INSPECTION INTERVENTION: Tips to Ace the Keuring

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Each breed association determines the format in which horses are evaluated for acceptance into its registry. Horses may be presented on the triangle and/or at liberty. They may be asked to free jump and to perform under saddle on the flat and over fences. So horses need to be prepared differently according to the demands they will face.
Breeders devote their lives to producing world-class sport horses that will compete at the top levels of dressage, eventing, jumping and driving. One of the best tools available to help breeders in their quest is the keuring, or inspection, of breeding stock. These inspections offer breeders and owners the opportunity to have their bloodstock evaluated, as well as to see the results of other breeding programs. The outcome of inspections can increase the value of horses and also provide excellent marketing opportunities. So, how can you successfully prepare your horses to receive the best marks from the jury? Three top warmblood breeders share their secrets for making the most of the keuring experience.

Keurings

Each breed association determines the format in which horses are evaluated for acceptance into its registry. In addition, horses are presented differently according to age and sex.

Preparation

Nutrition, condition and training are elements to consider, not only in advance of the inspection, but also as part of the breeding program as a whole. According to Arts, the biggest key to a successful keuring lies in long-term planning and preparation. This type of forethought starts in the very beginning, as Arts explains that bringing a foal into good condition is not only a reflection of how the foal has been raised, but has a lot to do with the condition of the mare as well. He explains that having the mare in good condition while she is carrying the foal increases the chance that the foal will be born in good condition as well. "It gives the foal a head start," he notes.

"I think the primary thing for people who are new to keep in mind is that you want to start many, many months in advance," says Natalie DiBerardinis of Hilltop Farm Inc. "You don't want to wait until June when the inspection is in July and decide 'Okay, now I'm going to change my feeding program,' or 'Now I'm going to start training my horse for the inspection.' We take everything from a long-distance approach."

Arts advises against making any drastic changes with foals and young horses. Adding supplements, feed and exercise should be done slowly and well in advance. Gradual adjustments are key to producing healthy and vital youngsters. "Obviously, this applies to any horse, but it is especially important for foals, yearlings and two-year olds," says Arts.

Along with good nutrition comes conditioning and training. "Foals tend to show best if they're not over-handled," explains Barbara Sikkink of Silver Creek Farms. "The biggest thing with the foals is good grooming and being halter broke. The quality of the foal just shows itself. If we're going to a show, it's a little bit different, but for the inspections, there's not a whole lot of prep with the foals."

DiBerardinis goes on to add, "For our broodmares and babies, we don't do anything specific before the keuring in terms of exercise. They do get a lot of daily handling. They live out in large fields, so they are running and playing and doing their own conditioning. We do work with our babies before the inspection, even though they are going to be shown loose on the triangle. We want them comfortable with the process of coming in, standing up, walking away from mom, walking near mom, trotting a little bit in hand. This is just so they are comfortable with the whole thing and it's not a total shock when they come into the ring for the first time."

"Starting horses in the two-year-old year at the walk builds strength without wear and tear," comments Arts. This is essential, as there is no muscle tone without work. He recommends daily time on an exercise mill if available. Starting a two-year-old on the longe line is also appropriate, which Arts notes is best done in a round pen for greater control. Longing also instills in the horse a respect for the handler and an understanding of voice commands, both of which are necessary at the keuring.

DiBerardinis recommends bringing mares to inspection prior to beginning their breeding careers. "You will get the professional input and feedback [from the keuring jury] on your mare's strengths and weakness before you choose the stallion," notes...
Ripken HTF, a 2009 Oldenburg colt (Riverman-Royal Prince-Parabol) owned by Hilltop Farm, tied for the top-scoring foal in the entire country in 2009 for ISR/Oldenburg with an overall 8.8 points.

DiBerardinis. There is the additional benefit of the mare being in better physical shape. “If you have a young performance mare in work, I really encourage you to go get her inspected then, because she’ll have a better topline and conditioning than she’ll have as a broodmare a couple of years down the road. If they’re in work, even if you don’t have plans of breeding them later, it’s still a great time to get the inspection taken care of.”

“Mares need a good level of fitness, good condition and correct weight to look their best,” says Sikkink. However, unless the mare will be doing the performance test, there isn’t an extensive amount of preparation needed. She notes many mares tend to come to the inspection from life at pasture.

Stallions, on the other hand, need to take it up a notch with excellent muscling and fitness. “In hand, they need to move properly like they would under saddle,” notes Sikkink. “They need to learn to sit down and engage the hind end, elevating the front end. In the walk, they need to be relaxed and loose through the back and engage fully so that the walk comes through the whole body. Sometimes, it’s difficult to teach a young horse to be relaxed when there’s a lot going on like there is at an inspection.”

Plan well ahead for optimal condition in your horse. “It’s not how much you do,” says Arts, “but how early you start to make small corrections.” This applies to all the details; Arts also recommends farrier work be done at least two to three weeks before the inspection to avoid the horse being tender-footed on the big day.

Presentation

At the inspection, perfect grooming and turnout create a perfect picture. The horse should be immaculate. Inspection preparation should take the same form as show ring turnout. “We do all the prep we would do for a horse show,” says DiBerardinis. This includes pulling the mane ahead of time, bathing, clipping, braiding, hoof polish and a dab of baby oil. At Hilltop Farm, body clipping two to three weeks prior to the inspection is also part of the preparation for the inspection. “It has

Advice for Newbies

“New owners and breeders can turn to stallion owners as good resources for advice, as they have experience navigating the inspection process,” explains Sikkink.

Detailed information packets are also available from the various breed registries. “Read through the breed registry’s rules and guidelines before going, which can answer a lot as to what to expect and how things are run,” notes DiBerardinis. “Each inspection runs differently. Be open to asking questions. Call the inspection host to touch bases beforehand.”

Early preparation sets an environment for success. “Being unprepared leaves you feeling frantic. For example, at least once a year we see someone show up with a mare without a bridle, when mares need to be presented in the bridle,” remarks DiBerardinis. She highly recommends going to watch an inspection before taking your own horse. It also helps to bear in mind that inspections never run quite like horse shows; you need to stay flexible on time.

According to Willy Arts, the biggest key to a successful keuring lies in long-term planning and preparation.

 Handlers Wanted

Good handling comes with not only talent, but experience as well. DiBerardinis notes that there are simply not enough young handlers coming along. “We want to see new handlers coming up, because it does take time to get good.”

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A handler who is running a mare and foal pair needs to know how to best show the foal. Shane Pinney presents this foal for Silver Creek Farms.

them looking their best," remarks DiBerardinis. "A lot of people don't body clip, and you certainly don't have to. It depends on where you live and what time of year inspection or keuring is.'

"Horses are presented in a bridle, typically with a flash noseband to keep the mouth closed," says Sikkink. "Especially with young stallions, that helps to keep the handler from being chewed on. The young stallions, when they are excited, tend to be a little mouthy and will grab at the reins or your gloves while you are presenting them. Most handlers will carry a dressage whip as an aid to keep the horse off of them or if they need a little push from behind."

Arts recommends tailoring the horse's braids to compliment the neck. He also notes the braid should be light, refined, of good quality and well cared for. He prefers a plain braid made of rolled leather, which creates a classy appearance without distracting from the horse.

Handling

The handler's job is very important, as the jury can only evaluate what they see presented. The handler's turnout should be neutral and easy to run in. Each breed association has its own preferred colors. "Different registries have handlers wear white or khaki pants," explains Sikkink. "The Dutch have handlers wear a white shirt, the Holsteiners red and the Oldenburg blue." She recommends wearing tennis shoes for running and gloves to protect your hands.

Often, breeders and owners hire handlers when they are not up to the job themselves. "This is a permanent score for the horse," advises Sikkink. "A good handler will make a huge difference in the scores."

"Presenting your own horse is usually a detriment. Not always - there are people who can present their horse well, but I'd guess 90% of the time you'd be best off with a professional handler."

Arts notes that the owner and handler need a good line of communication so that the horse is properly prepared to perform in hand with a new handler. This includes an understanding of which voice and body commands the horse is expected to respond to. A good handler is able to bring out the best in the horse, keeping the horse fresh and attentive, as well as allowing the horse to move out and show off its natural gaits.

The horse must be taught to stand quietly and correctly in front of the jury when conformation is being judged. The front legs should be fairly square with the hind legs slightly open. The legs closest to the judge should be positioned farther apart from one another than the legs on the opposite side. The handler should be able to maneuver out of the judge's line of sight and adjust the horse's legs according to the judge's viewpoint.

"A good handler knows how to stand a horse up well for the judges beyond the basic open stance we see in every photo taken for sport horse magazines," explains DiBerardinis. "A good handler knows how to adapt just a little for that horse's particular needs and what will show that individual horse off best...whether the neck should be lower or higher or whether they want the legs a little further apart or closer together. It can change the general appearance. It's not going to change the correctness of the legs or hide a conformation flaw, but you want to present the horses to their very best. For handlers who are very experienced, this goes into their thought process as they set a horse up."

At some inspections, the horse is presented free, while at others, the triangle is also utilized. If the horse will be performing in hand on the triangle, the horse must be properly prepared at home. Walk is shown on a small triangle, while trot is demonstrated on a larger surrounding triangle. The horse is led clockwise on the triangle with the handler on the outside of the triangle. The horse stands up at the apex of the triangle. "The horse should understand voice commands and respect the handler," says Arts. Likewise, the handler must be prepared. "The handler needs to be in good shape and not interfere with horse's natural movement."

A good handler can show the horse at its best. Handling is something of an art, which Sikkink notes often comes naturally.

Expert Panel

Three preeminent professionals in sport horse breeding share their insights with us:

Natalie DiBerardinis, Hilltop Farm Inc.

In her role as General Manager and Breeding Manager of Hilltop Farm Inc. in Colora, Maryland, Natalie DiBerardinis oversees some of the finest warmbloods in the nation. Since 1989, Hilltop Farm’s owner, Jane MacElree, has created a premier breeding and training facility. “Team Hilltop” can regularly be seen in international competition.

www.hilltopfarminc.com

Willy Arts, DG Bar Ranch

Dutch native, Willy Arts, has been a prominent figure in Dutch Warmblood (KWPN) breeding in the United States since teaming up with Tony and Betty DeGroot of DG Bar Ranch in Hanford, California, Since 1984, the DeGroots and Arts have been involved in many aspects of the sport horse business, including breeding, developing young horses, showing, and hosting shows and inspections. Arts is involved with the United States Dressage Federation’s FEI Young Horse and Junior/Young Rider programs. www.dgbaranch.com

Barbara Sikkink, Silver Creek Farms

As the Manager of Silver Creek Farms in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, Barbara Sikkink oversees a comprehensive breeding, training and showing operation, showcasing four outstanding warmblood stallions. Owned by Summer Stoffel, Silver Creek Farms is a state-of-the-art facility, catering to the hunter/jumper market. www.silvercreeksportshorses.com

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“A good handler needs to be able to run. The biggest downfall is a handler that can’t run well. It’s not just fast; you have to have a feeling for the horse and be able to run in stride with the horse. If the handler’s legs are moving really quickly, it’s distracting,” says Sikkink. “The handler has to be able to run with a really long stride to match the horse.” In the walk, the handler needs to allow the horse to get in front a little bit, so the handler is not dragging the horse.

Sikkink goes on to note that the handler must be able to keep space between himself and the horse and keep the hands still. “If your hands are bouncing, you’ll get the horse throwing its head up in the air and hollowing its back and not demonstrating good gaits.” She explains the reins need to be held in the right hand, so the left hand is free for balance while running. The left hand can also be held up to create a wall if the horse tries to get too far ahead. “A lot of people tend to hold the reins too tightly, not allowing the horse freedom to move his head and neck. The handler really is everything.”

Beyond just being able to run with the horse, understanding horses is an integral facet to good handling. “The timing and intuitiveness of the handling is just as important. The handler has to be aware. For example, someone who is running a mare and foal pair needs to know how to set up the mare to best show the foal, and also needs to be aware of where the foal is at all times when running the mare,” explains DiBerardinis. The whip person also plays an important role. Says DiBerardinis, “Ideally, the handler and whip person have worked together and have a common shorthand.”

**Inspections: A Leg Up for Breeders and the Breed**

The purpose of registry inspections is to encourage the development and promotion of outstanding sport horses. “They are a basis for judging the quality of breeding stock,” notes Sikkink. “This helps with quality control and what needs to be improved on.” The jury’s comments and evaluation are valuable tools for keeping sport horse breeding on target, producing first-class horses with the ability and disposition to succeed. Breeders can stay abreast of trends and learn from other breeders at the event.

“For all of us in sport horse breeding, it’s built in as a requirement for registration and approval of breeding stock,” comments DiBerardinis. “In simplest terms, it’s an independent check of your own eye, your breeding program and the choices you’re making to make sure you are still on the right track. It’s difficult to stay objective on our own horses if we don’t get out and see what others are producing, where our breed is going. At inspections, we hear from other professionals who see hundreds, even thousands, of horses each year.”

A positive inspection brings very credible marketability to breeding stock, and information gleaned from the judges serves to improve future breeding. Breed registry inspections improve the sport, encouraging quality horses that possess correct gaits and conformation, as well as overall sport horse potential. DiBerardinis says inspections are also a lot of fun to watch. “I encourage everyone to go out and watch, even if you’re not a breeder. They’re a great way to educate your eye.”