



Judy Wardrope's "Chestnut Horse" competing at the Olympics.

PEDIGREE VERSUS CONFORMATION

BY JUDY WARDROPE WWW.JWEQUINE.COM

Judy Wardrope has researched equine conformation for thirty years and has written several books on the subject. She travels worldwide giving conformation clinics for all disciplines and also analyzes individual horses based on photos and gives breeding consultations.

What are the factors you consider when assessing a horse or a potential breeding? Is pedigree more important than conformation? Or is conformation more important than pedigree? Does pedigree influence you more than conformation or vice versa? Does marketing play a role in your preference? Let's look at a few ways in which to make assessments.

STRENGTH OF PEDIGREE

It is extremely rare to find a horse competing at the upper level of the sport that does not descent from known sport ancestors in at

least three-quarters of his pedigree by the time you get to the third generation (that is assuming all the ancestors within three generations are known).

Some top-level horses have a lot of eventing relatives while others have eventing, jumping, and dressage relatives. Interestingly, jumping influences outnumber dressage influences, and the Thoroughbred influence is still fairly strong among the elite.

PEDIGREE BALANCE

Let's use a real-life example. Native Dancer was a magnificent physical specimen, but he had a problem, and so do many of his descendants. He had "ankle issues" and a lot of his descendants had upright pasterns and/or small, roundish fetlocks. Not surprisingly, they are prone to unsoundness, particularly in the fetlocks.

Racing Hall of Fame jockey, Robert "Bobby" Ussery, was racing's fifth-leading jockey by money won when he retired. On Derby Day a few years ago, he told this scribe, "The Native Dancers were not sound." And he should know; he rode many of them, including two of the most famous ones: Dancer's Image (disqualified after his Kentucky Derby win) and Natalma (dam of Northern Dancer).

If it is true that the Native Dancers were not sound, then how does Native Dancer manage to appear in eventing pedigrees? For one thing, when he does show up in the lineage of top eventers, it is usually in combination with influences for soundness and/or longevity.

When looking at a pedigree exhibiting any ancestors noted for unsoundness, it is advisable to seek sufficient ancestors noted for soundness and longevity. But, if the physical traits contributing to unsoundness are evident, then, no matter the pedigree, the risk for unsoundness is still high despite the soundness influences. As we all know, the weak do not survive in this sport, and they most certainly do not reach the four-star level. Conformation trumps pedigree.

REFINEMENT AND BLOOD

In general, people say that a top eventer must have a fairly high degree

of refinement, but how does one define refinement? Many also say that the top eventers need to have a fairly high degree of blood, which is usually found through infusions of Thoroughbred and/or Anglo-Arabian ancestry.

Because I seldom just accept things on the surface, in 2007 I set about doing a study to see if the degree of refining influences (Thoroughbreds and Anglo-Arabs) really affected girth and/or bone measurements. It was difficult to amass a reasonable sample where height, girth, and bone measurements were available, but the 100 approved sport stallions (56 based in Europe and 44 based in North America) used in the study represented most of the breed registries found in top eventers. They varied from no refining influence (0 percent RI) in the first three generations to 100 percent RI for the Anglo-Arabs and Thoroughbreds. Some were international competitors, some sired international competitors, some were average competitors, some sired average competitors, some did not compete in sport, and the offspring of some were too young to categorize. Because they are all stallions, there were no gender considerations. In other words, they provided a fair sample.

The full study will be posted on my website, www.jwequine.com for those interested in the detailed results. However, there are some findings worth mentioning here: When the horses were sorted by height, there were no discernible patterns when it came to bone and girth measurements. When sorted by degree of refining influence, there were no patterns in bone or girth measurements. In fact, in most cases, the so-called refining influences scored at or near the top for both bone and girth. In general the amount of bone and the size of girth increased with height, but there were no correlations to degree of refining influence.

GENERAL CONFORMATION

Judging an event prospect or breeding stock solely on pedigree does not guarantee success. We need to look at them physically as well. But what do we look at and for?

Simply looking for straight legs and powerful-looking hindquarters is not enough to improve your odds of picking an exceptional candidate for competition or for breeding.

A few years ago I wrote an article for this publication that compared Winsome Adante and Livingstone, and it sparked considerable discussions on the forums. Many posters said they would not have picked Winsome Adante ("Dan") because his hind leg was too straight, but how can you fault a horse with his performance record? Judging the whole machine (the horse, in this case) based on a single factor is limiting. How many people would have passed on Dan based on a single conformation trait?

FUNCTIONAL CONFORMATION

Top eventers have certain physical characteristics—identifiable characteristics—in common, particularly those that relate to athleticism. Slight variations in structure can be found, and those often correlate with the variations in scores within the phases. Some horses are structurally more suitable for the dressage phase than the jumping phases and vice versa.

What if a horse had the right construction for the sport, but did not have the pedigree (or the breed) for the sport? Would you turn down the horse with a placement of the lumbosacral gap that led to athleticism, with a rear triangle suited to dressage and/or jumping, with a stifle placement that guaranteed scope and a ground-covering stride, with structural lightness of the forehand, with a pillar of support that would indicate soundness and longevity, even if that horse did not have famous ancestors?

PEDIGREE AND CONFORMATION

Pedigree is not an absolute despite what marketing campaigns may lead you to believe. Look at human families—maybe even your own. Are you built like all of your siblings, do you all have the same talents? And what



Pictured here are the other two horses Judy refers to on page 39- the bay (above) and the gray (below).



about your cousins? Are you all built alike and of equal talent?

Although ancestry and conformation do go together, the correlation is complicated. For example, top basketball players tend not to come from families of short people, but most NBA stars have siblings who are not star players. In fact, the Williams sisters in tennis are more the exception than the rule. Just like the full brothers Shear L'eau and Shear H2O are the exceptions in eventing horses, as are the mother/daughter duo from the London Games, La Fair and Wega.

When it comes to horses, if you consider the Thoroughbred industry a reasonable example, you will find that the very top sires boast approximately 15 percent stakes winners. If one assumes that a stakes winner is the goal of most breeders, then the trends would indicate about an 85 percent failure rate. Although the statistics are not as easy to find in sport breeding, the percentages are most likely quite similar.

What if the horse descended from a sire line noted for quick action in front but little scope behind? What if you bred that horse to one noted for scope behind but slowness of the forehand? The cross might look good on paper or in your imagination, but what are the odds that the offspring would be quick with the forelegs and have ample scope? Would you believe they are about the same as those for an offspring with slow forelegs and limited scope?

No matter how famous the ancestors or how enticing the pedigree page, if the horse does not have the qualities that made the ancestors famous, it is unlikely to perform up to expectations in either competition or in breeding. Therefore, the individual horses need to be good representatives of their ancestors. Would you want to own or breed to a horse with a fabulous pedigree that was not well-constructed for the sport? You may not want to compete with it, but, sadly, you could probably market it as breeding stock. Little wonder the search for a great candidate is so daunting and why breeding is such a gamble. 🐾

PHOTO ANALYSIS BY JUDY

All three of these horses have the same sire, yet one of them is an Olympian and the other two were not or will never be Olympians. What makes them different? Can we honestly say that all the differences are because of the dams?

The chestnut actually competed in two Olympics, 2008 (team gold medal) and 2012, with two different riders and represented two different countries.

The bay was a mid-level jumper, has a full sister who competed as a jumper, and has a half-brother (same dam) who competed at a lower level of jumping. He is not built to have the athleticism of the chestnut.

The grey competed in eventing to the Advanced level and has a full brother who also competed at the Advanced level in eventing; however, he is not built to have the soundness and longevity of the chestnut.

Although all three horses did compete, they represent the upper end of their prolific sire's breeding career rather than the mean or the average.

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