

Breeding for pleasure

Breeders of pleasure horses discuss the qualities they strive for in their breeding program and why they believe today's pleasure horses are improving

"I believe that genetics play a bigger role in a pleasure horse's success than the trainer does."

DAN MCWHIRTER, *Dan McWhirter Quarter Horses, Doniphan, Nebraska*

The Quarter Horse industry is dramatically becoming more and more specialized. Competition has gotten so keen, that each segment of the industry is breeding more and more within its own proven bloodlines resulting in very specialized physical types within the breed. These horses are being bred with lots of natural talent which predisposes them to excel in their given arenas - be it halter, cutting, reining, racing, hunter under saddle or western pleasure.

At Dan McWhirter Quarter Horses, we too have become very specialized. The entire focus of our breeding business is to produce pretty, natural moving, athletic prospects for the pleasure horse industry. We have tried to model our business after the blue grass Thoroughbred farms. Like the Thoroughbred breeders, our goal is to produce a very high quality product and market those top horses as yearlings, either privately or at the fall sales.

The philosophy of our breeding program, which we follow closely, is to breed form to function. Bone structure and natural balance are the basis for outstanding pleasure horse movement and these characteristics are highly inheritable. Basically, the four primary qualities we are breeding for are: balance, movement, disposition, and attractiveness. We feel strongly that a pleasure horse should be a good enough mover naturally, that a trainer shouldn't have to try to change him. He should only have to school what is already there. A horse that's not naturally meant to jog and lope slowly can't

physically be forced to do it well enough to beat those horses that are naturally meant to. From my point of view as a breeder, I believe that genetics play a bigger role in a pleasure horse's success than the trainer does.

As an AQHA judge and national director, I am acutely aware of how the pleasure horse industry's image has suffered. I attribute much of this to lack of knowledge. Many people just don't understand that there is specific criteria to what makes a "good mover." Many critics can't recognize the form to function qualities of, for example: a strong, efficient driving hock; a flat knee; cadenced clean rhythm to the gaits; fluid length of stride with natural suspension at the lope; a level neck that doesn't bob because the horse is strong and balanced; etc. When I judge a pleasure class, I start at the ground with the horse's movement and then work my way up, not at the horse's head position and work my way down. Somehow, the pleasure horse industry, perhaps in conjunction with the AQHA, needs to develop positive criteria to specifically define what good movement is so that there can be more appreciation for these talented, natural moving horses and less criticism.

In my opinion, today's pleasure horse breeders are making a significant contribution to the improvement of the breed. We are producing pretty moving athletes with so much natural ability that it is easy for them to do their job. The future looks bright in the pleasure horse business as the consistent quality of the horse we are producing keeps

getting better and better. Good moving horses are the products of good families and are not just occasional freaks to be stumbled upon any more.

"Just as important as breeding is training the well-bred two-year-old so that he does what comes naturally."

BRAD & KELLI MCCAMY,
McCamy Quarter Horses, Lucas, Texas

The major quality that we breed for is conformation. These days, you have to have pretty. And the more conformationally correct a horse is, the prettier it will be and the better move it will be.

We also breed for disposition, movement and tail set/carriage. If you breed for tail set/carriage and make that just as important as breeding for straight legs, then maybe tail altering will not be an issue. If you breed two horses with these good qualities, genetics tell us that we will be improving the breed. This is what the industry has done and will continue to do.

What we do not want to do is take a mare that would not or could not be a pleasure horse (for whatever reason) and try to raise a pleasure horse out of her. If she is not a good individual, chances are she will not produce good individuals. You have to breed to a good stallion with the qualities mentioned, but you must breed a mare with good qualities also.

Over the years, we have done this, therefore improving our breed. But, just as important as breeding, is training the well-bred two-year-old so that he does what comes natural!

"Breeders have a moral responsibility to the industry to strive to produce exactly what the judges are requested to place."

MARK GRICE, *Kilmanagh Valley Farms, Ontario, Canada*

I feel that breeders have a moral responsibility to the industry to strive to produce exactly what the judges are requested to place. This means that we need to breed horses that naturally have

the correct conformation and movement to be representative of the Quarter horse.

With the competitive pleasure horse market being what it is, the public is becoming much more educated about good movement and the conformation which produces it. You hear less talk about forearm circumference and more talk about a strong top line and deep hock movement.

From an economic standpoint, it makes good sense to breed what the majority of buyers want. In my case I seem to get the highest demand, and therefore the most money for, tall, dark-colored horses with the capability to go in both English and western events. With the stallion, Tresrullah, I feel we have the size, movement, color and disposition that the end user—the youth and amateur market, is looking for.

“Our desire (is) to produce and train a more natural, graceful animal that is a pleasure to own, watch and ride.”

KEN MUNSON, *Deer Oaks Quarter Horses, Bath, Michigan*

Our opinion regarding the recent development and perpetuation of the pleasure horse is most strongly shown by our choice of Mito Cierra (*as a two month old weanling*) to place our faith in, both as a future performer and as a sire. We did this on the basis of our wish to put forth in the Quarter Horse world, a stallion that was not limited to a specific area of expertise, but was capable of being a great all-around athlete that would sire all-around athletes. Mito Cierra's bloodlines (*Mito Commander x Fancy Laces by Ole Man*) gave us the genes we thought would produce the type of athlete we had in mind. Mito Cierra's performance record (*Superior Western pleasure in eight weeks as a two year old; Congress Versatility Champion in 1985, etc.*) and his siring ability (*numerous performance Superior get and Congress Versatility Champion in 1990, etc.*), have substantiated our belief in his ability to sire into the Quarter Horse industry: “the athlete.”

We always strive to breed mares and produce get that are pretty-headed with a nice neck and a medium to short back with enough power in the rear to

develop the required locomotion. We want a performer with ring presence, a natural fluid movement at all gaits the pleasure class might require, and a willing animal with an attitude of wanting to please and work as a partner with the trainer and/or rider.

It is our opinion that the breeding track we have taken is helping in a small way to return the Quarter Horse to his previous position of an all-around using horse, but on a much higher plane than in the earlier history

of our breed. The horse of the 50s could walk, trot and lope the same as today, but the enhancement of the breed through increased selectivity in sires and dams over the past years, and hopefully into the future, has been outstanding. We hope we have contributed to this through our breeding program which is geared to our desire to produce and train a more natural, graceful animal that is a “pleasure” to own, watch and ride.

“The beauty of breeding pleasure horses is that they can be enjoyed by everyone from the youngest 4-H exhibitor to the strongest professional competitor.”

ANN PERRY, *Bob Perry Quarter Horses, Valley View, Texas*

We strive to raise all around athletic horses that also have the potential to make top caliber pleasure horses. It is of great economic importance to owners as well as breeders that the horses specifically bred for pleasure can also be capable of performing in several other events. This is not necessarily the case in some of the other specialized breeding programs such as halter and racing.

We are proud of the fact our Zippo bloodlines promote the qualities that make pretty movers with good conformation and great dispositions. Pleasure horses are not perpetuating negative qualities, but in fact have made many owners much more aware that all mares aren't necessarily broodmares candidates.

The rising costs of raising, keeping and showing horses are another reason many mare owners choose to breed for competitive pleasure horses. Many shows large and small have instituted futurity programs which give owners

and trainers the potential to recover more money than ever before for their labors. Is the reason for racing, cutting or reining horses to win money any different than showing pleasure horses for futurity purses?

The beauty of breeding pleasure horses is that they can be enjoyed by everyone from the youngest 4-H exhibitor to the strongest professional competitor. It would be interesting to see a breakdown on AQHA breeding statistics between race, cutting, halter, pleasure and all others to compare which area is most popular among breeders. If I'm not mistaken, western pleasure is still the most popular class among youth, amateur and open exhibitors as well as many owners. Junior, senior and amateur western pleasure require the most AQHA points to qualify for the World Show.

Thanks to *Eastern/Western* for considering the breeders an important voice on pleasure horses. ◀

A “difference in opinion” can be healthy in any industry. This column is not intended for the purpose of implying that any particular point of view is either right or wrong. Eastern/Western appreciates the contributions of those who have put their thoughts into words and are willing to share them with our readers.