# Blackburn Architects Stables A Specialty

*By Vicky Moon*

John Blackburn

When the Upperville Colt and Horse Show takes place this year June 6-13 many exhibitors and spectators will walk past the towering judge's stand on the south side of the main ring. A hub of official activity for announcers, judges and officials, it's been frequently photographed through the years. It stands majestically yet unobtrusively, as a towering symbol of historic equestrian significance.

While it appears this is the original antiquated judge's stand, few realize it's actually the brilliant design of Blackburn Architects, P.C., a Washington, D.C. firm, specializing in planning and designing equestrian facilities. "It was a unique challenge," says John Blackburn, "it had to fit in with that simple wood frame to echo the grandstand and we couldn't do a brick or block frame, the stair on the side leads up and there are two levels upstairs."

"It's a wonderful airy judge's stand and announcer's stand combined and it keeps the appeal of the old stand that had been there for heaven knows how long," said show manager Tommy Lee Jones.

The traditional dark green with white trim has been carried out and on the top a pinking-sheer trim was added under the eaves. "It adds a little more definition," Blackburn says.

It is this attention to detail that sets Blackburn's work apart and defines it as distinctive. At Heronwood Farm, also in Upperville, Blackburn has done a total of seven buildings. "When they were looking for an architect [in 1984] my former partner and I wanted something to fit into the Upperville landscape and we photographed dozens of all types of barns in the area. We developed a contextual study, looking into roof forms, dormers versus cupolas and building shapes."

Judge's stand at Upperville Horse Show

When it was presented, a Federal type broodmare barn emerged with stone (found on the property) on each end. "The end in turn provided a pocket for the aisle doors to sit in," Blackburn says. (There's that attention to detail again.) There are 20 stalls 14' x 14' with a 16-foot aisle. "It's a big barn," he says."It somehow needs to be as close to the conditions in the paddock as possible, the light is so important with the cycles of the broodmares." To do this, a skylight was added along the ridge, the length of the barn. "It appears as if the roof is floating over the barn," he adds. The broodmare barn is approached from the side, there's a reception area where you are able to talk about the broodmares and the plans for the broodmare.

The 16 stall yearling barn, tastefully utilitarian and simultaneously stately, duplicates that Federal form.

For the three isolation barns at Heronwood, each with two stalls, the design was simple with conscientious regard to fit the structures into the landscape. Two additional clapboard run in sheds, each with three sides, were built with consideration of the winter winds. "Given the choice, a horse out in a field will run behind a hill with his back to the winter winds," Blackburn says.

The estate barn is a current project. "It's basically an old pole barn that's been there and the owner wants a nice looking building," Blackburn says. "The proportions are awkward so the roof will be replaced, the slope will be changed and a cupola [for ventilation] will be added. The finishes will also be replaced — oak wainscoting in the aisle and an oak ceiling."

At the Virginia Tech Research Facility in Middleburg, Blackburn applied some of the same theories on a more modest (state funded) budget. The first phase, completed in 1992, includes a 12-stall clinic, classroom space, offices, conference area and a foaling barn.

Heronwood's broodmare barn includes skylights

Not all Blackburn barns are of the high end. "We do all types of barns and all budgets," he says, "And we use the same care and concern with each one." The costs can range from $20 to $120 per square foot. They do everything from a custom designed pole barn to the high end with slate, stone and block.

"In every barn there are four elements," Blackburn says, "the site, the owners' wants, the needs of the horses and our experience. The one thing that doesn't change is the horse's needs, that's always consistent."

He's particularly concerned that the barn be set into the landscape perpendicular to prevailing breeze. "Then the vents are installed at the bottom of the building and that forces the air up and out," Blackburn says. "This also cuts down on disease running right through the barn like a traditional structure parallel to the wind with two large doors on each end." This innovative ventilation feature is a Blackburn hallmark.

For the horse owner who is considering building a barn there are essentially three options: the off-the-shelf pole barn (or pre-fab building), the design/build method or to hire an architect such as John Blackburn.

"The off-the-shelf method is really the cheap way to go and probably the most popular across the country," Blackburn points out. "In this area the design/build method seems to be most popular. The owner gets a 'look' while buying something out of a catalog. For the untrained eye that may be sufficient for their needs."

But for owners who are concerned with designing an environment that suits their needs, suits the needs of the horse and fits well into the landscape, then the architect is what they need.

"We have had numerous clients contact us and say they wish they had called us a year ago, that they had built a barn or an arena and laid out their paddocks but now they need to build another barn, or additional farm structures or even a house and they find they built the barn in the wrong place; with the other methods their only concern is to sell you a barn."

And finally there's the construction process, certainly an exciting time, but often a time full of surprises. The inability to read blueprints or construction drawings during this phase can bring about a disaster; enter the architect.

Enter Blackburn Architects, with a dazzling portfolio of designs for over 40 equestrian facilities in 17 states. The end result, you ask?

Simple.

A lovely new home for your horses and neither one of you will loose any sleep over it.

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