

A MODEL of Efficiency

When Tim and Cindy Harris sit down to balance the books for their breeding farm, they don't have to factor in employee expenses. That's because Harris Paints of Federalsburg, Maryland, operates without hired help. While many family-owned and -operated breeding farms manage without employees, few—if any—are the size of Harris Paints.

Harris Paints is a model of efficiency. Cindy is farm manager, breeding manager, bookkeeper, secretary, receptionist, trainer and groom. Tim, who works for Possum

*Cindy Harris
gets more accomplished by
9 a.m. than most people
do in an entire day. How does
she do it? Here, she shares the
secrets to Harris Paints'
success.*

By Jennifer Nice
Photography by Charles Mann

Hill Farms, Inc., the family farming business, helps Cindy collect and process semen, often during his lunch break or after work; takes care of all the maintenance and improvements; helps keep the books balanced and is out in the barn during the late-night foalings. Occasionally, the couple will take in a high school student on an internship program for a few hours a day. But for the most part, Cindy's on her own—with 10 stallions and more than 60 broodmares to care for, 45 stalls to clean, a constantly ringing phone



and a continuous stream of horses and customers coming and going.

Cindy succeeds in running Harris Paints single-handedly because she and Tim are aces when it comes to devising cost- and time-saving methods. By the time many of us are just rolling out of bed, Cindy has been up for hours, fed the horses, cleaned all the stalls and returned a dozen or more phone calls.

The amount of work Cindy manages to accomplish in a day is daunting to many, but anyone interested in streamlining their own breeding business can learn a lot from her. Harris Paints operates on two premises: Time is money and the breeding business is really a people business. Following are 10 ways the Harrises' ingenuity has made their breeding business successful:

1 Set high customer-service standards. The horse business is really a people business, says Cindy.

"Unfortunately, many stallion owners forget who is paying their bills—the mare owners," she said.

Cindy believes that if anything is lacking from the breeding industry, it's customer service. "I think perhaps it's because a lot of the people dealing with the mare owners are not the owners of the stallions, but their employees," she said. "That's one of the reasons why we don't have employees, because we would lose that one-on-one touch with our customers."

Susie Shaw, owner of Painted Pepper Farm in Parsons, Tennessee, visited Harris Paints for the first time in 1999 to look at stallions and has been a customer ever since. She and Cindy became friends after doing business.

"That was the reward of doing business with Harris Paints," Susie said. "I not only found breeders with ethics; they work harder than anyone I've ever seen. They set an example of high standards in the equine business.

"They exceeded every expectation I had as far as breeders," she continued. "They are always willing to give me a helping hand and offer guidance."

To meet customers' needs, the Harrises collect every day of the week that semen is needed.

"We try to set up our shipped-semen program to be as mare-owner-friendly as possible," said Cindy. As a result, she spends a considerable amount of time on the phone coordinating shipments of her resident stallions' semen going out and ordering semen from outside stallions for mares at her farm.

"The whole time I'm trying to clean stalls the phone is ringing, so I either have a portable in my pocket or

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I have the headset on so I can keep cleaning stalls," she said.

That way, neither the farm's horses nor its customers are neglected.

2 Rotate stallions. The Harrises are firm believers in rotating stallions every three to five years.

"We bring in different bloodlines to keep growing," explained Cindy. "We try to upgrade our stallions every few years."

They bought their first Paint stallion at a sale in 1989—a yearling colt named Captain Crusader.

"We had Quarter Horses then and were breeding to outside [Quarter Horse] stallions, and we found that the Paints were more marketable," said Cindy.

Plus, added Tim, "We weren't totally satisfied with the customer service that we received when breeding to outside stallions, so we decided to purchase a stallion of our own."

"After a few years of owning Captain Crusader, we added an overo stallion named Steps Last Hope," said Cindy. "He was an APHA Champion and Superior halter horse. Then we added a Triple's Titan-bred stallion, The Genuine Edge, and sold Captain Crusader."

The Harrises recently sold their stallion VR Master Tommy to Marilyn Martin Stix of Fallon Nevada, who had been breeding to "Tommy" and other Harris Paint stallions for several years. In September, the Harrises bought Three Deuces at the Painted Dogwood Acres dispersal sale.

Of the 10 stallions standing at Harris Paints for the 2004 breeding season, the Harrises own five, all Paints: Lucky Two Straws, Three Deuces, Black Rock Star, A Posing Kid (also registered with AQHA as Ima Posing Kid) and Cool Heir. The other five stallions are Conclusive Mister, owned by McLoughlin Show Horses of Plymouth, Indiana; Socketts Intimadation, owned by Wayne and Linda Patton of Rhodesdale, Maryland; Final Review, owned by Reese-Skare-Roach Enterprises of Lake City, Minnesota; The Kids Classe (AQHA), owned by Kenny and Kara Mills of Fruitland, Maryland; and *Menai Mister Modyn, a Section A Welsh pony owned by Regency Horses & Ponies of Beltsville, Maryland.

3 Diversify. Harris Paints has gained a reputation for its foaling and breeding services.

"We have found the best way to be successful in the breeding business is to be diversified," said Cindy. "That's why we started doing foal-outs as well as shipped-semen recipient mares of all breeds. In 2003, we foaled 63 mares, and of those, just 12 were our own."

Recent changes in the Standardbred racing industry have had an impact on Harris Paints.

"The Standardbred industry got a big boost when [the state] began allowing slot machines at the racetracks in Delaware," Cindy said. "A lot of people in Delaware are now breeding Standardbreds and we're just two miles from the state line.

"There aren't a lot of foaling facilities in this area. It started with vets referring high-risk pregnancies to us, and then the word got out at the track that we do foal-outs and shipped semen, so now we have a lot of Standardbreds that come through."

First-time Paint Horse owner Anne Habberton of Wye Mills, Maryland,

heard about Harris Paints from her veterinarian, Terry Corkran, who recommended that Anne take her new mare, Phantom Macs Lady, to Harris Paints for foaling.

"We didn't have experience foaling a horse," said Anne of herself and her husband, Jonathan. "Georgia" was their first broodmare.

"I am extremely glad that we took his advice," said Anne. "We took her over to Cindy, who was open to our constant visits. She was very patient and understanding.

"It turned out to be a terribly difficult foaling," added Anne. "If we had had that happen at our farm, Georgia and the baby would have died."

"He was upside down with both feet back," said Cindy. "I was able to get him turned, get his legs and pull [him out]. He was a big boy!"

"Cindy worked heroically, in my opinion, to get the baby out and save the mare," said Anne. "She did a great job. We arrived about an hour later. Cindy looked exhausted, but there was this beautiful foal. Cindy saved their lives."

Longtime Harris friend and neighbor Dan Towers has been one of Cindy and Tom's customers since the couple bought Captain Crusader. In fact, Dan was the Harrises' first customer. Even though Dan lives just eight miles away and has experience foaling, he elects to use Harris Paints' services.

Every year he breeds a mare or two to one of their stallions and uses the farm's foaling and breeding services, most recently for his new interest: Irish Draught horses.

"Not only does she do it well, but she's reasonable," said Dan of Cindy. "She's not a veterinarian, but she's a very good technician."

Dan is a guidance counselor at North Carolina High School. He helps place students interested in veterinary medicine and horses on the Harrises' farm to work.

"They work hard because she works hard," he said.

4 Keep your cool. As much as Cindy likes to plan out her days, she is the first to admit that this is sometimes impossible.



The Harrises believe in rotating their stallions every few years to maximize their marketability. They currently stand 10 stallions, including Black Rock Star, above, with Cindy Harris. The farm is comprised of a 15-acre main facility (below) and another 30 acres for broodmares nearby.



"The biggest problem with breeding season is that you can't always plan your day because you don't know what your day is going to bring," she said. "One mare foaling prematurely can put you behind by four hours."

She will also be the first to admit that sometimes the stress can be significant, but she never lets it get to her.

"Obviously it can be hectic at times," said Tim. "When you're dealing with the public, the customer has to come first. We've worked out a great system that works well for us, and we enjoy what we're doing."

The one thing that does unnerve Cindy is a lost shipment.

"I have a hard time keeping my cool when we have a lost shipment," said

Cindy. "I get so frustrated when I waste hours and hours on the phone trying to find the shipment and often have to do a quick collection and take off for the airport—at our expense—so that our customers can get semen before their mare ovulates. It drives us crazy to have everyone working together—the vet is on top of the timing with the mare, semen goes out and then to have a third party screw everything up when they don't do their job."

Fortunately, that doesn't happen too often.

5 Use the Internet as a business tool. During breeding season, Cindy estimates she spends about two hours a day on the Internet. She uses

the Internet to communicate with owners about their mares and to correspond with prospective customers.

"I check e-mail at least twice a day so they can get quick responses to their questions regarding our breeding program," she said.

She also advertises on-line, researches the latest in reproductive concepts, searches bloodlines, progeny and show records, and keeps the farm's own Web site up-to-date.

"I've also used the Internet to locate those hard-to-find items," she added. "I recently did a search for foaling monitors and cameras. I could do comparative research when I had the time and not be tied down to waiting for returned phone calls or playing telephone tag with representatives."

6 Invest in improvements that will save time. Tim and Cindy made all the improvements to the inside of their barn themselves.

"Tim's the one who is extremely handy," said Cindy. "He can fix or build anything! I'm great as a laborer and helper. We had the shell built and then did all the [interior] work—plumbing, electric, stalls, lab, bathroom, concrete, etc. Tim even designed our examination chute and phantom."

When Tim and Cindy determined how long it took to dump out, clean and fill all the water buckets in the barn and around the farm, they quickly realized that they were wasting a lot of time and promptly installed automatic waterers.

"We were spending about 20 hours a week just standing there holding a hose," said Cindy.

They also put lazy Susan feeders in each stall.

"After the horses finish their night feeding, I turn the lazy Susan back around and re-feed for morning," explained Cindy. "Then, in the morning, I just have to flip the feeder back around as I'm cleaning the stalls. I don't have horses standing there banging the stalls. It saves so much time and the horses are occupied while I'm cleaning the stalls."

One of the first things a visitor notices about Harris Paints is that the

The origin of Possum Hill Farms, Inc.

Harris Paints, in Federalsburg, Maryland, is built adjacent to Possum Hill Farms, Inc., which has been in Cindy Harris's father's family since 1674, when it was part of a land grant from the King of England known as "Venture."

"It is one of the oldest family farms in Maryland," said Cindy. "My father's ancestors have been continuously farming this land since that time."

"Parcels of the land grant were sold off to various members of the Lyden Family, my grandmother's family on my dad's side, through the years," she said. "My father spent his entire lifetime re-assembling these farms as various family members died or sold them. The re-assembled farms were then called Possum Hill Farms, which was later incorporated as the family business."

Possum Hill Farms is comprised of 1,800 acres of crops that Tim Harris farms with Cindy's two brothers, Wayne and Gene Robinson. They represent the 10th generation of the family to farm this land.

In addition to cultivating 1,800 acres, Possum Hill Farms, Inc. also raises broiler chickens—about 150,000 per flock, with a new flock coming in about every eight to nine weeks.

Cindy has lived in Federalsburg her entire life.

"The furthest away I've lived was two miles down the road," she said.

The entire family is close by. Cindy's mother lives next door.

"My brother Wayne and his wife live across the road from us, and my brother, Gene lives two miles from us (by road). My sister also lives in the neighborhood."

barn is spotless. At one time, Cindy spent so much time sweeping that she began to develop carpal tunnel syndrome.

"I was spending 30 to 40 minutes, twice a day, sweeping," said Cindy.

The solution: A gas leaf blower, which saves Cindy a lot of time and saves her arms, as well.

When Tim and Cindy planned additions to the barn, the design was based entirely on making it as efficient as possible for one person.

"Our barn's layout is efficient, with good ventilation and natural lighting," said Tim. "We have fluorescent lighting in all the aisles and breeding areas, and individual stall lights for each stall. I also put an electrical outlet outside each stall door. Drains throughout the aisles make it easy to wash down."

All the stalls in the main wing have mesh fronts.

"With these, I can stand pretty much anywhere in the barn and see the horses," Cindy said. "I don't have to go up to the stall and look over the edge."

Added Tim, "The grilled stall fronts allow us to see the entire interior of the stall. [We] can easily see if a baby is cast or some other problem."

The stall floors are made of blacktop. They got the idea from a breeding farm in Kentucky.

"The stalls stay level. There's no digging, no mixing bedding and dirt, and the bedding stays dryer. No mats curling up, and the blacktop makes it easier to strip and spray out stalls in-between horses."

The shaving storage is efficiently designed, as well, with one access door outside and one inside.

"This way, I can dump a tractor-trailer load of shavings outside and push it in with the Bobcat," said Tim. "The sliding door on the inside of the barn can be opened to load shavings into wheelbarrows. That way we don't have to go outside in the elements to get them, and it saves those extra steps."

Even the smallest detail of the barn is designed to increase efficiency. There is a hot-water spray nozzle at the examination chute, which makes



Every feature of the main barn is designed for maximum efficiency. Cindy keeps the barn clean with the use of a leaf blower (top). The open-front stalls (above) allow the horses to be supervised from many vantage points. The lazy Susan feeders cut down the time it takes to feed the horses.



it quicker and more sanitary to clean up the mares prior to insemination or treatments. Also within easy reach are a motion-activated disposable towel dispenser and a pulley system for hanging flushing solution. In the lab, there's a lunch counter so Tim and Cindy can work through lunch without skipping the meal. The wash rack's walls are maintenance-free stainless steel, which makes them easier to clean.

7 Cultivate teamwork. One of the keys to Harris Paints' success is the teamwork between Tim and Cindy. Although she manages nearly every aspect of the breeding farm herself, when it comes to collecting the stallions, Tim and Cindy always do it as a team.

"We've got it down," said Cindy of their assembly-line system. "We work well together. He relies on me to have the paperwork and the AVs ready. He handles the stallion, and I handle the AV. When we get into the lab, I'll measure the semen out. He takes the sample and runs the numbers on the Densimeter while I run the motility on the microscope. He records the count and the motility and tells me what the dilution rate is. We can collect the stallion, run the semen, have it processed and in the Equitainer in about 15 minutes, and sometimes we'll repeat this nine times a day."

If the collection is to be shipped, Cindy has the UPS labels filled out ahead of time. If a trip to the airport is required, one of them makes the 90-minute round trip. If the mare is at the farm, then sometimes they will collect the stallion later in the day.

"Fortunately, Tim's schedule is flexible enough that he can run over here during the day to collect," said Cindy. "If it's a light day, then we just collect on our lunch break and eat in the lab."

Cultivating teamwork means much more than simply dividing up the work.

"We know each others' strengths and weaknesses and have worked out a great partnership with that knowledge," said Cindy. "For instance, I'm

great with remembering names, bloodlines, etc., so Tim relies on me to handle that. I'm more of a risk-taker when teaching a new young stallion how to collect and Tim is more practical and conservative. I rely on him to watch my back, so to speak, and to keep me out of trouble if a young stallion starts to lose his balance or put me in harm's way."

8 Keep up with the paperwork. Breeding season at Harris Paints begins mid-January and continues through to mid-July. So for six months out of the year, there's little extra time. To keep on top of the mountain of paperwork, Tim and Cindy do as much in advance as they can.

"We put stallion packets together in the fall," she said. "Then, when someone calls, all we have to do is address them and stick them in the mail."

"As soon as the [morning] vet work is finished, I start doing the paperwork for the ship-outs, the UPS book,

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—Tim Harris

mailing labels and insemination reports. When we come in at night from the barn, we catch up on paperwork, too."

9 Do it right the first time. Cindy worked as a paralegal for 21 years before quitting to go into the breeding business full-time.

"For 10 years, I was breeding and working full-time," said Cindy. "We built the business slowly until we reached the point that we had to make the decision that this was the time or it's never going to be a time."

"When we made the decision for Cindy to quit the law firm, we sat down and discussed our long-range goals for Harris Paints," said Tim. "We felt that with enough hard work and dedication we could meet those goals. I feel we've been able to exceed those goals."

"The years I spent in the law office as a paralegal was one of the biggest assets for our business because I learned a lot about time and ethics, scheduling and details," said Cindy. "It was a great learning experience for me because it drilled into my head how things had to be done correctly."

"Our business had been growing each year while she was still working as a paralegal," said Tim. "Harris Paints has grown tremendously since that time. When she left the paralegal business [in 1998], we were standing three stallions. We have 10 stallions on our lineup for 2004."

When APHA passed the shipped semen rule in 1995, Tim and Cindy took advantage of the new opportunity. Now they breed exclusively via artificial insemination.

"We switched over when APHA allowed shipped semen," said Cindy. "We found it to be much safer. We can also cool semen and breed mares the next day to save the stallion. It's easier on us and easier on the stallion."

10 Enjoy the job. It's been a long time since the Harrises took an extended vacation together—about seven years, according to Cindy, although they did manage to get to the beach for a few days last summer to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

"There are times I think it would be nice to be able to get away. It's been a long time since we've been able to take a real vacation," said Cindy.

"We manage whatever time together that we can," she added. "If Tim's on the combine, I'll take his lunch out to him and ride along on the combine, and we talk about our business, our day and our kids."

The couple has two sons, Greg, 20, who is in the Air Force, and Ryan, 23. Neither of them work on the farm.



For Tim and Cindy Harris, the job is all about teamwork. Tim (above left), records the semen counts. Cindy (above right) prepares the AV. The reward for their efforts is the many healthy foals born at Harris Paints each year.

Tim and Cindy don't seem to notice their obvious lack of free time. The reason is because they enjoy what they do.

"It's something that's been in my blood since I got my first horse when I was 4," said Cindy. "I've never been without a horse since. It's the farming instinct in me that has taken a little different turn.

"I like the fact that I can be there at conception and be there at delivery. No matter how many babies are born, there's still that rush."

Tim agrees. "I like seeing our babies born in the spring and seeing the results of the decisions we made the previous year on which of our stallions to cross on each particular mare."

According to Cindy, the horses are a part of her she could never be without—as are the people, her customers and friends.

"I really like the people," she says of their successful horse business. 🐾🐾🐾

