



DRESSAGE PROMISE: *The 2017 colt Modern Pleasure S (Expression x Wynton x Ferro), a KWPN stallion candidate bred by Sonnenberg Farm, shows his naturally active hind leg and ability to lift his forehand from a very young age*

# From Foal to FEI

Can dressage success be predicted?

BY SARAH EVERS CONRAD

GINA RÜDIGER

**T**he barn is alight with a hushed excitement: The new foal has arrived. This eagerly awaited baby is the product of two accomplished FEI-level dressage horses, both with star-studded pedigrees. That sire and dam were chosen, of course, in the hope that their offspring would also excel in the sport.

Does dressage success breed dressage success? If you're in the market for an FEI prospect and a foal is what you want (or can afford), can dressage talent be determined at such a young age? We asked four experienced sport-horse breeders, trainers, and riders to weigh in.

## Secrets to Predicting Success

Maryanna Haymon, owner of Marydell Farm in Columbus, North Carolina, has been breeding warmbloods for 27 years. She says that dressage standouts can indeed be spotted at the foal stage.

"Every one that I've looked at that I've said, 'That's an FEI horse,' they've made it that far," she says.

When Haymon sizes up a foal, she watches it play and interact with its dam and the outside world. She says that foals with an aptitude for dressage will perform such movements as piaffe half-steps, passage, flying changes, and canter pirouettes as they frolic in the field: "These things are natural to top-level horses when they are babies."

Haymon also looks for evidence of innate bravery, curiosity, and a desire to interact with humans, all of which, she believes, stoke the work ethic needed for high-level dressage achievement. She likes to see a foal that's willing to leave its dam's side to come over and sniff Haymon and her dogs when they visit, she says.

KWPN breeders Gina and Dan Ruediger are strong believers in the importance of the mare and the mare line in predicting success. The Ruedigers, who own and operate Sonnenberg Farm in Sherwood, Oregon, say that a mare line containing individuals with successful competition records and with a reliable record of producing good sport horses is likely to go on doing so.

## Shopping for a Foal: What to Look For

Before you begin searching for a young dressage prospect, educate yourself about sport-horse bloodlines. Consider your own dressage skill level (or that of the intended rider), and determine which lines have demonstrated records of success and popularity with riders of similar abilities, advises international competitor, trainer, and clinician Heather Blitz.

"Just because top riders love certain types of horses, it doesn't mean they're right for less-experienced riders," Blitz points out.



**PROMISE FULFILLED:** Breeders say they can spot FEI potential in their babies, like Callaway Farm's 2009 Hanoverian mare Donatella CF (Donarweiss GGF – Tiadora, Tantris), pictured as a foal (top) and now competing at Intermediate II and Grand Prix with breeder/owner/trainer/rider Kim Kobryn-Callaway, who has earned all of her USDF medals aboard her mare.

Now based in Wellington, Florida, Blitz is well known for her achievements with young horses during her tenure as head trainer for the Danish Warmblood breeding facility Oak Hill Ranch, in Folsom, Louisiana. Blitz's best-known Grand Prix horse to date, the gelding Paragon (Don Schufro – Pari Lord, Loran), is an Oak Hill-bred. Blitz was there the night Paragon was born, and she's the one who started him under saddle when he was three. Together the pair went on to win team gold and individual silver medals at the 2011 Pan American Games and were the US dressage-team alternates for the 2012 Olympic Games.

Even in young foals, conformational attributes or drawbacks can be spotted by the discerning shopper, says Kim Kobryn-Callaway, who rides, trains, and breeds Hanoverians at her Callaway Farm in Ottsville, Pennsylvania. ➔



**INTERNATIONAL STAR:** *Trainer Heather Blitz brought the 2003 Danish Warmblood gelding Paragon to the highest levels of dressage, including qualifying as the reserve combination for the 2012 Olympic Games*

“You can see angles [of joints, neck set, and so on] in a young foal regardless of growth stage,” Kobryn-Callaway says. “A lot of times, those angles can tell you about how the horse’s movement is going to be.”

Although conformation is important, experience has taught Kobryn-Callaway that it needs to be paired with a top pedigree in order to seal the deal. Buyers look first for top bloodlines and a record of achievement in competition; then they’ll evaluate the individual youngster, she says.

The Ruedigers look at conformation, movement biomechanics, and temperament in evaluating a foal, with hind-leg activity and function topping their list.

“If the foal really ‘carries’ when it is moving, you’re going to see the front end lift up, and that’s going to allow for the very advanced movements of the FEI [levels],” Dan Ruediger explains.

## FEI Goals? These Two Gaits Are Key

“I have heard that any horse with three decent gaits and a good mind can at least make it to the Prix St. Georges level in national competition,” says Kobryn-Callaway. “Obviously, the quality of the gaits determines whether they are a candidate for the international arena.”

In evaluating a youngster’s gaits, both Kobryn-Callaway and Haymon put more emphasis on a quality walk and canter than on the trot.

“The trot can be ‘manufactured’ under saddle,” Haymon says. “That comes with strength and training. The walk is a gait that you cannot fix. You either have it or you don’t.” And with so much canter work in the FEI-level tests, a clean canter with good natural balance and “air time” is a must for the prospective Grand Prix horse, says Kobryn-Callaway.

## The Rule of Threes

“We follow the method of looking at the foal at three days, three months, and three years” of age, says Dan Ruediger. “I think your best time to view a foal is at three months old or around that date.”

Many horsemen believe that the three-day, three-month, and three-year marks coincide with phases in the young horse’s growth in which its body is fairly balanced. Evaluating a youngster during these windows of time, they believe, offers a fairly accurate benchmark of how the horse will mature.

Blitz also follows this time line for viewing young horses, noting that Paragon followed the “rule of threes” to a T.

“He was impressive at three days, three months, and three years, but not so much in between,” she says. “I thought he had good balance, a super canter, and personality at three days old. At three months, he moved in a trot barely touching the ground, and then it was a while before he was impressive again.”

Horses, like children, go through awkward stages as they grow. “Those times aren’t very attractive or promising,” says Blitz, “but if you remember what you saw in the ‘windows’ when you saw them, they’ll most likely show up again. When Paragon was coming five, all of his FEI qualities were very apparent.”

If you look at a foal that’s in an off stage of development, evaluating “uphill” movement can be tricky unless you have a practiced eye, cautions Blitz, who says she’s also seen young horses display an awkward walk during certain growth phases.

Weanlings—say, around nine months of age—may look out of proportion in their conformation, Ruediger says. “That doesn’t mean it is not a quality horse; it just means it is going through an awkward growth phase.”

If you suspect that a foal you’re interested in is in an awkward stage, you could try letting some time pass and scheduling a return appointment to see if it’s outgrown it, Blitz says.

## Pretty Is as Pretty Does

Right up there with good movement and gaits, temperament should be a sport-horse breeder’s goal, Dan Ruediger

believes. It isn't always the case, but a tough-to-handle foal may grow up to be a difficult horse under saddle, he says.

A good temperament and ridability, both "interior traits," are must-haves for an FEI-level dressage horse, says Kobryn-Callaway, and they are not synonymous.

Temperament, Kobryn-Callaway explains, refers to the horse's personality on the ground and in the barn. The concept of ridability encompasses the horse's innate sensibilities under saddle: whether it's naturally inclined to go forward ("forward-thinking"), to be light off the aids, to be spooky, and so on.

Unfortunately, it's impossible to assess a horse's ridability until it is actually under saddle, says Kobryn-Callaway, who looks to some other factors to help predict a foal's future ridability. For starters, she'll try to locate other offspring from the same bloodlines and ride those horses, or talk with their trainers, with the aim of finding any common threads in the descriptions of how those horses are to ride and work around.

Kobryn-Callaway also likes to buy from breeders who ride the horses they breed—as she herself does.

"I have a mare who has had seven foals, and I've ridden five of them," she says. "They do have different sires, but they are still very consistent. Because I have that data, I can predict what her foals are going to be like."

## What About Buying in Utero?

Purchasing a foal in utero may seem the ultimate way to get the best bloodlines for the lowest price. It is also "a way to guarantee that you have that foal before it hits the ground and before everyone else sees it and wants it," says Kobryn-Callaway.

But buying in utero can be a risky move—the mare could abort, something could go wrong during the birth process, or the foal could be born compromised or experience complications during the first three days of life. That's why some breeders, Haymon and Ruediger among them, don't offer in-utero sales.

"As a breeder, I'm taking the risk," Haymon says. "I don't want to have somebody who has bought this foal in utero and then the foal dies at two or three days old. That's a heartbreaking, devastating loss, so it's just not an avenue I go down."

To protect the buyer's investment, Kobryn-Callaway advises that any contract to purchase a foal in utero include a live-foal-guarantee clause. She recommends dealing only with reputable breeders and doing plenty of research into both bloodlines and the breeding facilities' management and nutrition programs before committing to an in-utero purchase.

"If you like gambling, then purchasing a horse in utero might just be for you," quips Dan Ruediger, who reminds buyers that genetics can be a roll of the dice. ➔

## That Je ne Sais Quoi Quality

**T**op dressage horses have an intangible quality known as presence. We can't breed for it, and it can be hard to describe in words, but we know it when we see it, says sport-horse breeder Maryanna Haymon, owner of Marydell Farm in North Carolina.

That look-at-me quality will catch not only the buyer's eye but those of judges down the road, Haymon says. So if you find yourself drawn toward a particular foal, consider that factor in making a buying decision.



**STANDOUT:** The Marydell Farm-bred 2012 Hanoverian colt David Bowie MF (Don Principe – EM Rotina, Rotspon) was the 2012 Dressage at Devon foal champion and the 2012 Adequan®/USDF Dressage Sport Horse Breeding Horse of the Year. This year, with rider Julio Mendoza Loo, "Davey" was the open Third Level reserve champion at the Great American/USDF Region 3 Championships.



**HOMEGROWN PRIDE:** *Sonnenberg Farm's Gina and Dan Ruediger have followed the career of their homebred mare Allure S through the FEI levels and into success as a broodmare. She's pictured with rider Angela Jackson after winning the Intermediate I Open Freestyle championship at the 2014 US Dressage Finals.*

The Ruedigers have two children whom Dan describes as very different from each other, “and that’s what happens when you breed horses, too,” he says.

One year, Ruediger recalls, they bred three full siblings via embryo transfer. “You could tell from the moment they were born—conformationally, movement-wise, and in temperament—they were very different. When you would line them up, you would never believe that they were siblings. They were all talented, but in different ways.”

## Are You Right for a Foal?

We’ve talked a lot about finding the right foal. But what about the flip side of the issue: Are you the right person to take on that talented baby horse?

The much-publicized success story of Verdades and Laura Graves—whose mother imported “Diddy” from the Netherlands as a foal—may inspire buyers, especially budget-minded ones, to look for talented babies. Haymon reminds shoppers that a foal may be loaded with potential, “but once they leave [the breeder], it’s up to the owner, rider, and trainer to take care of that potential.”

Buyers frequently ask Kobryn-Callaway whether a foal has FEI potential. Her usual response: “Do you have the potential

to train a horse to FEI, or will you find someone who can?”

“Certain traits [in horses] are very heritable; however, without a good trainer, you’re never going to be able to utilize those qualities,” Kobryn-Callaway says.

A rider/trainer who already knows how to develop a horse up to the FEI levels has an advantage in working with a youngster, says Ruediger; but even if you haven’t previously trained a horse through the levels, you still may be successful with a young horse if you are a good rider who relies on regular guidance from an experienced instructor/trainer.

Some sport-horse breeders research prospective buyers nearly as thoroughly as those clients research the horses they buy.

“We’re so careful with the stewardship of our young stock,” says Dan Ruediger. “We have some great foals and some great young horses, but if they’re not trained correctly, all the work and breeding decisions and everything that we’ve put into it could just go awry.”

## Science, but Not Exact Science

You may know of at least one impeccably bred, textbook-perfect equine specimen that is a dud as a performer. Con-

## Are Foal Inspections Good Predictors of Success?

Not necessarily, says Pennsylvania-based breeder and dressage trainer Kim Kobryn-Callaway. “Depending on the growth stage, they may not show their best,” she says, adding that she has been pleasantly surprised by the talent of several of her horses that did not earn raves at their foal inspections.

For whatever reason, some horses that receive accolades as youngsters don’t live up to their expected potential under saddle. But don’t be too quick to write a horse off, says Dan Ruediger, co-owner of Sonnenberg Farm in Oregon: Some horses are simply late bloomers, while others may require more-skilled trainers or riders to help them develop to their fullest abilities.

versely, you may know of an unlikely-looking horse that is a cherished partner with an impressive record. These are the kinds of unexpected outcomes that keep both breeders and buyers guessing.

Blitz, for one, has a long list of traits that she looks for in a horse: agility, coordination, suppleness, strength, elasticity, balance, and good conformation. At the same time,

she says, she’s seen horses overcome conformational flaws to achieve success in competition if they possess the right combination of temperament and heart.

If you do buy a foal, keep in touch with the breeder. Nothing thrills breeders more than to follow their “babies” successful careers. Ruediger points proudly to Sonnenberg’s homebred 2005 KWPN mare Allure S (Rousseau x Farrington). Purchased by Dr. Kerrin “KC” Dunn of Timbach Farm in Depauw, Indiana, Allure S developed into a FEI-level dressage star who also earned the KWPN’s preferent and prestatie broodmare designations.

That’s every sport-horse breeder’s dream: a healthy foal, placed in a home with good care and training, and matched with a rider who finds joy and fulfillment in working with that horse, whether it’s an international star or a steady lower-level performer. So if you love your horse, let the breeder know! ▲

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## 2019 US Dressage Tests

Introductory - Fourth Level

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#### US Dressage Tests Booklet

The 2019 US Dressage Tests booklet contains all of the USDF and USEF tests (Intro-Fourth Level) in one convenient guide - handy for carrying at shows, in your vehicle, or at home. The 2019 US Dressage Tests are effective December 1, 2018 through November 30, 2022.



#### Testpro: USDF App

The official test app of the USDF, Testpro: USDF features not only the tests, but also diagrams, audio, and many helpful reference links. This useful on-the-go reference features all of the USDF and USEF tests (Intro-Fourth Level) and is a must-have for competitors, trainers, judges, and spectators. The 2019 US Dressage Tests are effective December 1, 2018 through November 30, 2022.