

Sporthorse: Evaluating Mares

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Breeding a successful sporthorse involves a number of components: art, science and luck. In order to produce exceptional foals, both parents must contribute positive attributes.

The following information is adapted from some of the best Warmblood breeding strategies, but the concepts are sound regardless of the breed, and certainly they can be applied to breeding Curlies.

The first step is to evaluate your mares. Ideally, the mare should pass on traits that will create a superior performance horse. The first question is: what makes a superior performance horse? The answer may vary depending upon the sport you are breeding for, but in general, the traits are athletic ability, a sound constitution, a good & trainable mind, and a willing disposition.

The Warmblood world had a distinct advantage over the Curly world because mares have been inspected for generation after generation, evaluated on movement, conformation & type. This information has been recorded in the warmblood stud books for future reference so that some statistical data can be scientifically applied to the evaluation of bloodlines. This is important because it takes some of the guess work out of breeding.

In addition to standard breeding stock inspections, most Warmblood breeds offer Mare Performance Testing as well. These tests have been created to determine the mare's abilities in the areas that contribute most strongly to the performance success of future foals. Tied closely to performance success, of course, is trainability, so a mare's ability to perform basic tasks upon request are inherently part of this testing as well. In the evaluation of any mare, a breeder should be looking for an athletic, well balanced horse that is alert, yet calm and tractable. All parts of the mare's body should flow together in a harmonious manner.

Before delving into specific attributes for the ideal sport horse mare, it is probably appropriate to state that in the pursuit of the 'ideal', a breeder should breed the best (available) to the best (available) and then retain any offspring that are superior to his/her parents as 'upgrade stock' for the next generation. The process of upgrading future breeding stock ensures that the breeder will make progress toward the ultimate goal. Those breeders that sell everything that they breed year after year and do no upgrade their breeding stock will not be able to make improvements, but rather will maintain status quo.

The following sport horse guidelines may help you evaluate your mares as sport horse breeding stock:

General Appearance: The mare should be a noble, large-framed horse with the energy, soundness and saneness required for performance. Her neck, midsection and hindquarters should be approximately equal in length. She should be built uphill (withers higher than the croup) so the mare can lift her front end easily for collection or over fences. Please note that "large framed" does

not mean “drafty” but rather substantial enough to stay sound, yet light on her feet and able to perform in sport horse events.

Breed and Type: A mare should have the characteristic "look" of her breed. She should be feminine with a well-defined outline and clean, well-muscled legs.

The head: The mare's head should be attractive and expressive, suited to the mare's body and with a large, kind eye.

The neck: Look for a neck that comes out of the body above the point of the shoulder with a good angle, clean throatlatch and a slight crest. Ideally the topline of the neck is longer than the bottom line and the throatlatch is refined enough to allow the mare to comfortably 'go on the bit'.

Saddle position: The shoulder should be long and sloping, with a clearly pronounced wither that extend well into the back and can easily hold a saddle in place. If the shoulder is too laid back, this can compromise the horse's ability to carry a saddle that will stay in the proper position without a fore girth or crupper.

Frame: The goal is to be able to draw a rectangular frame around the torso and legs. The mare should also have a smooth topline; a long, powerful, sloping and well-muscled croup; and one of the most important aspects for as sport horse is a strong loin connection.

Forelegs: The mare's legs should be clean and well muscled with well-defined strong joints. They should be straight (in alignment structurally) and stand parallel to each other. If they are structurally straight, a line dropped from the point of the shoulder will bisect the leg evenly.

Hind legs: Look for well-muscled and clean hind legs with large, well-defined joints and a strong hock. The hocks should be low, but not at the expense of an overly long gaskin.

Movement:

When sport horse mares are evaluated at breed stock inspections, movement is scored for correctness, impulsion and elasticity. When the mare moves toward you, her legs should move straight ahead without swinging in or winging out. From the side, the mare should move forward with power, bringing up her back and flexing all the joints to create an energetic, forward and fluid impression. The mare should move using her entire body. She should use her back and all parts of her body in a supple, energetic and elastic manner.

Walk: The walk should be rhythmical with four distinct beats. Her stride should be energetic, elastic and ground covering with the hind hoof overstepping the fore hoof print.

Trot: The trot should show a clear two-beat rhythm and a great deal of impulsion, elasticity and balance. An active trot with a lot of hock joint articulation that reaches deeply under the horse's center of gravity will enable the shoulder and forehand to lift and move freely.

Canter: The canter is not always shown in sport horse evaluations, some inspections only show the horse in hand, in which case only the walk and trot are evaluated. Other inspections require the horse is shown at liberty so that the canter can be evaluated as well. At this point at liberty, many judges will also consider revising trot scores if the mare shows a more animated trot without a handler. The canter should show a clear three-beat rhythm, and as with the trot, it should demonstrate a great deal of impulsion, elasticity and balance.

The ideal canter shows the mare using her body completely with a soft, elastic back and her hind leg reaches deeply under her center of gravity with each stride.

Disposition & Trainability:

Disposition and trainability are more difficult attributes to evaluate at sport horse inspections unless there is a performance component to the evaluation. It will be obvious to the judges if the horse is abnormally spooky or shy, but basically the judge will only be able to offer general impressions based on a few minutes of observation.

It is essentially up to the breeder to look at his or her mares and ensure that potential brood mares have the disposition and trainability to pass on to future sport horse foals. Genetically, a mare contributes 50% of her genes to the resulting foal, but she also serves as a role model for her offspring. For example, if a mare is particularly nervous or tends to be jumpy or panic, her foal will often follow her lead. If she shows no fear, and is relaxed & confident, her foal is likely to follow this example as well.

There are a lot of considerations in breeding performance horses. If a mare isn't ideal, she may still be a candidate for breeding, assuming her flaws are not too serious and she brings enough desirable qualities to the pairing *and* if the chosen stallion can balance out her weaknesses. The breeder should keep in mind that genetic flaws are not always expressed in the next generation and can reappear in subsequent generations. So flaws in breeding stock may be unavoidable but should be carefully considered in regard to their impact on subsequent generations. It is in a breeder's best interest to look at his or her breeding stock with an open mind, recognize each horse's weaknesses and look for complimentary matches. A good breeder will also recognize when it is time to upgrade, replacing current stock with the next generation of superior sport horses.