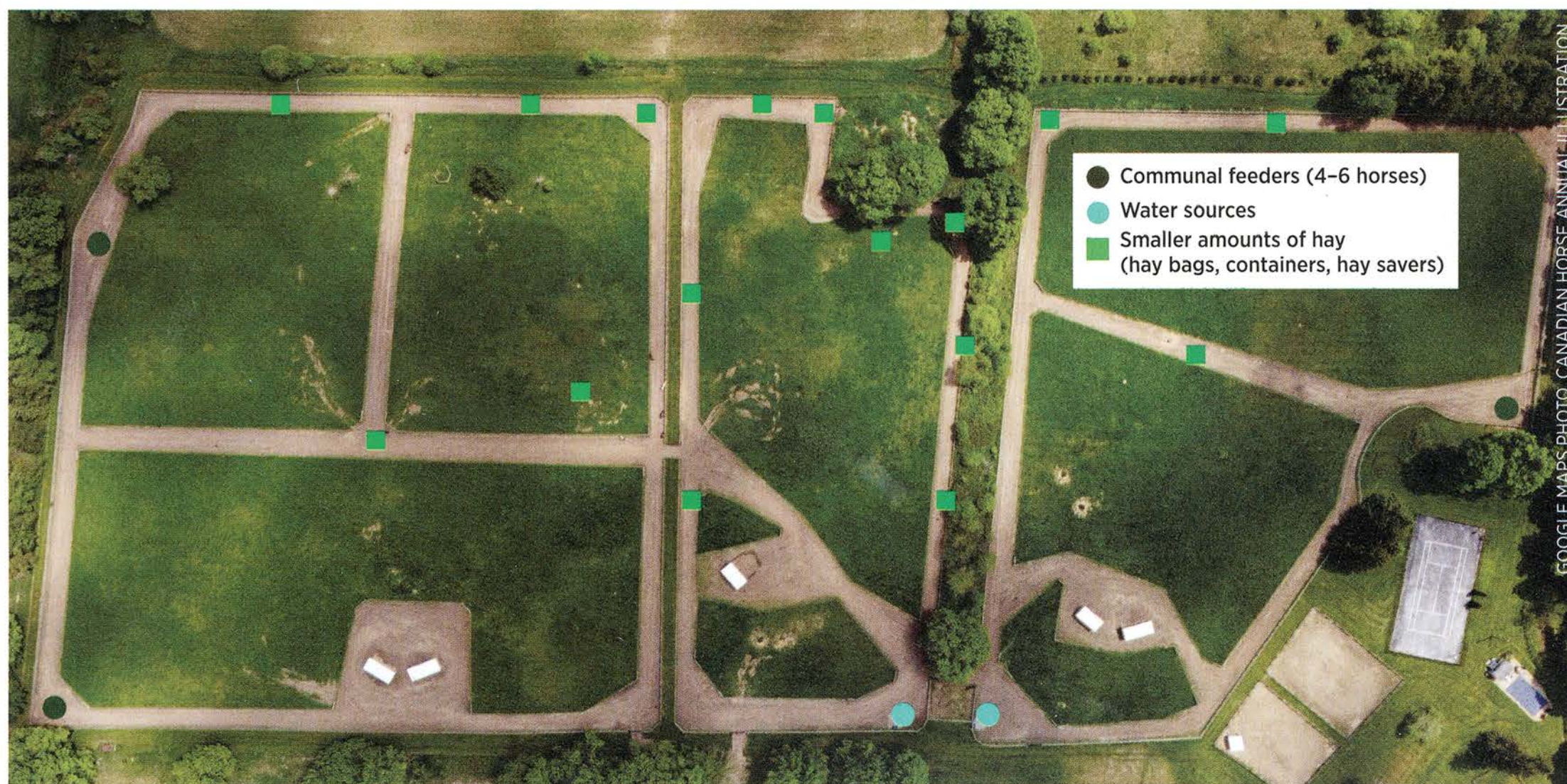
They’re still streamlining the maintenance and labour costs, such as the time to fill hay nets spread around the track. They have two water troughs, with 15 hay stations (some large, some small) set up as far from the waterers as possible. In the summer, they create a “water buffet,” setting up additional waterers each with different minerals and electrolytes.



The Pale Yeti strolling on the well-groomed track at Balancing Whispers



Balancing Whispers' track system indicating various hay and water sources.



GOOGLE MAPS PHOTO, CANADIAN HORSE ANNUAL ILLUSTRATION

Sudan says the biggest challenge has been learning how to keep grass and vegetation off the actual track. They don’t want to go too deep and remove root systems, which would result in mud. They have very sandy soil at the moment, which is great for drainage. In the winter, Sudan says, “I’ve learned not to snowplow.” It led to the accumulation of ice. Now, the horses make their own tracks through the snow. Occasionally she’ll put down a little hay or manure for traction, and this year plans on putting down salted sand if needed.

“One of the things that is really important to remember is that ... it can take a long time for a horse to physically and emotionally adjust to being on a track,” Simpson says. It’s a change for a horse that’s been kept in a traditional boarding environment to suddenly have so much freedom of movement and choice. They found some of the horses also weren’t used to the amount of walking, and it resulted in some tripping and cracked feet. Their feet “can take months to get used to it,” Sudan says. “And then they harden up, they toughen up, and they’re beautiful.”

The track system has been hugely beneficial for horses, Simpson says, whether it’s helping an overweight horse to slim down or helping an underweight horse gain muscle.

“It’s an all-around win,” Sudan says. “We have this huge track that the horses love.”

“It’s very difficult to provide proper, natural living for horses and meet their behavioural needs without having something like a track,” Simpson says. “We need to be giving them the ability to express species-appropriate behaviour, and that includes a ton of locomotion, a ton of foraging options.”