

;login:

THE MAGAZINE OF USENIX & SAGE

June 2001 • Volume 26 • Number 3



inside:

MOTD

by Rob Kolstad



USENIX & SAGE

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

motd

Excellence

by Rob Kolstad

Dr. Rob Kolstad has long served as editor of *;login:*. He is also head coach of the USENIX-sponsored USA Computing Olympiad.

<kolstad@usenix.org>



On Debbie Scherrer's recommendation from several years ago, I took my parents to view the "World Famous" Lippazzaner Stallions last night at their Pueblo, Colorado tour stop. I had no expectations, having ridden horses a few times and even enjoyed seeing well-made photographs of them. Most people's favorite part is the "airs": the jumping and rearing up (as in "Hi ho Silver, away!" from the Lone Ranger intro). Those horses were definitely coordinated, ever moreso considering they weigh in four digits. As horses go, they were excellent.

We hear a lot about excellence in our industry. You can hardly turn through a trade magazine without someone extolling the excellence of their product, their service, their record, or their management style. Entire books discuss excellence. I think it's a desirable quality.

Of course, excellence is decidedly *not* perfection. Perfection is yet another step and is seen only rarely in our world. There are those who felt Michael Jordan's basketball skills bordered on perfection; others admire Tiger Woods's golfing performances. Let's stick to excellence for this discussion – perfection is just really challenging in general.

Personally, I like excellence. I thought Dan Klein's talk from several years ago about the parallels between Blazon (a language for describing coats-of-arms) and Postscript was excellent. I think some of Mark Burgess's thoughts on system administration are excellent, even though I think I disagree with a few of the others. We occasionally see an excellent article in *;login:* or an excellent talk at a conference. It's really great.

Making excellent software or creating a site that is administered excellently is really challenging. The more skilled one becomes at creating either programs or environments, the more flaws one sees on the way to excellence. This is the worst sort of reward for improving skills! "I'm better now and I can see that I've got to spend much more time on the tasks I'm solving." How awful.

On the other hand, it also raises the bar in our world. Many of the technology-oriented parts of our lives truly have improved. Satellite-delivered home entertainment has a technical quality (i.e., lines per inch and lack of interference) that was simply never reached with old-style broadcasting through the ether. You can find technological success stories throughout the world from hybrid rice that feeds India to better ceramics for creating lighter engine parts. The *Science News* weekly newsmagazine has examples of these sorts of things every issue.

How does one achieve excellence in any one thing? I don't know exactly. I do know, however, that really excellent results seem to take a lot of time, maybe even an incredible amount of time.

Have you ever deleted a program and had to re-create it from memory? Remember how it took only a fraction as long to create and the new program ran better, cleaner, faster, and was easier to maintain? This seems to offer a clue: excellence rarely seems to appear quickly or "the first time." Excellence appears to require not only inspiration but sharpening, tuning, and all sorts of refinements often not visible at the onset of creation.

I've tried to do excellent things for several years (e.g., excellent programming contests for the USACO students). It's hard – but I think I'm getting better at it. I wish I could say the same for several of my other endeavors.

I think it's fun to think about excellence. Maybe there's something you do that is or could be excellent. Sometimes, I think creating or doing something excellent (a program, great peanut brittle, playing duo-piano, a super clear man page) has a bit of its own reward just in its birth. I hope you'll consider doing anything excellent – I think the world will be a better place.