



Job Focus: Braiding

Kaitlyn McAleese

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How many weeks a year do you work?

Braiders can work whenever and wherever there is a horse show so schedules vary quite a lot. Typically, braiders' main season is during the summer circuits and then they either go south to braid for the winter or stay home and have a down season after 5 months of severe sleep deprivation. Most braiders tend to carry another day job or have side work through the summer anyway, so may increase their hours during their off-season until the local braiding picks up again. Bottom line, braiders are borderline insane and work all day everyday if they can.

Pay range?

Before I get into the actual numbers of braiding, I want to remind people that braiders are the people that come in the middle of the night, when it's freezing cold, and dark, fueled by 20 minute power naps and way more than the recommended amount of caffeine and maybe Adderall. They braid your horse in the middle of the night so you don't have to learn how to yourself, or wake up earlier than you already have to, or worry about whether amateur braids are going to detract from an otherwise beautiful round. They offer unofficial night check that has saved countless numbers of cast and colicking horses and rounded up herds of loose horses and waited until morning to find their rightful people. When you forget a tail wrap they find one, so the braid you're paying good money for isn't ruined, and in May when your horse's mane hasn't been pulled since the last fall show, they work their magic and somehow still manage to put 40 braids in, so even though you don't own a mane comb you still look like you know what you're doing on show day. Braiders work incredibly hard, at multiple jobs, and are usually only torturing themselves because they have student loans or a horse of their own who they never see, but who is at home essentially snacking on \$20 bills. And that is why I don't feel bad charging \$40-50 for a mane and \$30-40 for a tail, essentially making \$90 an hour. Braiders make crazy good money, to point where I've been asked on multiple occasions if I'm actually stripping at night, to which I have replied, "nobody would pay *this* much to see that," which is unfortunate because stripping would be easier. On Sundays when it's time to pay the braider, it may soften the blow to remember your braider lives in her car, hasn't showered since Wednesday, lives on granola bars and Tim Hortons, and can often be seen hallucinating and talking to herself because she has basically lost her mind. Case in point: paying the braider is basically charity work. So just do it!

Background?

Braiders need a strong background in horse handling because learning to twist hair is only half the battle. Braiders who have a background in grooming have the advantage of an arsenal of horse wrangling techniques for the unmannerly, rank and downright dangerous animals we



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inevitably encounter. People with a strong background in either crash studying for exams, binge watching Netflix, or showing up to work on time after staying up all night drinking are all better suited to braiding because they are probably familiar with their caffeine threshold and already have very little respect for their overall health and well-being. Finally, I think braiders that are familiar with how hunters at the very top of the sport are turned out is important, which means they need to have spent a fair amount of time at world class horse shows in order to develop an appreciation for beautiful braids. If you do not believe what we do is important, there is absolutely no way you will be able to convince yourself to stay up all night doing it, so braiders need to love the sport and respect the traditions that dictate how they are supposed to be presented to the judge.

What to do to get the job?

Practice, practice, practice. Find a PROFESSIONAL braider (not your friend's Mom who used to braid her pony for the fall fair) to teach you how to braid. Practice getting your braids (the actual part that you braid down and tie off) very tight before you even approach the professional if you do not want to be greeted with sarcasm and general hostility, due to reasons previously discussed. Watch videos of the hunter derby horses at WEF and indoor finals, so you know what you're aiming for. If ever you think, "these are probably good enough," you are not ready to start braiding professionally.

Process to acquire job?

I think there are basically two routes to go when trying to break into the braiding ranks. The process is very similar to joining a gang, so any experience there is obviously an asset. Each circuit will have a couple leaders who control most of the big barns, and then a team of braiders that all work for them, doing whatever overflow there is. If you are already good enough that you can approach a head braider and say you want to help her, this is probably the best way to go. If you work for another braider, you don't have to worry about any of the billing, organizing, or collecting which allows you to focus on the braiding itself. You may start out just braiding manes down, or doing the horses that do the lower divisions and/or have the bad or dirty manes the head braider doesn't want to deal with. I think that your early days as a braider are best spent working under a top braider because it ensures there is a strong sense of responsibility in the work you do, as you are representing someone else. If your braids aren't good enough, you will be told as much and made to re-do them, which is something everyone has to do at some point on the road to becoming a top braider. The other route, is picking up smaller accounts with lower level barns on your own, and building a client base from there. The benefit to this is that you control how many horses you do a night, however they will



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probably be not as nice, not as clean and not as mannerly as the ones at top barns that are taken care of by professional groomers. I started out braiding this way, and I think you can still become very good and make a lot of money, but there is definitely more responsibility involved that can make a new braider feel overwhelmed.

Positives and Negatives

Braiding is flexible, lucrative, and involves basically zero human interaction. I'm going to file those all under positives, but if you are one of those strange people who enjoy other people's company, I suppose that last one could be a negative. Braiding also offers an opportunity to play a role in the performance of top equine athletes you otherwise wouldn't deal with, and for people that love the sport, this can be a source of really great pride. Braiding also offers a (fairly) healthy outlet for OCD tendencies and perfectionism, in a way that develops a real commitment to excellence that can be applied in a more conventional profession later on. On the flip side, braiders tend to spend most of their waking hours working, have weathered hands too embarrassing to ever get a manicure, and cars so dirty you can never have passengers. As an aside, I never lock my car because I am 100% sure no one would ever steal it because all the scattered wool and garbage suggests an elderly knitting enthusiast lives in it, so we can add that one to the positives list. No sleep, a fairly dark attitude, and a mild to severe caffeine addiction are all downsides, unless you are actively trying to destroy any hope of a social life and make you entirely un-dateable. Braiding is tough, and on the worst nights when they are all dirty and unlabeled it's hard to remember why we do it at all. But then a really nice summer night will come along, and your iPod shuffle will be on point, and all your horses will fall asleep on the cross ties, and you'll remember how nice it is to have time to yourself with the animals you love, all while making really great money.