# A Face Lift

**If your doors are sagging and every third bar is bent or missing, maybe it's time to upgrade those stalls. It's not as hard as you think.**

**By Ellen Feld**
*Photographs courtesy of Blackburn Architects*

The stalls are clean, the aisle has been swept and all the horses are quietly munching hay. Your prospective boarder will appear at any moment and she's sure to be impressed with the care the horses receive. Unfortunately, when this person does arrive, the first thing she notices are the slightly sagging doors and the chewed stall fronts. You've just lost another potential boarder.

## SHOULD YOU RENOVATE?

How do you decide whether a renovation of your stalls is warranted? Obviously, if you are losing clients because your stalls look worn, then the time has come to make a change. What other reasons might factor into your decision? Safety concerns are paramount. If there are sharp objects such as splinters protruding everywhere, or if latches or other hardware are sticking out where they can injure a horse, then you want to get to work right away. On the stall doors, the track and roller systems can wear out, causing the doors to either jam or close with great difficulty. The weld points on the stall frame may start to chip or crack, weakening the structure, while the frame itself may look cockeyed because the framing system originally installed was of an inferior type of steel. Wood might be rotting or moisture laden, particularly near the floor, where bacteria can flourish. Perhaps the separator walls between stalls have begun to fall apart because the attachment plate is giving way. Upon closer inspection, you may discover that the post this wall is attached to has been partially cribbed away and weakened beyond repair.

If you have hinged doors, then you may want to change to sliding doors. "A lot of the old barns have hinged doors," notes John Blackburn, AIA, of Blackburn Architects in Washington, D.C. "I'm opposed to them because they can be closed but you can't really tell if they are latched or not. A sliding door is either closed or open; it's obvious if it is open. A horse can open a sliding door," Blackburn continues, "but he can't just kick it and it's open. There is also a safety reason. The wind can blow them and injure the horse, or it might have a throw-bolt type latch that sticks out and injures the horse," says Blackburn. Additionally, if yours is a busy barn, doors that open into the aisle can cause a problem with other people or horses walking by.

Regardless of the reason for the renovation, Richard Peacock of Loddon Stalls, Inc. in Wellington, Fla., advises that you "...establish a clear understanding of why you want to refurbish. Then you need to stick to those criteria. What I often find," Peacock continues, "is that people say they are going to refurbish because they don't like the look, then they start to concentrate on the price and end up fundamentally getting

exactly what, they had in the first place. So the stall will look great for the first few years but will probably deteriorate quickly again."

## DO IT YOURSELF?

Once the decision has been made to renovate your stalls, you need to decide whether you will do the work yourself or hire somebody to do it. The process can be a relatively simple one for anyone who is handy with carpentry. If the stalls are free and clear of the structure and there are no supporting beams involved, then it should not be a difficult task. However, even the most mechanically inclined person may want to consult with a professional if any structural changes will be made. Warns Blackburn, "...you want to be careful not to remove something that is critical for the barn. For example, in an old barn, the walls between the stalls may provide a wind bracing for the barn. If you remove those, you may well have weakened the structure of the barn."

"I think the key point," advises Peacock, "is to look at the flooring where the stall front is going to be. It is often difficult to put nice stall fronts on an uneven earth floor. In a pole barn, you will need to look at the poles. If they are okay and you're just putting the fronts in-between them, you don't need to hire a builder. But," cautions Peacock, "if the poles are structural and they look damaged or if they are supporting a second floor in the barn, then that's where you need some professional expertise to come in and help you."

If you are not quite sure how big a job it will be, consult a builder. Have them come over to your barn and give an estimate. Or, suggests Wendy Claiser of Heartlight Equestrian in Grass Valley, Calif., "...take a photograph and send it to the stall manufacturer or someone that specializes in barn design, someone who knows how to look at that photograph." A recent development that may affect your decision, is whether your town will even allow you to do the work. "You're going to run into areas in certain parts of the country where the building permit department is going to require a remodel permit," says Claiser. Some will also require that a general contractor do that work. So even if you can do the work, you might not be allowed to. In California it's getting pretty bad and because we're considered to be on the cutting edge, much of the rest of the country may soon follow."

If you do hire a builder, what should you look for? First, says Tom Kelley of the Forest Hill Construction Company in Wellington, Fla., ask them if they have any equine experience. "Usually, if they have horses of their own they are at least a little bit knowledgeable. Check with other people with whom they have done work and run a credit check. Typically," Kelly continues, "you want a small operation, somebody that is going to be there on the job all the time. If you get a big, commercial builder, where they just send a foreman out with a crew, then they may just wham-bam and bang it together. You want somebody that will pay attention to all the small details." Other things to ask the builder? "If he's supplying the materials," suggests Peacock, "ask where he buys from and what his criteria is for the materials. Often it is based on what's cheapest. Also, some barn builders tend to push their own products so it is important to understand what you are getting from that builder. You may want to buy the supplies yourself and just have the builder install them."

## YOUR NEW STALLS

When shopping for your new stalls, there are many things to consider. Safety is a priority, so be sure your new doors are secured at both the top and bottom, regardless of whether they are sliding, hinged or half-doors. A horse can kick the bottom of the door, it might slip open and then the horse gets its hoof caught. For your door tracks, you can now find ones that are self-lubricating and self-cleaning. In addition, purchase tracks that have covers at each end to keep mice and other small animals from building nests in them.

You want solid welds (the weld goes all the way around and is sealed) on all steel parts. Many companies do spot welding where they just put a spot of weld on the front and back

**Powder-coated stall fronts are more common today allowing barn owners to spruce up with color.**

sides, perhaps sand it so it looks like it's welded all the way around and then spray it with silver spray. But spot welding will rust and deteriorate. If your grill work is powder-coated, there are two things you need to check. First, the thickness. Although measured in microns, it does make a difference and the thicker, the better. Also, some manufacturers just powder coat directly onto the galvanized steel. But galvanizing leaves a very smooth finish and the powder coating can easily flake off. So be sure that the surface has gone through a second process, similar to an acid dip, to rough up the galvanized steel and provide a better sticking surface.

Be sure to check the gauge of steel (or aluminum) on the framing system. "That's one of the biggest problems," says Claiser. "People don't know how to ask or check for the gauge of steel that a frame is manufactured from. The manufacturer should be producing 10- or 12-gauge on the high end, meaning the toughest, the best, the sturdiest of all. If it were me, I'd use nothing less than 12-gauge." Peacock adds, "Horse stalls will generally fall into two distinct types, steel and alu-

Make sure bars are no more than two inches apart or use a mesh design to avoid hoof injury. Full-view doors make checking in on horses much easier.

minum. With aluminum, if a horse kicks it, it will go through it. With steel, it will probably bend, but if it is made properly, the foot won't go through. That's one reason why the woodwork tends to go quite high when using aluminum and the aluminum is just on the top portion. But that reduces the air circulation."

To ease the workload in large, commercial barns, there are several additional features your new stalls can have. For clients with 20 or more stalls, Blackburn has several recommendations. Swivel feed gates or feed access doors, hay access doors, blanket bars on the stall fronts and automatic waterers are just a few of the possible improvements that you can make. For the doors, steel bars or mesh covering the full height of the door will allow you to quickly check on each horse as you walk by and not miss any that might be lying down. Plus, the horses will enjoy the improved ventilation.

## BELLS AND WHISTLES

When giving your stalls a facelift, you have the perfect opportunity to upgrade. To help entice new clients, why not put the door in the center of the stall front? That way you'll have support on each side of the door to help stabilize it. This also allows additional features to be added to each stall. "We can then put in a light switch and outlet at each stall," says Blackburn. "The light switch will allow a light in the stall that you can flip on without turning other lights on. And there's now an outlet, so if you need to clip the horse, need heat lights, a fan or something else, you've got power right there. Also popular are yoke gates in the stall fronts." Blackburn also recommends that people use removable gates as opposed to the kind that hinge and flap down. "There is the safety concern," says Blackburn, "but also you'll have horses that like to stick their heads out and others that might be fighters so you want them confined. So if you have a 20-stall barn, we may suggest ten yoke gates. We also suggest casting rails. It's a very simple 2x4 rail near the base, about 2 feet off the base of the stall wall. If a horse is cast, the hoof will be sliding up the wall and the casting rail gives him something to push against. They're very inexpensive." Another Blackburn suggestion: That the top edge of the 2x4 be chamfered or covered with a metal angle to reduce the chance for cribbing. We have found that the chamfered top edge is generally acceptable and less costly."

What about new products that are making their way into the market? For aesthetics, vertical placement of tongue and groove timber instead of horizontal placement is getting popular. However, if there are any problems with rot, all the vertical boards that run to the floor will have to be replaced, rather than just the first one or two horizontal boards. An interesting new product is solid vinyl tongue and groove plank. Notes Claiser, "If it's installed right, it is absolutely maintenance-free. It isn't readily available yet, but I think in the next six months you will be able to find it most everywhere."

### Pricing it Out

You would love to up-grade your stalls to attract new clients, but you're just not sure you can afford it. What will it cost? Prices will vary from region to region, but basically, "The cost per typical stall ranges from $1,000 to $1,500" notes Blackburn. "That includes a full stall front with wood panel below, steel bars above, steel bars or steel mesh sliding stall door, wood sidewalls and a steel frame." Broken out, interior aisle stall doors are $500 and up and side grills on the main aisle are $500 and up. The costs do not include labor.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Here is a checklist of some small details to ensure that your stall renovation is a success:

- Be sure to take a look at the electrical and plumbing design before you start. Where are your water and electrical lines? Will you be disturbing any of those?
- Do not put stall systems in with nails. Nails will work themselves loose and injure the horse. Use bolts and screws. The same goes for anything installed within the stall, such as a casting rail. And, sink the bolts so they don't stick out.
- Inexpensive fronts may have spacing of 3 inches between bars. Ideally, they should be spaced 2 inches apart (measure from the center of one bar to the center of the next) or less to prevent hooves from getting caught.
- Consider the size of rollers vs. the weight of the doors. You don't want to buy a track and roller system that has little tiny rollers and a big, heavy door. Such a set-up will guarantee another renovation in a year.
- If you do install stall fronts that are all metal, you may still want one plank on the bottom to keep shavings in the stall.

Stall renovation may seem like a daunting project, but with a little forethought, it really isn't that hard. The horses will be happier and you just may find your barn attracting more clients. [sm]