

# Worst Job in Sports: Racehorse Groom

*How Trainers Can Improve Barn Productivity &  
Morale With Better Employee Management*

**Prepared by Ian Tapp  
November 1, 2006**

## **Table of Contents**

---

Purpose.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Study Information.....	4
Statistical Data.....	5
Grooms' Ages.....	5
Grooms' Racetrack Experience.....	6
Grooms' Wages.....	7
Country of Origin.....	9
Mexican State of Origin.....	10
Geographic Distribution in Mexico.....	11
Qualitative Data.....	12
Editorial Commentary.....	13
Conclusion.....	14
References.....	15
Thanks.....	15
About the Author.....	15
Spanish Questionnaire.....	Appendix 1
English Questionnaire.....	Appendix 2

## **Purpose**

---

The purpose of this study is to better understand the racehorse groom in order to suggest ways in which trainers can manage their workforce to increase barn productivity and to heighten barn morale while retaining and developing good help.

## **Introduction**

---

In 2005, the writers of *USA TODAY* offered an entertaining series of sports-human interest stories that together outlined “the 10 worst jobs in sports.” Over 10 consecutive weekdays, the publication counted down the craziest, dirtiest, and downright toughest jobs in the whole wide world of sports. Sure, it was a humorous countdown, and it was well received by readers. But amidst such esteemed professions as Team Mascot, Random Urine Tester, and Iditarod Sled Dog was the number one worst job in all of sports: *Racehorse Groom*.

The personality featured in the *USA TODAY* article is Paul Perry, longtime groom of racehorses for top trainer Todd Pletcher. With the title of “worst job in sports” comes some very serious demands, and there are people like Perry at every American racetrack who are responsible for the daily care of the industry’s most valuable assets—the racehorses.

A widely held notion by trainers on the backside is that you live and die by your help. Without good help, a trainer is unable to provide the necessary care to his or her stable of often immensely valuable racehorses. Not surprisingly, though, good help is hard to find, and the groom turnover rate is extremely high. With unimpressive pay and few incentives, workers will quit one barn for the most minor of reasons knowing they can do the same job at another barn the very next day. This study was embarked upon in order to unearth ways that trainers—the ones who hope to employ people in the worst job in all of sports—can better accommodate their employees in order to increase barn productivity and heighten barn morale while retaining and developing good help.

## **Study Information**

---

The original plan of attack was to distribute questionnaires (either in Spanish or English depending on the respondent's preference) at two major racetracks in the country, but due to grooms' busy schedules and often limited literacy, oral interviewing (Spanish and English) was the most frequent survey method. In all, a total of 107 grooms were surveyed during the months of September and October of 2006. This figure includes 73 grooms from Santa Anita Park in Arcadia, CA, and another 34 grooms from Saratoga Race Course in Saratoga Springs, NY. While it is certain that females working as grooms do exist on the racetrack, none were encountered during this study. The approach was to walk barn to barn, and try to get at least one groom from that barn answer the series of survey questions.<sup>†</sup> The grooms in the study represent a wide cross-section of trainers. Grooms identified themselves as employees of the following trainers (In the cases where respondents did not list a trainer, grooms were identified as employees of the trainer at the barn where the groom was interviewed):

Abrams; Abreu (2); Avila; Baffert (3); Becerra; Bell; Canani (3); Carava; Chew (3); Contessa (5); Currin (2); Drysdale (3); Dutrow, R. (5); Fanning; Gallagher; Garcia (2); Glatt (2); Gomez; Gonzalez (3); Grant (2); Harty; Hendricks; Hofmans; Hollendorfer (5); Kazamias; Klesaris; Lewis (3); Mandella (7); Mason (2); Matlow (2); McAnally (2); McGaughey; Mitchell (2); Mullins (3); O'Neill (3); Palma; Periban; Pletcher (5); Ramos; Ritvo; Serpe (2); Spawr (2); Specht; Tagg; Truman; Vienna (4); Ward, W. (2); Weaver (3); and Zito (3).

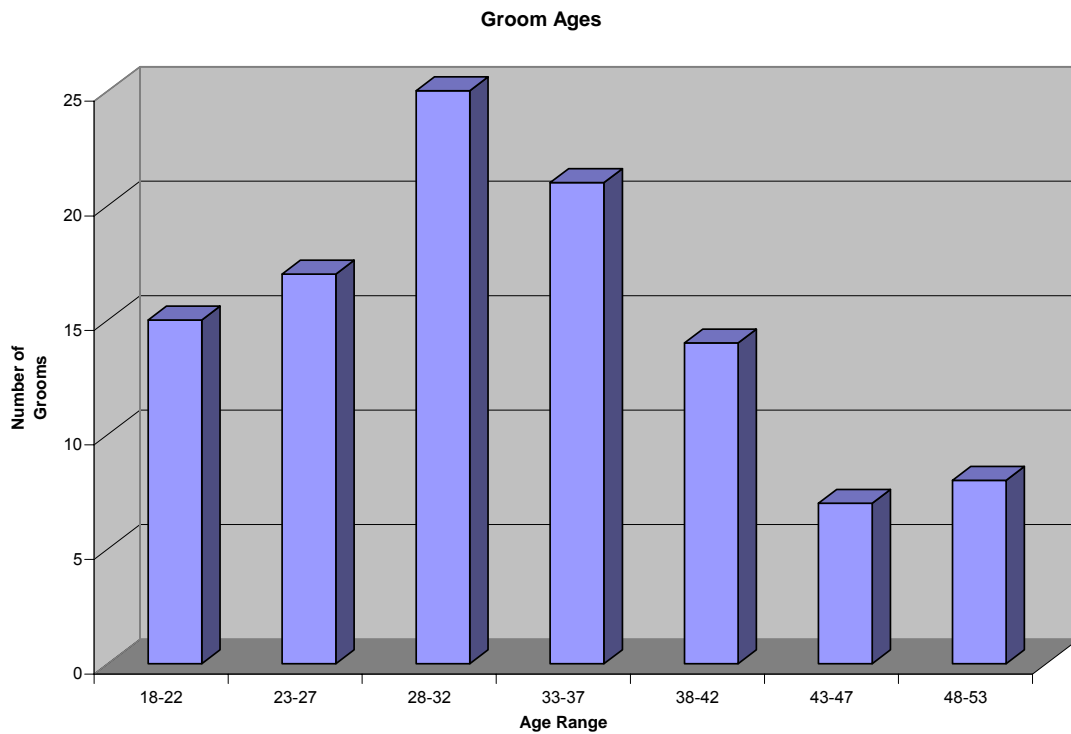
<sup>†</sup> Please refer to Appendices 1 (Spanish) and 2 (English) to read the actual questions that were answered by these grooms.

## Statistical Data

---

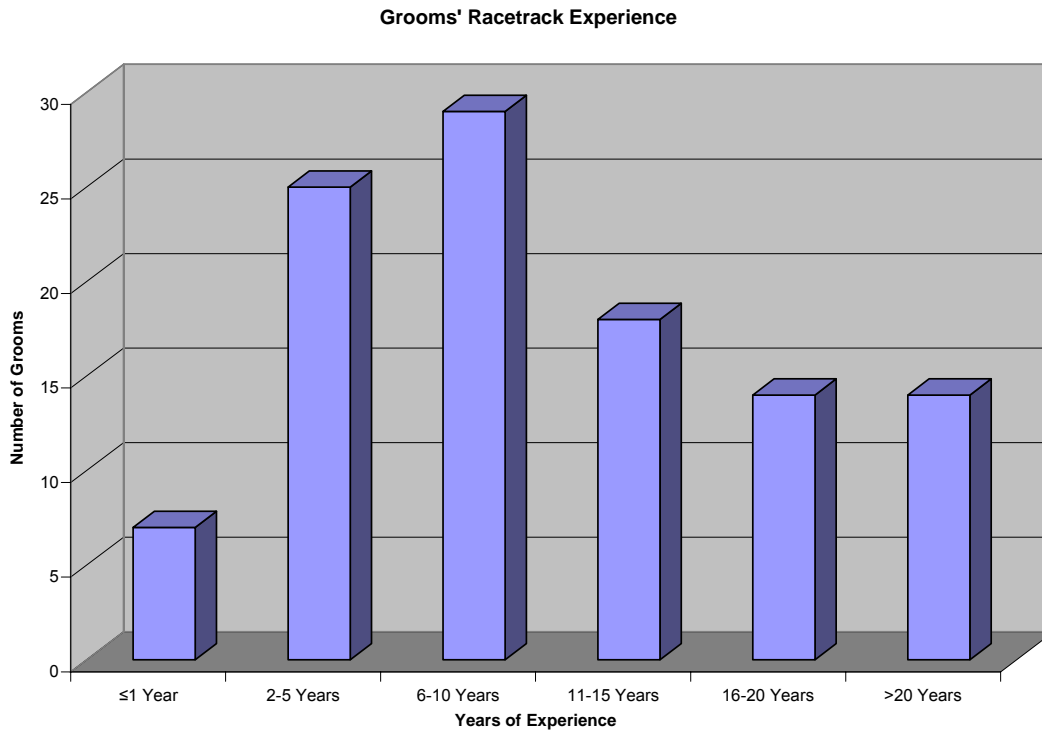
### **Groom Ages**

The average age of the 107 grooms surveyed was 32 years, 7 months. The graph below illustrates the highly populated age ranges of 28-32 and 33-37. In fact, 50% of all grooms in the study were between the ages of 25 and 36. The inferences from these data are that the younger age group is comparatively inexperienced, and perhaps many *future* grooms are currently employed as lower skilled workers (hotwalkers or other stable help). On the opposite end of the spectrum, the decline in number of grooms with age can be attributed to the physical demand of the job taking its toll on the individual, or to the fact that, as some grooms suggested in interviews, many workers ultimately return to their home country.



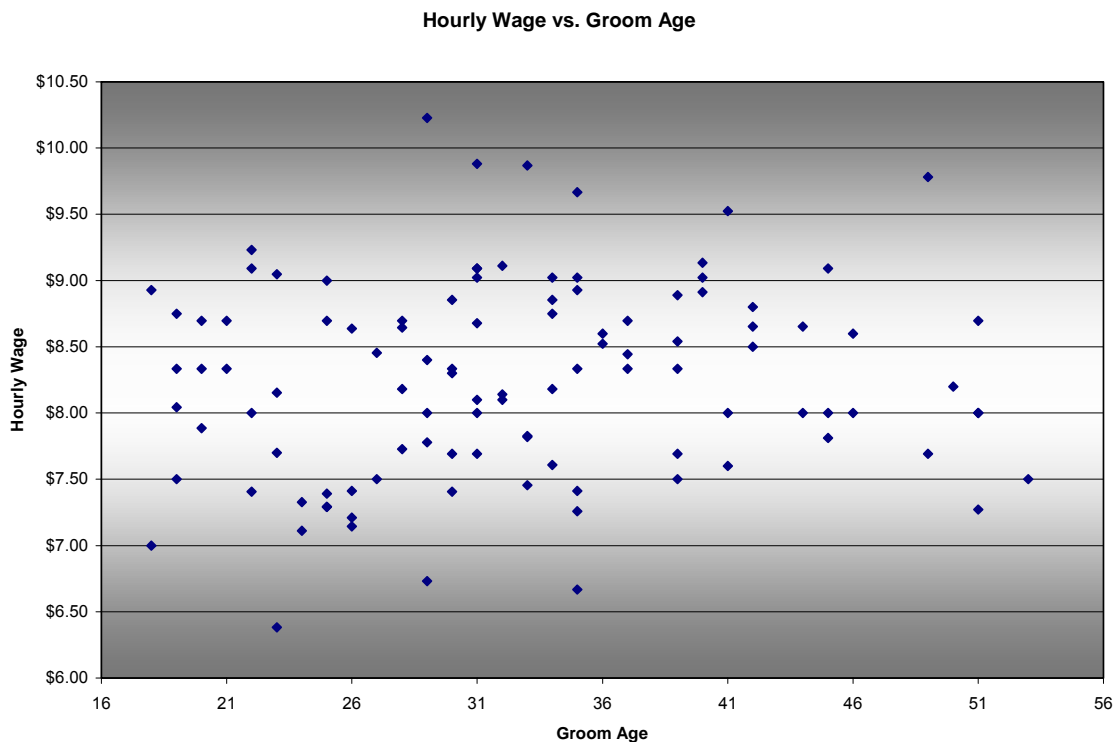
### **Grooms' Racetrack Experience**

The grooms in the study had an average 11 years, 2 months experience on the racetrack. A few had some form of horse-related experience before coming to the track, but most did not. From this average time of experience and from the relative low number of grooms with a year or less time on the racetrack, we can infer that the job requires a reasonable degree of skill and experience. We can subtract the average years of experience from the average age of grooms to find that the on average, grooms began their racetrack careers at age 21 years, 5 months (32 years, 7 months – 11 years, 2 months).



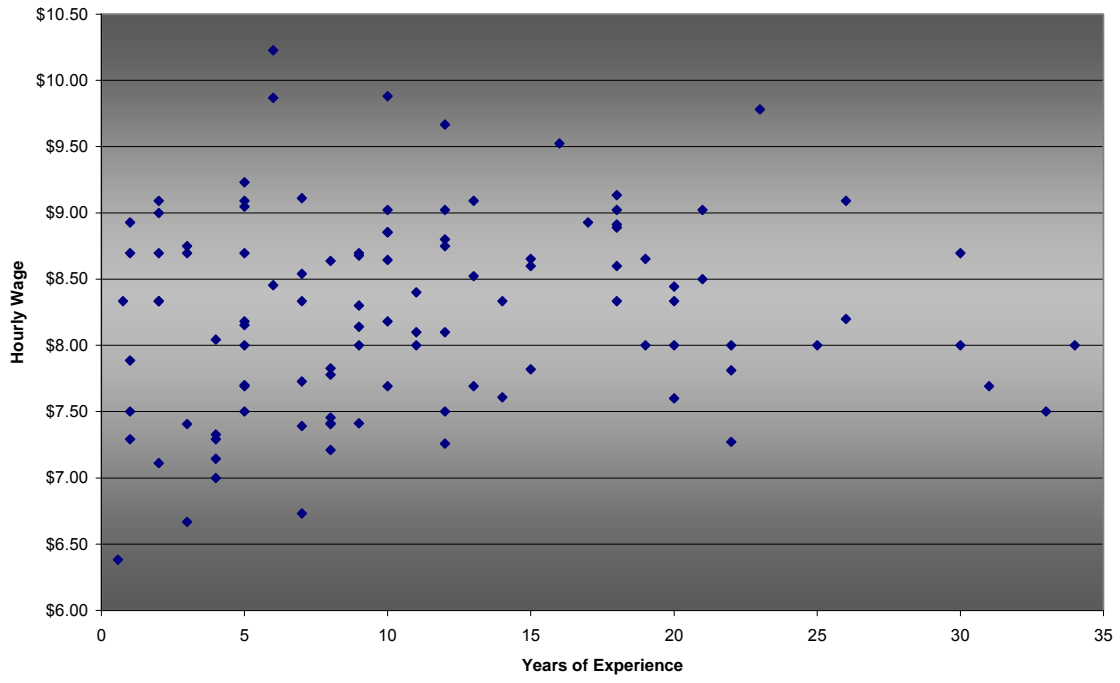
## Grooms' Wages

In most lines of work, it follows that more experience is rewarded with higher pay. Along the same lines, an older worker can be expected to earn a higher wage than a younger co-worker due to the likelihood that that elder employee has had more time to gain valuable experience. In the profession of a racetrack groom, this logic does not seem to follow according to this study. Based on the two graphs below, there is no correlation between age and pay or experience and pay. In fact, the groom with the highest reported hourly wage—\$10.23/hr—had only six years experience on the racetrack, nearly 50% below the average level of experience. It seems that pay is determined on an individual trainer's basis, varying from trainer to trainer instead of groom to groom. What appears to be lacking on that backside is a pay system rewarding experience and loyalty. In one Saratoga trainer's barn, a groom with only one year of racetrack experience earns the same weekly pay as a groom with 20 years experience! It should be noted that in addition to a paycheck, many grooms receive reduced or no cost dormitory lodging at the racetrack from their trainers, thus, while groom pay is low, the cost of living at the racetrack is also low.



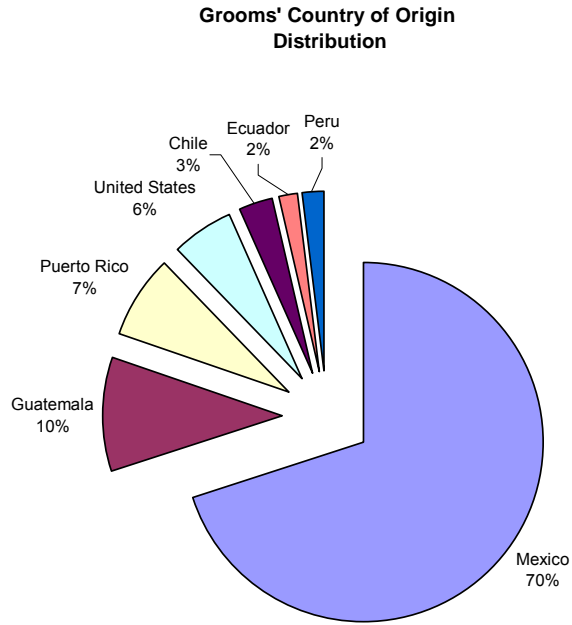
**Grooms' Wages, continued.**

**Hourly Wage vs. Racetrack Experience**



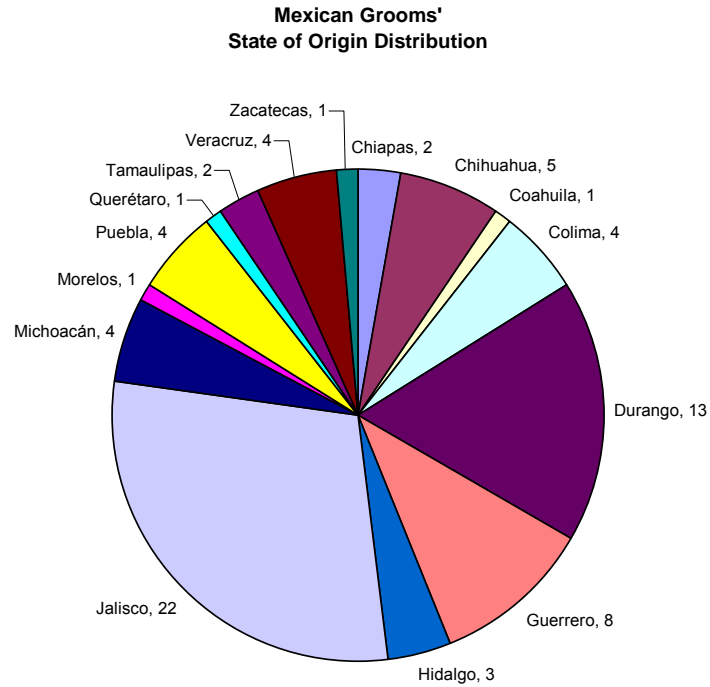
### **Country of Origin**

While seeking to better manage backstretch workers, it is important to know where they come from and what cultures they bring with them to the track. What should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the backside environment of American racetracks, 98% of the grooms surveyed were of Hispanic heritage, and 70% of all respondents listed Mexico as their home country. Only six of 107 grooms—5.6%—called the United States their home country.



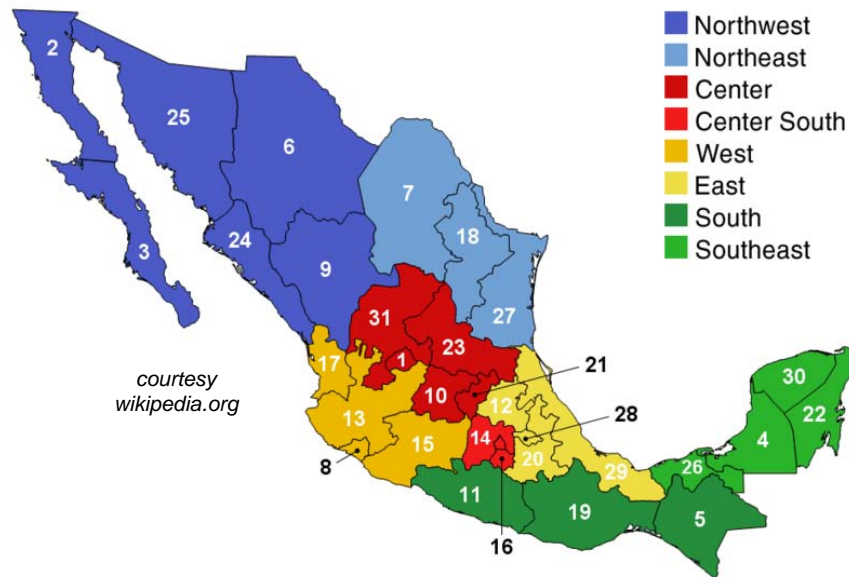
### ***Mexican State of Origin***

In Mexico there are 31 states and one federal district. Fifteen of these states are represented by the grooms in this study. Leading the way is the state of Jalisco, which produced 29% of the Mexican grooms in this study. Jalisco's capital city is Guadalajara, the second most populous city in Mexico.



### **Geographic Distribution in Mexico**

Interestingly, 53% of Mexican grooms hail from states bordering the Pacific Ocean. These states are moderately populated, but more importantly they claim the Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre del Sur mountain ranges that yield altitudinal climate and precipitation favorable to agriculture. This rural lifestyle as well as cultural familiarity with horses and other farm animals explains the high number of the region's citizens going on to work with racehorses.



- |                        |                |                     |                |
|------------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|
| 1. Aguascalientes      | 9. Durango     | 17. Nayarit         | 25. Sonora     |
| 2. Baja California     | 10. Guanajuato | 18. Nuevo León      | 26. Tabasco    |
| 3. Baja California Sur | 11. Guerrero   | 19. Oaxaca          | 27. Tamaulipas |
| 4. Campeche            | 12. Hidalgo    | 20. Puebla          | 28. Tlaxcala   |
| 5. Chiapas             | 13. Jalisco    | 21. Querétaro       | 29. Veracruz   |
| 6. Chihuahua           | 14. México     | 22. Quintana Roo    | 30. Yucatán    |
| 7. Coahuila            | 15. Michoacán  | 23. San Luis Potosí | 31. Zacatecas  |
| 8. Colima              | 16. Morelos    | 24. Sinaloa         |                |

## **Qualitative Data**

---

Key questions are presented followed by the most common responses. Please refer to Appendices 1 and 2 for a full list of questions asked of the 107 grooms. Results to some questions have been omitted in this section due to limited response. These questions include those on marital status, stake earnings, job acquisition, and other trainers.

### ***Why did you want to come to the racetrack?***

- 78% Love of horses
- 19% Family involvement in racing
- 17% Necessity (for work only)

### ***What is the best part about your job?***

- 36% Working with horses
- 25% Getting paid
- 11% Having a day off

### ***What is the worst part about your job?***

- 45% Waking up early/Long hours
- 37% The pay
- 21% “There is no bad part.”

### ***How much time off do you get?***

- 74% One afternoon every 7-10 days
- 55% One day per week
- 14% One day every 8-30 days
- 12% Not fixed/must request time off when needed

### ***How many hours do you work per week?***

- Average: 48.7 hours
- Median: 48 hours
- Mode: 50 hours
- High: 62 hours
- Low: 38 hours

### ***What is your goal for the future?***

- 41% English fluency
- 32% Become a foreman, assistant, or trainer
- 30% “There is no future on the racetrack.”
- 19% Personal achievement (“superación”)

### ***What is one thing your trainer could do to make you happier in your job?***

- 35% Improve communication, relationship, or stress level at barn
- 32% Pay better
- 25% More time off/vacations

## **Editorial Commentary**

---

When I explained the concept behind this study—that the goal was to uncover the motivations of backstretch employees—to my fellow RTIP students and other friends in the industry, the general response was, “Of course, they want more money.” I think it is safe to say that money is *one* key factor to racehorse grooms, but this truth describes nearly every other job on the planet in any industry. In addition to monetary compensation for their hard work, grooms want the opportunity for advancement, lower stress environments, and the chance to learn English.

An alarming statistic is that almost one-third of grooms in this survey feel that there is no future for them on the racetrack. One Santa Anita groom, Miguel, described himself as being “trapped.” I asked him, “If the racetrack’s so bad, why don’t you try to find a job somewhere else?” He revealed that he lacks his immigration papers, and the racetrack is one of a very few places that will hire illegal workers with high frequency. Miguel told me that without documentation, businesses wouldn’t even give him a job application to fill out. Racetracks and trainers should consider providing services to help grooms and other backstretch workers make legal steps toward obtaining naturalization, permanent resident status, or work visas so that workers don’t feel trapped like Miguel. This information can be found at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website ([www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)). To some, the environment in many barns resembles a slave labor system. Most trainers want no part in helping workers become legal because legal grooms could easily leave to work outside the track. Some trainers pay their grooms in cash, thereby illegally avoiding payroll taxes and depriving workers like Miguel of Social Security benefits that would potentially improve his standard of living. Trainers should check their ethics and consider the possibility that workers may actually reward fair treatment with quality work.

Continuing with wage issues, the discrepancy between wages and work experience should be examined. If trainers do indeed live and die by their help, shouldn’t they reward their employees for their loyalty? Experienced grooms should earn a higher wage than the inexperienced, and grooms who have stayed with the same trainer for a long period of time should receive periodic increases in pay.

41% of grooms surveyed describe learning English a future goal. In the past, racetracks have offered on-site English classes, but these programs charge fees directly to the backstretch workers. If the trainer can afford it, he or she should consider bringing in a part-time English teacher to work with the employees. Offering workers even an hour of instruction per week could prove to be a tremendous competitive advantage over other trainers. If a groom is motivated to learn English, he will want a job in your stable if you’re offering English language classes to your employees. This way, the trainer has the pick of the best and most productive employees.

Other important ideas for trainers to consider are more regular days off in order for employees to avoid burnout and enjoy personal time. Furthermore, the barn environment should be analyzed. High-stress barns with poor communication do not foster a

productive atmosphere, and based on the results from this study, reducing stress and improving communication are the most important ways trainers can improve barn morale.

## **Conclusion**

---

As human resource management goes, backstretch employees are one of the more poorly managed groups of workers in the country. Despite this fact, most grooms feel content with their jobs and describe themselves as “happy” at work. But trainers can do better, and based on this limited selection of just 107 grooms at two major American racetracks, the study revealed several key trends within the population of these workers. With an increased number of workers surveyed, representing a wider cross-section of tracks, we could find and support trends with greater certainty and hope to change the working conditions on racetracks and training centers across North America.

### **Key methods for trainers to consider in employee management:**

1. Offer naturalization, permanent resident status, and work visa information.
2. Demonstrate professionalism and ethics in compensation of employees.
3. Reward the most experienced and loyal grooms.
4. Provide access to English language instruction.
5. Invigorate workers with regular days off or vacation time.
6. Improve level of communication at the barn.

The results of this study suggest that should a trainer implement these methods into his or her business model, the barn should experience increased productivity and barn morale while retaining and developing good help. While some of these ideas will be cost prohibitive, implementing these management tactics at even a low level should give a trainer some kind of a competitive advantage over other trainers. Truthfully, these kinds of ideas are not new. Human resource management is an integral part of American business, from the small business to the major corporation. If trainers seek to develop and maintain a successful business, these ideas for developing employees should be embraced. Trainers do indeed have the ability to push the job of *Racehorse Groom* off the list of worst jobs in sports.

## References

---

“10 Worst Jobs in Sports.” *USA TODAY*. 20 October 2006.

<<http://www.usatoday.com/sports/tenworstjobs.htm>>.

“Immigration from Mexico.” *Center for Immigration Studies*. 20 October 2006.

<<http://www.cis.org/articles/2001/mexico/mexico.pdf>>.

“Mexico.” Wikipedia. 20 October 2006. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico>>.

## Thanks

---

I would like to extend my thanks to Maggie Sweet and Michael Dilger for assisting me in surveying grooms at Saratoga Race Course. I also say thank you to each barn staff at Santa Anita Park for being receptive and encouraging regarding my research.

## About the Author

---

Ian Tapp is a senior in the Race Track Industry Program at the University of Arizona expecting to graduate in May 2007. He has spent the past three summers working for Todd Pletcher Racing Stables at Saratoga Race Course, first as a groom, then as a barn foreman. His goals are to revolutionize the current methods of racehorse training and stable management while making a lasting positive impact on the sport. Ian can be reached at [iantapp@aol.com](mailto:iantapp@aol.com).