

# Blood Will Tell

LEARN HOW TO RESEARCH PEDIGREES BEFORE YOU BREED OR BUY

BY AUDREY PAVIA

**R**EMEMBER HIGH-SCHOOL BIOLOGY CLASS, WHERE teachers had you grow things in petri dishes and made you study diagrams of DNA? Chances are, you never thought you'd use all that information when you grew up. But if you happen to be looking for a dressage prospect or are hoping to breed one in the near future, it's time to harken back to the stuff you learned about genetics in biology class.

Although equine genetics can be a complicated topic, the basic principles are easy: Foals inherit half of their genes from one parent and half from the other. Therefore, if you are seeking a dressage prospect, you should take a good look at that horse's parentage to see what you are getting. Experienced horse people know that a horse's pedigree can be a treasure trove of information in determining the animal's potential.

## Pedigrees and Performance

It's a fact of life that some horses are proficient at passing along their best traits to their offspring, while others are not. So, if you are considering breeding a mare for a dressage prospect, it's important to research every angle of the stallion you are considering.

"Check out the offspring of the stallion, and research the family," advises Carter Bass of Ruckersville, VA, a sport-horse breeder, sport-horse-breeding judge, and USA Equestrian "R" judge. "Of course, that's if the stallion has been producing long enough to have offspring of compet-

ing age. If he's a young stallion, we refer to him as unproven, and there is no way to predict what you might expect from a cross with him. A good rule of thumb is to breed a proven mare—one who has already produced a dressage horse—to an unproven stallion and, conversely, to breed an unproven mare to a proven stallion. Then at least 50 percent of the equation is known."

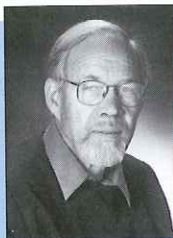
However, pedigree is not the only factor in selecting a breeding stallion or in choosing a dressage prospect. "If you look for a horse based [only] on pedigree, you will be about 5 percent certain to get what you want," says Bo G. Crabo, DVM, PhD, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul), an expert on reproductive physiology and president of the Swedish Warmblood Association of North America (SWANA). "If you look at the performance of the parents, the chance of being right increases to about 30 percent. To be certain, you need to look at the performance of the offspring—not just one or two out of many, but of a minimum number. Usually this is fifteen, in relation to all foals born compared with all stallions. Then the accuracy will increase to about 90 percent."

Hans Dressler of Princeton, NJ, a well-known Grand Prix rider and competitor and a breeder of sport horses, also emphasizes pedigree in addition to performance. "Generally, you not only want bloodlines, but specifically horses that pass on the right traits," he says. "A horse can have a wonderful pedigree, but that doesn't mean he will pass on his good characteristics."



Scott Hassler

COURTESY HILLTOP FARM



Dr. Bo Crabo

COURTESY DR. BO CRABO



Carter Bass

COURTESY CARTER BASS



Hans Dressler

COURTESY HANS DRESSLER



Janine Malone

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Bob Orton

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Determining whether a stallion passes his good qualities to his progeny can be tricky and requires some extra research. "You can go to Europe and see some fancy, famous stallions; but most breed 300 mares a year," says Dressler. "With that kind of quantity, you are going to get some good horses; but this doesn't always tell you that the stud passes on his traits. Instead, look at how many mares this horse breeds a year, then how many of the offspring are active in dressage and how many are on top of it. Also, look at the bloodlines he crosses best with."

Scott Hassler, manager and head trainer at Hilltop Farm, a sport-horse breeding and training center in Colorado, MD, believes that looking at offspring is the most important element of evaluating a stallion. "If you can, go to a breeding station to see the offspring," he advises. "The big advantage to this is that breeding stations have the offspring right there, and the mares too. In fact, the offspring are so important, I have bought mares without seeing them just by looking at their offspring. I didn't care what the mare looked like if the offspring was good, as long as she was healthy and had good legs."

### Some Shining Stars

Our experts pointed to a number of stallions as having established a reputation for producing offspring capable of performing well in the dressage arena. One such stallion is the German-bred Westphalian Rubinstein, who competed at Grand Prix with German dressage star Nicole Uphoff. Asked about top European stallions, Hassler says, "This horse is known for progeny that is rideable, and for producing horses that are good for the amateur market and yet quality enough for the higher levels. His offspring tend to be pretty horses with rideable gaits."

Hassler also likes the German-bred Hanoverian Weltmeyer, whom he describes as "the most popular stallion in the world right now. He throws extremely pretty horses that are good-moving, have a lot of scope and a lot of potential. They are best for professionals rather than for the amateur market because they have a lot of energy and want to use it."

Both Crabo and Hassler find the German-bred Hanoverian Donnerhall to be a quality stallion whose progeny perform well in the dressage arena.

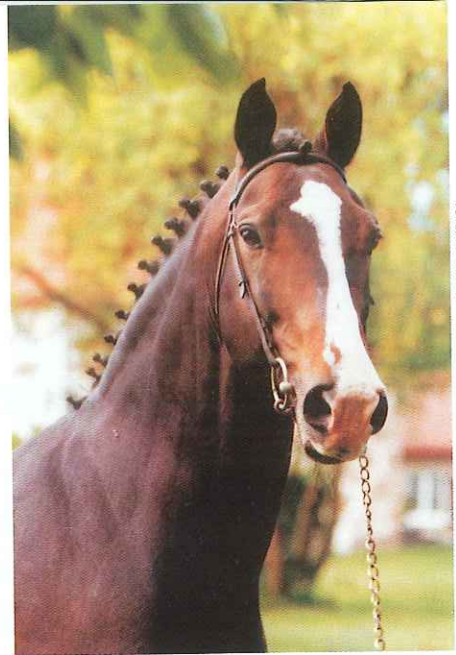
"Donnerhall crosses with Pik Bube are particularly good," says Hassler. "They are very rideable and have good backs. They are also good-looking, strong in reproduction, and have strong, free shoulders and good minds."

"A Danish stallion, May Sherif, has produced both Matador II and Andiamo," Crabo points out. "It may be worth noting that May Sherif's grandmother was daughter of the Swedish stallion Chagall. All these horses are known for good heads, are forward and have good gaits." (With Finland's Kyra Kyrklund, Matador won the 1991 dressage World Cup. Germany's Sven Rothenberger piloted Andiamo to victory in the 1990 World Cup. Chagall is the sire of Gauguin de Lully, who won team silver and individual bronze medals at the 1988 Olympic Games with Swiss rider Christine Stückelberger.)

### Becoming Informed

Europeans have long known the value of looking at a horse's bloodlines to help determine how that animal will perform in the dressage arena, a practice not always seen among American riders. Because of the lack of emphasis in this area, information about sport horses' breeding is not always readily available in this country.

"It can be hard to research stallion pedigrees in the U.S.," says Dressler. "In



Chagall

COURTESY SWEDISH WARMBLOOD ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA

Europe, you go to an event and get a program showing the sire, dam, and breeder of every horse entered."

Bass agrees. "Checking on offspring results is difficult in this country, as there is no database for sport horses set up as yet," she says. "In Europe, the Federation Nationale maintains records of progeny earnings; and this can easily be accessed to see which stallions have the highest rankings or indexes in dressage. This can give you somewhat of a reliability factor when choosing that stallion. When breeding domestically, we must rely upon the stallion owner, who has hopefully been vigilant in keeping up with the stallion's get and their successes.

"The reason there is no system in this country yet is simply that there are not sufficient numbers to warrant the cost of setting one up," Bass continues. "The average stallion in this country breeds a fraction of the number of mares as compared to many of the stallions in Europe, where many popular stallions can breed hundreds of mares."

However, things are starting to change in the U.S. The USDF hopes to make researching sport-horse bloodlines a lot easier with the implementation of its Horse Identification Numbers program, which will begin this June. The program will track the perform-



ance of dressage horses, along with their bloodlines, through the use of horse-identification numbers (HIDs). HIDs will be assigned to all horses taking part in USDF/USA Equestrian-recognized dressage competitions, with the exception of breed-restricted USA Equestrian Regular Competitions (e.g., all-Arabian shows), pas de deux, quadrille, Introductory, and other exempt classes.

“The system of recordkeeping and the resulting education of the riders, owners, breeders, and trainers is the primary reason that Europe is producing plenty of sport horses for riders from the grass roots to the elite levels, and why the U.S. still has breeders and riders who don’t understand that better horses can be produced at reasonable prices for riders



Andiamo and Germany’s Sven Rothenberger

at all levels by employing the same techniques that have worked so successfully in Europe,” says Janine Malone of Zebulon, NC, a member of USDF’s Sport Horse Committee. “This will *not* lead to instant gratification as far as the benefits of breeding trends. However, it will yield complete competition records for the sale or lease of horses, and it will provide recognition and immediate verification possibilities for individuals checking their show records.”

While the HID program will prove invaluable to those wishing to keep track of the bloodlines of sport horses in the U.S., other methods of acquiring breeding information still exist.

“The easiest, best way for someone to find out about bloodlines is to get in touch with local trainers and riders,” says breeding expert Bob Orton, who trains and rides at Buck Branch Farms, Lynchburg, VA. “Go to dressage shows. Ask which bloodlines they have had luck with and which ones they haven’t. Ask them, ‘What was good and what was bad? What mother lines crossed best with this stallion?’”

Bass agrees. “If I see a horse I am particularly impressed with, I ask about the breeding. Unfortunately, many of the riders of these fine horses have no idea what bloodlines they are sitting on, which always shocks me. The dressage sport-horse-breeding shows are better in that area, as many of the breeders can rattle off their horses’ pedigrees in an instant. If I am lucky enough to get the information, I file it in my own database. Through the years, it’s been amazing to see the common denominators come through: For example, the horse I liked at one show is a relative of one I liked at another. This can work the other way as well: If I see a particularly fractious or unruly horse, I file it, and that too can show up again in a relative.”

“When we look at breeding, it’s basically gambling,” Hassler says. “You can take the most beautiful mare and ask 100 people what they think, and they will say she’s incredible. Then you pick the most incredible stallion, and 100 people say the two are a perfect combination. But after all that, the breeding doesn’t work. The key is to find out what crosses have worked in the past and what haven’t, then look at the stallion and see what he has produced. If you put all these factors together, you have a better chance when gambling. If you have a pedigree and don’t track it, it’s just foolish.” ▲

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