
TRAINING

for

LIFE

Individuals in recovery get back on track
with **TAYLOR MADE SCHOOL
OF HORSEMANSHIP**
in partnership with Shepherd's House

By **ERIC MITCHELL**
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► As part of the Taylor Made School of Horsemanship,
Drew Miller works with a foal at Taylor Made Farm





Frank Taylor believes Taylor Made School of Horsemanship could create a workforce for other Thoroughbred farms

IN

THE EARLY FALL OF 2020, Michael Lowery found himself homeless and penniless in Woodland Park near downtown Lexington. A heroin and alcohol addiction had brought him to the lowest point in his life and ending the pain was what he craved most.

“I wasn’t able to be a father to my children; I wasn’t able to be a son to my mother,” he said. “Really, I gave no value to life. I had to do something different, and it was like God slapped me in the face and said, ‘Get it together, son.’”

Fifteen months later Lowery is sober and working at Wind-

ing Oaks Training Center near Ocala, Fla. He helps manage 10 2-year-olds for a partnership and now envisions a future he never could have imagined during those dark days in Woodland Park. The path to sobriety hasn’t been easy, but Lowery said a pilot horsemanship training program created by Taylor Made Farm in cooperation with Shepherd’s House, a residential addiction recovery program in Lexington, gave his life newfound hope.

“Today my self-worth is through the roof,” he said.

Lowery is among 16 Shepherd’s House residents who have participated in the Taylor Made School of Horsemanship, which Frank Taylor conceived and launched in March 2021. Most of the recovering addicts, such as Lowery, had never touched a horse prior to their first day at Taylor Made Farm, near Nicholasville, Ky. With persistence and the support of their brothers in recovery, however, they gained new skills and grew their self-confidence. Several graduates now have careers in the horse business.

“Life is difficult when you’re early in your sobriety and recovery; you’re fighting for your life,” Lowery said, noting he had been through 12 treatment programs before winding up at Shepherd’s House. “To have somebody on your side that knows what you’re going through firsthand and is there to support you, I feel like that’s definitely helped me succeed this far. We have to place our recovery first because if we don’t, we’re going to lose it. It’s very important for me, and it was nice

to have somebody to lean on in those days that were tough.”

Like other businesses nationwide, Taylor Made Farm had been struggling to find quality workers. Frank Taylor, who runs Taylor Made with three of his brothers, saw a potential solution in a model used by a Lexington restaurant named DV8 Kitchen. The owner Rob Perez—himself celebrating more than 30 years of sobriety—hires recovering addicts to help them “deviate from their past lifestyle,” according to DV8’s mission statement.

“I knew DV8 was working with people that were in rehab,” Taylor said. “I went there to eat and was very impressed with the people there, the service they provided—and the food was excellent. I saw a way to help people with their sobriety because I’ve been exposed to the pain of having somebody in our family that suffered from addiction. That drove me.

“There was some apprehension about doing this,” Taylor recalled. “You’re bringing in people with backgrounds that are not desirable—drug problems and legal problems. There were concerns about theft or overdoses or a horse getting hurt or a person getting hurt. On the other hand, we’re not just operating a business. My dad taught us that running a farm was just an opportunity to do what God wants us to do by helping other people. We try to operate with good values, good morals, and influence society in a positive way.”

Taylor took his idea for a 12-week groom training program to Shepherd’s House, which runs a disciplined 12-18-month addiction recovery and transitional housing treatment program that also provides workers to Central Kentucky businesses, including DV8.

“We’ve have had a lot of farms approach us for workers, and we’ll send them, but they were not as concerned with that worker’s sobriety as Frank was,” said Shepherd’s House president and CEO Jerod Thomas. “We’ve had nowhere near the buy-in we see with Frank’s program.”

The goal of Shepherd’s House is to provide men a foundation and platform to gain sobriety, secure employment, and start their lives over, said Chris Chaffin, the program’s COO.

“The Taylors know with our program that our guys are clean and sober because they’re drug tested at least twice a week and are going to be held accountable,” he said. “They have to put their recovery first. If you get the recovery down, then the family, the job, and all the rest will come.”

The Taylor brothers decided to create the pilot horsemanship training

program to put these men to work while supporting their recovery. They agreed to try it for a year with the understanding that if anything went wrong, it could be immediately stopped.

But there would be no need to halt early.

“As it turned out, it’s gone fantastic,” Taylor said. “We got some really good guys that have turned their lives around and are now committed to the horse industry. They have a brotherhood here and really care for one another—and they love the horses. It’s been pretty powerful.”

A key part of the Taylor Made training program’s success was putting Josh Bryan in charge. Not only does Bryan have a long history with the farm, but he also knows personally the importance of second chances.

One of Taylor’s cousins, Bryan first worked at the farm for a couple of summers beginning in 2010. He spent the next seven years working on and off at Taylor Made and tried unsuccessfully to earn a bachelor’s degree in sports management at Western Kentucky University. His alcohol addiction kept getting in the way. After failing out of WKU, Bryan returned to Taylor Made looking for yet another chance.

“I had been back at the farm about a week visiting Frank at his house when he asked me to take a walk down the driveway,” Bryan remembered. “We were talking about my future and what was going on with me, and I just broke down and told him I needed some help. I’d lost everything financially and emotionally.

“You know, the drinking is really only part of the problem,” he continued. “There is depression and anxiety, and the drinking just fuels the fire.”



Josh Bryan runs Taylor Made School of Horsemanship and is a graduate of Shepherd’s House

Bryan has faced imposing mental and physical challenges since he was an infant. He was born with Goldenhar syndrome, a rare deformity marked by an underdeveloped jaw, cheekbone, and temple bone coupled with underdeveloped facial muscles on one side of the face. By his count, he's endured about 14 separate reconstruction surgeries beginning when he was seven weeks old. His life took another blow when he lost his parents, one in 2012 and the other in 2014.

"The surgeries, losing my parents, it all just snowballed, and then the drinking made it 10 times worse," Bryan said. In August 2020, he joined the Shepherd's House recovery program, and while there he worked for eight months in Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital's surgery department so he could learn more about horse anatomy. After graduating from Shepherd's House in August 2021, he had a full-time job waiting back at Taylor Made.

"Josh is the perfect guy to run this program," Taylor said. "He's been through the Shepherd's House. He knows how to stay sober and knows what it takes; plus, he's got the



Hunter Blake loads a manure spreader at Taylor Made Farm

horsemanship."

Bryan welcomed the opportunity.

"Being put in this position has humbled me and really been vital to my recovery," he said. "It has shown me that I can help other people through my story of strength and hope. I have come to the point where I'm OK with who I am and comfortable to be in my own skin. You realize you can really do anything if you put your mind to it."



Taylor Made School of Horsemanship participants learn key skills they can put to use in an industry that is always in need of workers

Andrew Miller is a Taylor Made School of Horsemanship graduate who grew up around cattle but had very little hands-on experience with horses. He is now working full-time at the farm and—though he doesn't have the title yet—has all the skills required to be a barn foreman, according to Bryan.

"I was intimidated at the start, I mean, a big 1,200-pound mare is looking at you, and I didn't really know how to do anything," Miller said. "My biggest worry was getting injured. But here you're surrounded by a bunch of guys, and they're all looking out for you.

"Josh is a big part of that because you can relate to a person who understands standing in lines at soup kitchens and how people can get frustrated with you and how you have to earn that trust back," Miller continued. "This program has taught me patience, and I actually care about what I'm doing because I'm caring for another animal. I have the desire to get up in the morning and the willingness to come to work. It keeps me humble, and it gives me peace."

In addition to providing new careers to recovering addicts, the Taylor Made/Shepherd's House collaboration provided the foundation for a new pinhooking venture: Ready Made Racing. The venture was the brainchild of Will Walden, son of WinStar president and CEO Elliott Walden.

Will Walden was going through the Shepherd's House program in 2021, and when Taylor would visit Shepherd's House to discuss his farm's training program, the two men would talk horses. Last July, Walden pitched Taylor on an idea to pinhook 2-year-olds at the racetrack instead of through auctions. If Taylor was interested, Walden told him he already knew who his partners would be in running the new venture—exercise rider Tyler Maxwell and Lowery, fellow Shepherd's House residents who had gone through Taylor Made's horsemanship program.

Walden saw an opportunity with Kentucky racetracks writing 2-year-old races for horses sold or bought back at auction for \$45,000 or less. He envisioned buying a handful of modestly priced yearlings that could be showcased in these special races and then sold. Taylor said he recognized the potential immediately.

"The problem with 2-year-old sales is you have to pick a day and have him at his best, whether he's ready or not on that day," Taylor said. "With Will's idea, whenever they're ready to run, you run them and sell them. Now you're working on the horse's time frame, not on your time frame."

With Taylor on board, Walden had no trouble getting a commitment from Lowery despite the caveats.

"I told him, 'This is a long, long, longshot.' Ideas like this that come up in your head in the afternoon don't materialize into reality most times," Walden said.

"When it really did start to materialize, I knew we were



Participants find camaraderie and a sense of purpose from the program

going to need a rider, and Tyler had experience in that; it was the perfect storm," Walden continued. "We were all finishing the Shepherd's House at the same time, and that timing was important because I didn't want to involve somebody in this and have them leave the Shepherd's House early. We were all going to finish up the Shepherd's House before it was time to head to Ocala. It's crazy how it's worked out."

Walden, Maxwell, and Lowery did not know each other at all prior to their time together at Shepherd's House.

In fall of 2020, Walden was in the Woodford County Jail in Central Kentucky and at the end of his rope. He already had been in and out of treatment centers over 12 years, battling a heroin and crack addiction. His mother told him at the time that entering the Shepherd's House program was

the only way he was getting out of jail.

"I did not care about my life at that point (when) I came to Shepherd's House," Walden said. "I didn't care whether I lived or died, but they told me, 'If you don't care about yourself, care about the next guy—the guy on your left, and the guy on your right. Worry about them.' And by doing so, you develop a little bit of pride and get more in touch with your emotions. If you're caring about somebody else, you feel like a human being again. And when you feel like a human being again, then you start to realize you are one. And then when you realize you are one, you start to care about yourself and you start to care that there is more out there than what I was doing and the way I was living."

The guy on Walden's left was Maxwell. Two years ago while

"THERE WAS JUST SOMETHING ABOUT HAVING THIS 1,200-POUND ANIMAL THAT COULD EASILY RULE ME, BEING AT ONE WITH ME."

—MICHAEL LOWERY

driving intoxicated, Maxwell rolled his truck three times and got ejected. He woke up on the floor in the Warren County Jail.

"I was basically pissed, just tired and mad that I was still alive," Maxwell said. "I got a nudge from the judge to go to a facility where I did 30 days. Something inside of me said that wasn't going to be enough."

Maxwell was directed to Shepherd's House.

"They said it was sober living, and then I discovered it was a year-long program that was run like a military boot camp," he said. "I didn't know it at the time, but that was exactly what I needed."

Maxwell already had a background riding cutting horses so he didn't need much encouragement to sign up for Taylor Made's pilot program.

"All my experience had been in the saddle and this enhanced my horsemanship working with horses on the ground," he said. "We came into this thing knowing that it was going to be bigger than any one of us, something that was going to pave the way for other guys. It's worked miracles in our lives, so I can't even imagine what it's going to do for the lives of others who take the same path. It's very important."

On Walden's right at Shepherd's House was Lowery.

"Will brought the program to my attention," Lowery said. "He said there was something special about working with horses that brought about a certain peace. I really didn't buy into that, but I trusted Will and I gave it a shot. I come from

a construction background so I'm used to hard labor, but this was difficult. I was fearful of the horses, but at almost my 90 days in it, I realized I had a passion for it. There was just something about having this 1,200-pound animal that could easily rule me, being at one with me."

Today the three horsemen are at Winding Oaks with Juan Ramos, a recovering addict who has worked for years at sales for Taylor Made. Ready Made Racing has five colts and five fillies that the team is preparing for the races.

Walden, whom Taylor describes as an "excellent horseman," has his trainer's license and is putting into practice the lessons he learned earlier from top trainers such as Bill Mott, Todd Pletcher, Jonathan Sheppard, Dale Romans, and Wesley Ward. Maxwell and Ramos handle all the riding duties while Lowery is the team's groom.

"They've got the perfect team down there to train these horses," said Taylor. "Mike is just unbelievable. He never touched a horse until last March and today when they've gone to the track, he does two of them up in polos, puts them on the walker, cleans two stalls, beds the stalls, puts hay down, and puts polos on the next set going out. He can do it all. He can do everything from bandages to tack—everything."

Walden, Maxwell, and Lowery said the new venture has brought on new stresses to manage, but they all agreed doing this together has made it possible.

"[Tyler and Mike] know me as well as anyone does right now. They know the right things to say and what's applicable to the program we work, as far as recovery," said Walden. "They know that stressing about problems is not going to accomplish anything, but to give it to God and trust Him with the results and just keep it moving forward one day at a time."

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it," said Maxwell. "Packing up and going to pursue a dream 800 miles away has definitely not been easy. It's chaotic and an environment Mike and I are not used to, but we have tools that we can use on a day-to-day basis to get us through. Some days I struggle, but I already know that through that struggle I'm going to come out stronger. And, I get to do it with my brothers."

Though excited about Ready Made Racing's potential, Lowery said being in Ocala has been tough because he's been away from his children.

"I just remember the bigger picture," he said. "God's not going to allow me to fail as long as I have faith in Him. So I remind myself of that on a daily basis. This is much better than the alternative."

One pressure that Walden, Maxwell, and Lowery don't have to shoulder is an expectation that their new venture



Ready Made Racing's team: (L-R) Tyler Maxwell, Mike Lowery, Will Walden, Frank Taylor, and Juan Ramos, with Taylor's friend Robert Osbourn

be profitable.

"I've been talking to some people about investing, and to tell them we've sent these addicts down to Ocala on their own, it sounds like a crazy experiment, but these guys have been solid," Taylor said. "They might make money, but I'm selling it that we may lose everything, and the people who are investing are investing in these guys. They are doing it for the cause."

Walden said he also was upfront with Maxwell and Lowery about the risk they were taking.

"We've discussed it several times, and what's most important isn't making our money back," he said. "It's furthering our knowledge and experience in this industry. It's staying sober and gaining trust back from the ones that lost it. If we happen to make some money at it, if it happens to be successful—that's the cherry on top, but it's not the cake."

As the Taylor Made horsemanship program enters its second year, Taylor said the potential he sees is no longer confined to his family's farm.

"I'm not thinking small on this," he said. "I can see other big farms starting their own programs. Really, I think this program could grow all over the country."

Taylor Made could contribute to this growth in several ways, Taylor said. He can see his program playing a role as a feeder program by handling all the training and then passing workers along to other farms. He also believes Bryan could help other farms establish their own programs and assist in finding prospects by building a network with other addiction treatment facilities.

"I think we can get Josh some help to free him up to manage other programs and talk weekly with the workers on other farms and managers in order to head off any issues," Taylor said. "In the next year I think we can have a volume of people come through the program, stay sober, and become good horsemen."

"Growing up, my dad helped a lot of people that were addicts or drunks, but he didn't have the tools that the Shepherd's House provides," Taylor continued. "He bailed them out of jail and gave them work. Some of them got sober on their own, but a lot of times he was just enabling them. But this is proven, and why I'm pumped about this program. They feel like they have a responsibility out here to do what they can to the best of their ability. They have discipline, that responsibility, that structure, and a brotherhood. It's a better way to operate a business and a better approach to life." **BH**