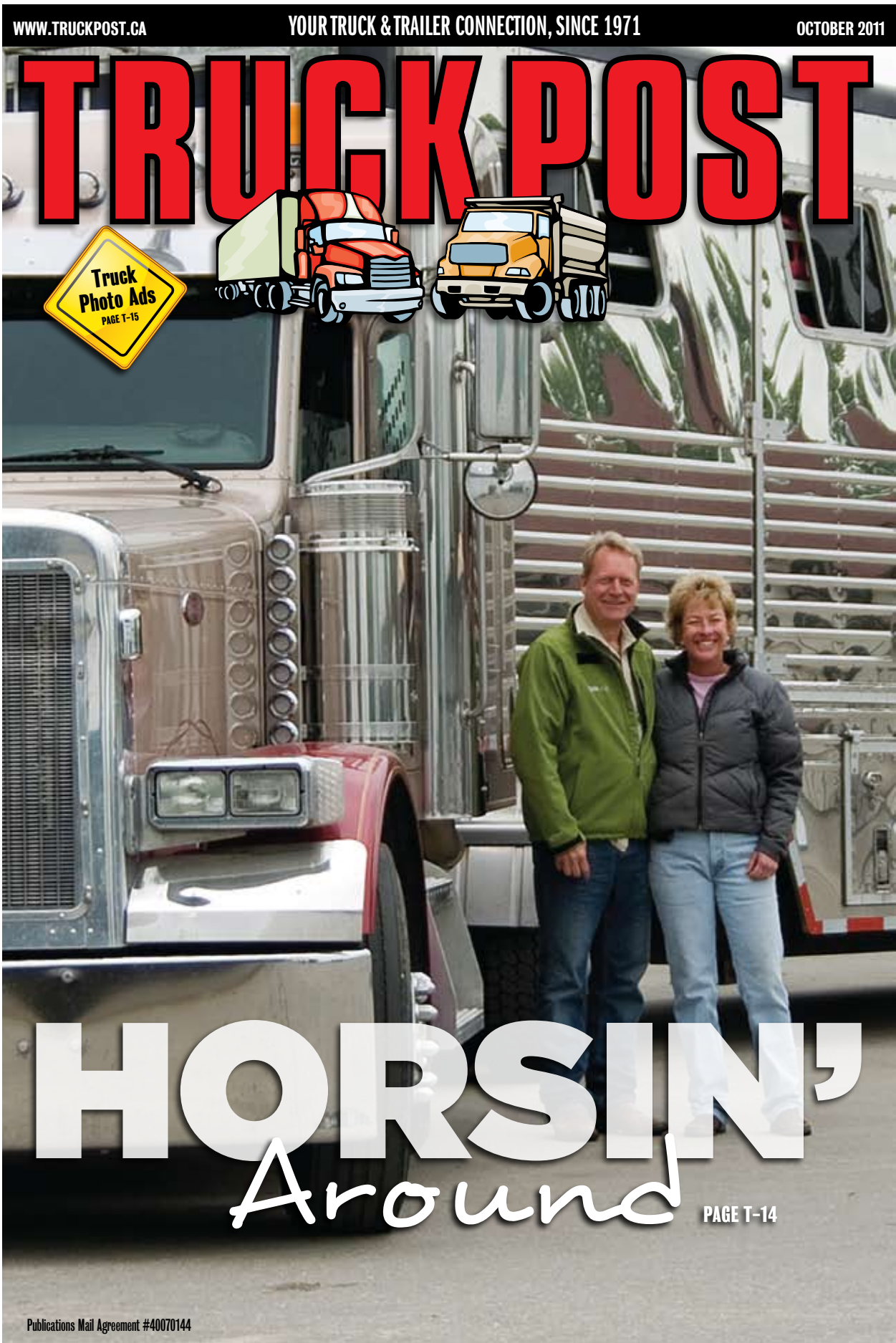


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HORSIN' *Around*

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Cover Story
by Kathryn Thorpe Klassen

Horsin' Around

"The customers appreciate the extra care that we provide to their very special friends and companions."



Michael Kits hauls horses around the countryside and loves every moment of it. He was the President of Porter Trucking (now operating under the name TST Overland Express), and he stayed on for a few years after the company was purchased by Trans-Force in 2005, but when his good friends Darwin and Gillian Orr decided to get out of the horse hauling business, Michael decided to jump straight into it with both feet.

Michael and his wife Laura purchased Foothills Horse Transport from the Orrs in 2009 and haven't looked back. "It was a great decision, I love going to work everyday," says Michael.

Foothills Horse Transport currently has three truck and trailer combinations. The big unit is a flashy Doyle 15-horse semi trailer pulled by a 379 Peterbilt. A Freightliner Sport chassis and Dodge 4500 are used to pull two Jamco six-horse trailers.

Michael is the main driver and dispatcher, backed up by four part-time drivers who help cover when things get busy. His sister Laurie takes care of the administration end of the business and wife Laura helps out wherever needed in between running a boarding facility for retired show horses, and bringing along young horses on their 80-acre ranch.

"We operate primarily in Western Canada and the Western USA, but do go anywhere in North America as required. During the summer we focus on the show circuit

in Southern Alberta and Langley, BC areas. For the winter months we operate between Southern California and Southern Alberta and spring and fall we do charter trips to Florida, Kentucky and Ontario. Much of our business is show horses and moving these horses to and from local and national venues."

Working out of Priddis, Alberta, near Calgary, and in close proximity to Spruce Meadows, one of the world's elite Show Jumping facilities, means that hauling some of the most famous horses in the world is a regular occurrence for Foothills Horse Transport. The most notable to have graced the ramp, Eric Lamaze's Olympic gold-medal mount *Hickstead*. Ian Miller's horse *In Style* has also travelled with Foothills, as well as many members of various Nation's Cup teams from around the world.

But business isn't limited to the fame and fortune of show jumping and clients like Cavalia. Foothills Horse Transport does plenty of local moves, emergency

and non-emergency veterinary runs and regular pickups at the Calgary International Airport for horses being flown in from around the world. "It is very fulfilling to take a sick or injured horse to the vet clinic, and then being able to go back in a few days and bring it back to their home and their very happy owners," says Michael.

Horses are not regular freight. They aren't always cooperative when loading, they shift during transport, require regular food and water, and their owners tend to worry about them — a lot. With that in mind, each truck and trailer is equipped with cameras so that the horses can be monitored continuously while on the road.

"We have developed a wonderful working relationship with our customers. Transporting horses is very different from the general freight business I come from. Transporting horses requires personal contact with each of the customers and their horses. We constantly communicate with them from before we pickup their horse, at pickup time, during the trip and when we deliver the horse."

Hiring drivers can be tough. You need someone who knows how to handle the animals, can deal with them in an emergency situation if needed, is knowledgeable enough to know when an animal is sick or injured, and can drive in a manner that keeps the horse comfortable.

"Horses travel standing in a stall. Our drivers must be very smooth — no fast starts or stops and when we are travelling

in the mountains great care must be taken going around the corners and up and down the hills to ensure the horses are not subjected to undue stress or possible injury."

The horse business is different from other trucking businesses but Michael says, "We also face many of the same challenges as all transportation companies in today's economic environment. There are ever-increasing fuel costs, increased regulations, extensive emissions controls on new trucks, etc. We operate very specialized equipment which is very expensive to purchase and maintain. Finding drivers with horse experience and background adds an additional challenge."

"Our first goal is to pickup, transport, and deliver the horse safely! Being aware of unsafe situations for the horse and people in the general vicinity while loading or unloading is a big concern. The driver must be aware of, and eliminate unsafe situations. While traveling we stop every four hours to check, feed and water the horses, as well as monitor the temperature of the trailer and add or remove blankets as needed. This is especially important leaving Alberta on a nice Sunny -30° C day in January and heading to Southern California where it could be +25° C."

"We pride ourselves in providing a positive transportation experience for the horse. The customers appreciate the extra care that we provide to their very special friends and companions. We always treat the horses as if they were our own." 🌿

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