

Cross Purposes

Crossbreeding for dressage performance:
good idea or risky business?

BY MARGARET FREEMAN



BRILLIANT CROSS: *The gelding Brilliant Too (Brilliant - Blue Bridgetta), a Dutch Warmblood-Thoroughbred cross ridden by Katherine Poulin-Neff (OH), represented the US at the 2007 Pan American Games and won the open Grand Prix championship at the 2010 Great American/USDF Region 2 Championships*

DIANA HADSALL

You have a nice mare in your back yard, and you think it would be fun to breed her and raise a foal. You've got your eye on a stallion of a different breed or type than your mare. But, you wonder, is it a good idea? Can a crossbred foal compete in dressage against with the purebreds?

To answer these questions, start with a realistic evaluation of whether your mare can produce a foal with the potential for dressage-type movement and the temperament for training. Is she a sport-horse type—more specifically, a dressage type, with the desired “uphill” build, free shoulder movement, and good activity behind? If she is, then your chances of success go up, but of course the choice of the stallion is still an important part of the mix. If your mare is not built for dressage, then the odds of her producing a

The European warmbloods that many think of as breeds (e.g., Hanoverian, Dutch Warmblood, and many others) are usually closely regulated registries, most originating in a specific country or region. Horses have to be inspected to be accepted for breeding, often in a significant testing program, or possibly meet performance standards.

“Europeans breed only from approved stock,” explains Jeanne McDonald, who stands the Oldenburg stallion Tantris at her Turning Point Farm in Downingtown, PA. McDonald, who trained Tantris to Grand Prix, is an FEI “I” dressage judge and a USEF “r” dressage sport-horse breeding (DSHB) judge.

“Stallions in Europe can be approved by more than one registry,” McDonald says. “Many stallions that stand in the US aren’t approved. If people are looking to breed,

A lot of horses end up in livestock auctions because they weren’t what people envisioned when they bred. — Breeder and sport-horse judge Carter Bass

dressage prospect will depend even more heavily on the stallion you select.

Let’s take a look at what “crossbreeding” really means in the sport-horse world, and how and when it can lead to dressage success.

The Warmblood Melting Pot

In the sport-horse world, many “breeds” are already pretty much crossbreds to a certain degree. The term “warmblood” itself implies a cross between “hot bloods” (Arabians and Thoroughbreds) and “cold bloods” (draft breeds). There are very real differences among:

- A “pure” breed of a very specific type, such as Arabians and Thoroughbreds. For a foal to be eligible for registry, both parents have to have papers in that breed. Studbooks are “closed,” meaning that individuals outside those bloodlines may not be introduced or accepted for registry.
- A breed registry that closely regulates its standards but that accepts individuals from other breeds that demonstrate qualities it seeks to improve that breed.
- A registry that accepts any horse that meets its definitions or standards—potentially a wide range of individuals, bloodlines, and characteristics.

they should verify a stallion’s registry and whether he’s approved. That doesn’t mean that wonderful quality can’t come from non-approved stallions. There are valid reasons to cross-breed, especially in the US, where we have such a huge population of Thoroughbreds and a huge population of eventers and show hunters, where they’re looking for lighter, more elegant horses.”

The Registration Question

Your horse doesn’t have to be any particular breed in order to participate in US Equestrian Federation-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competitions. However, the demands of Second Level and above call for fluid gaits and a forehead sufficiently light to be able to collect. These assets generally result from a certain type of movement and conformation, which brings us back to the “should you breed your mare?” question.

If your mare shows an aptitude for dressage and you decide that she’s breeding-stock-worthy, consider that registering her with an appropriate organization will increase her value and possibly also that of her foal. Besides the aforementioned types of registries, there are also US-based registries that are affiliated with their European counterparts;



SUCCESSFUL CROSS: Traum, a registered Oldenburg gelding by the Oldenburg stallion Tantris out of the Thoroughbred mare Hock the Broom, bred and owned by Jeanne McDonald (PA)

nonaffiliated US registries with widely varying standards; and even registries specifically for crosses, such as Friesian crosses, Arabian crosses, draft crosses, and Iberian crosses.

This array of registries, each with its own rules of inclusion, can be hard to sort out. Some are for so-called “designer breeds,” such as one specific cross. Some registries are privately owned, not overseen by a board of some type, and may have been established to enhance an individual’s specific breeding program. Some were established because a breeder couldn’t get his or her own horses accepted by an existing registry. The USDF All-Breeds program currently includes 60 participating organizations that cover an amazing range of breeds and types. When this article went to press, there were two participating registries for Hanoverians, three for mustangs, three for Arabians, several (depending on how you label them) for Iberians, two for Knabstruppers, eight for Friesians, and four for Gypsy Cob/Drum horses. If you have a mule (talk about a cross!) registered with the American Mule Association, you can qualify for a USDF All-Breeds award, as well.

Crossbreds in the Show Ring

DSHB judges aren’t told the breeding of the horses presented to them in open sport-horse classes. (Many dressage breed shows, most notably Dressage at Devon in Pennsylvania, also offer separate classes for specific breeds.) Usually just the bridle number is announced when the horse enters the ring, and his breeding and other particulars are announced as he leaves. However, the judges are looking for specific qualities of conformation and movement, and some breeds or crosses may not stack up well against the typical warmbloods in open classes.

“There are criteria that judges are looking for in movement and conformation,” explains Carter Bass, of Ruckersville, VA, a USEF “R” dressage judge (currently working on her “S”) and an “r” DSHB judge who’s currently showing a homebred Oldenburg gelding at Grand Prix. “If a horse meets the criteria, he can be very successful. No judge is looking for the breed.”

Indeed, at Dressage at Devon this year, the reserve-champion stallion was a ten-year-old mustang named Padré, born wild in Nevada and adopted from the Bureau of Land Management as a yearling (see p. 12).

Why Crossbreed?

If you’re considering breeding (or buying) a crossbreed for dressage, start by defining your goals. Are you seeking a horse with movement, temperament, and conformation that could indicate upper-level potential? Are you breeding to sell and need to be able to market the foal? Do you want to campaign for USDF All-Breeds awards? Do you want a specific cross that would suit your particular tastes, interests, riding ability, and possibly body size? Are you just breeding because you love your mare and want a foal from her? As you can imagine, depending on your goals, your ideal cross might not be suitable for another person.

There are some clear advantages to crossbreeding and some equally clear disadvantages, and they don’t necessarily balance one another. On the plus side, a crossbred generally costs less up front, especially if you already own the mare. You may trust the way you prefer to raise a horse but aren’t in a position to purchase the registered horse of your dreams. You may have special confidence in the specific cross that you’ve researched.

USDF Region 1 director and FEI-level trainer and competitor Alison Head, of Hamilton, VA, has bred crosses to Lusitanos and Oldenburgs and has also trained the Lusitano breeding stallion Calhambeque to Grand Prix.

“My market tends to be jumpers and eventers, plus dressage, and getting Thoroughbreds into the mix tends to be helpful,” Head says. She started with a Percheron/Thoroughbred mare, which she said produced a big horse with a good temperament but not dressage-type movement. She then paired the Percheron mare with her Lusitano stallion, and the result, she says, was a big, “amateur-friendly” horse with supple gaits.

“With a cross, you can’t be certain what you’ll get until you try it,” says Head. “They have to complement each other. Crosses can improve individuals, but a bad combo is a bad combo. It puts the burden on the person making the cross.”

One of the purported advantages to breeding or buying a crossbred is that “amateur-friendliness”: a steady, reliable temperament and perhaps movement that’s easier to sit, both of which are in high demand. Genetic rolls of the dice being what they are, of course, a mix that looks perfect on paper could wind up producing exactly the opposite. Raise your odds by shopping for young stock, especially if they’re already under saddle. If the breeder or seller can show you siblings from the same cross or even half-siblings of a similar cross, so much the better. The same principle holds true when shopping for a stallion for your mare: Look at his get. Some sires are known for “stamping” their offspring with their temperaments or physical attributes; with others, the

mare plays a bigger role in how the foal turns out.

Certain non-warmblood breeds are becoming trendy for dressage riders who are looking at crossbreds. Realizing the market potential, some registries are now breeding more selectively for sport-horse types rather than expecting purpose-bred park horses and Western-pleasure horses to find equal success over in the dressage ring.

“Morgans and Arabs are now breeding for sport horses, both with crosses and purebreds,” says McDonald. “If you can get the warmblood rear end with the Arab heart, that’s a wonderful cross. Saddlebreds can be some wonderful dressage horses, not just the Saddlebred crosses.”

The biggest negative in crossbreeding is that the result of your pairing is less certain, especially with two distinct pure breeds as opposed to two horses of similar types from well-established warmblood registries. The crossbred foal may be harder to register, if that’s a priority. If you’re looking to sell the foal, you’re likely to get less return on your investment. If your mare lacks papers, it’s possible that you may not be able to get any papers at all for the foal she produces. ➔



What’s in a Name?

Ahlerich, one of the most famous dressage horses in history, was registered Westfalen but was actually half-Thoroughbred (see pedigree below). He and his equally legendary rider, the late Dr. Reiner Klimke of Germany, won gold at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games (pictured).

	Oliveri (TB)	Macherio (TB)
Angelo (Thoroughbred)		Fior D Orchidea (TB)
	Antibes (TB)	Neckar (TB)
Ahlerich, Westfalen gelding, born 1971		Alwara (TB)
	Donar (Westfalen)	Dolman (Hanoverian)
Dodona (Westfalen)		Faibita (Hanoverian)
	Mieze (Westfalen)	Meldeschein (Hanoverian)
		Sonya (Westfalen)

SOURCE: ALLBREEDPEDIGREE.COM



PLEASING COMBINATION: USDF Region 1 director Alison Head (VA) bred her Lusitano stallion, Calhambeque, to the Percheron-cross mare Jane's Emblem Janet. The offspring, the mare Tarantella LGE, was the 2009 International Andalusian & Lusitano Horse Association's half-Andalusian Training Level Open Horse of the Year under owner Verna Saxer-Gibson (FL).

"You're loading the dice fifty-fifty when you outcross," says Bass. "You could get either end of the spectrum or right down the middle. With the first generation of an outcross, you can get a range of results in type and movement. The predictability just really can't be counted on."

Costs

Head says that she prices her crossbreds at about two-thirds less than a comparable purebred, and she usually sells them as foals because they don't gain as much value as purebreds as they get older. "Breeding crosses makes enough to just keep you going," she says, "but it's worth it to watch riders enjoying their babies."

Although the up-front cost of producing a cross may be lower than a purebred, the long-term costs involved in breeding, raising, and training a young horse remain the same. In Europe, these costs are reduced because different types of professionals are involved.

"If you ever added it up, you'd go out and buy a trained horse," McDonald says. "Most people in this country are not in the right place to be starting a baby. We don't have a society like in Europe, where there are farmers who are breeders; then the weanlings go to raisers; then at three they're

Expanded Grants for Dressage Instructors available from The Dressage Foundation in 2011.

Beginning in 2011, additional grant funding will be available from the Continuing Education for Dressage Instructors Fund, originally created by Maryal Barnett.

The Fund will continue to offer annual grants of \$1,000 (up to five per year) to USDF GMOs for instructor education, which can include the USDF Instructor Certification Program workshops and testing, as well as other educational programs for Dressage instructors. GMOs may apply for the grants throughout the year. Applications must be submitted at least 90 days prior to the event.

The Fund will now also offer grants ranging from \$500 to \$1,500 to individuals to attend USDF Instructor Certification workshops, pre-certification, and/or testing. There will be two deadlines per year for the individual grants. Applications will be due no later than February 1st and July 1st for individual grants only.

Visit our website at www.DressageFoundation.org, for more information!



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Maryal Barnett

PHOTOS BY BARB

chosen and there are specialists at starting young horses; and then they're sold as riding horses. It's a system of how to produce horses at the cheapest possible cost."

In the US, Thoroughbred mares have been popular choices for crossbreeding in part because they're easily obtained for low prices if they aren't successful on the racetrack. Many TB mares have been crossed successfully with the heavier, older-type warmblood stallions like those imported a couple of decades ago, in the early days of US sport-horse breeding. Today, those warmbloods tend to be of a lighter type to begin with, thereby making the introduction of Thoroughbred blood superfluous.

Think Before You Breed

Considering today's economy—and the sad stories of unwanted and neglected horses on the rise—would-be breeders would be wise to do their homework before booking a stud, particularly for a cross that's unproven.

Evaluate your mare as impartially as possible. If you're new at the game, get a professional's opinion as to her worth as a broodmare. Request photos (video if possible) of the stallion's get and also pictures of the dams. Determine whether the stallion consistently produces the qualities you desire in mares that are similar in type to your own. If regis-

tering your horse will be a priority, research breed organizations before you produce or purchase a crossbred. Compare registries' histories and standards as well as the depths of their equine talent pools.


"It's important when you breed to think about what the outcome might be and what your goal is," says Bass. "Do you want to keep it for yourself and ride it? Or are you going to sell it? Do you want a dressage horse, an eventer, or a hunter or jumper? Keep in mind, as well, that many people don't have a facility to raise a foal—so you, the breeder, are likely going to be in charge of the foal for at least three years, until it's a marketable age."

"People need to think long and hard before they create another horse," Bass says. "There are a lot of horses that end up in livestock auctions because they didn't end up being what people envisioned when they bred. The foal is adorable when it's born, but often it grows up and you can't find its path because it doesn't do any one thing well enough. This is when it is really important to keep temperament in mind, so at least you can count on it being a nice pleasure horse for someone to enjoy."

Margaret Freeman, of Mt. Kisco NY, is a USEF "S" dressage judge and a USDF silver medalist.

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