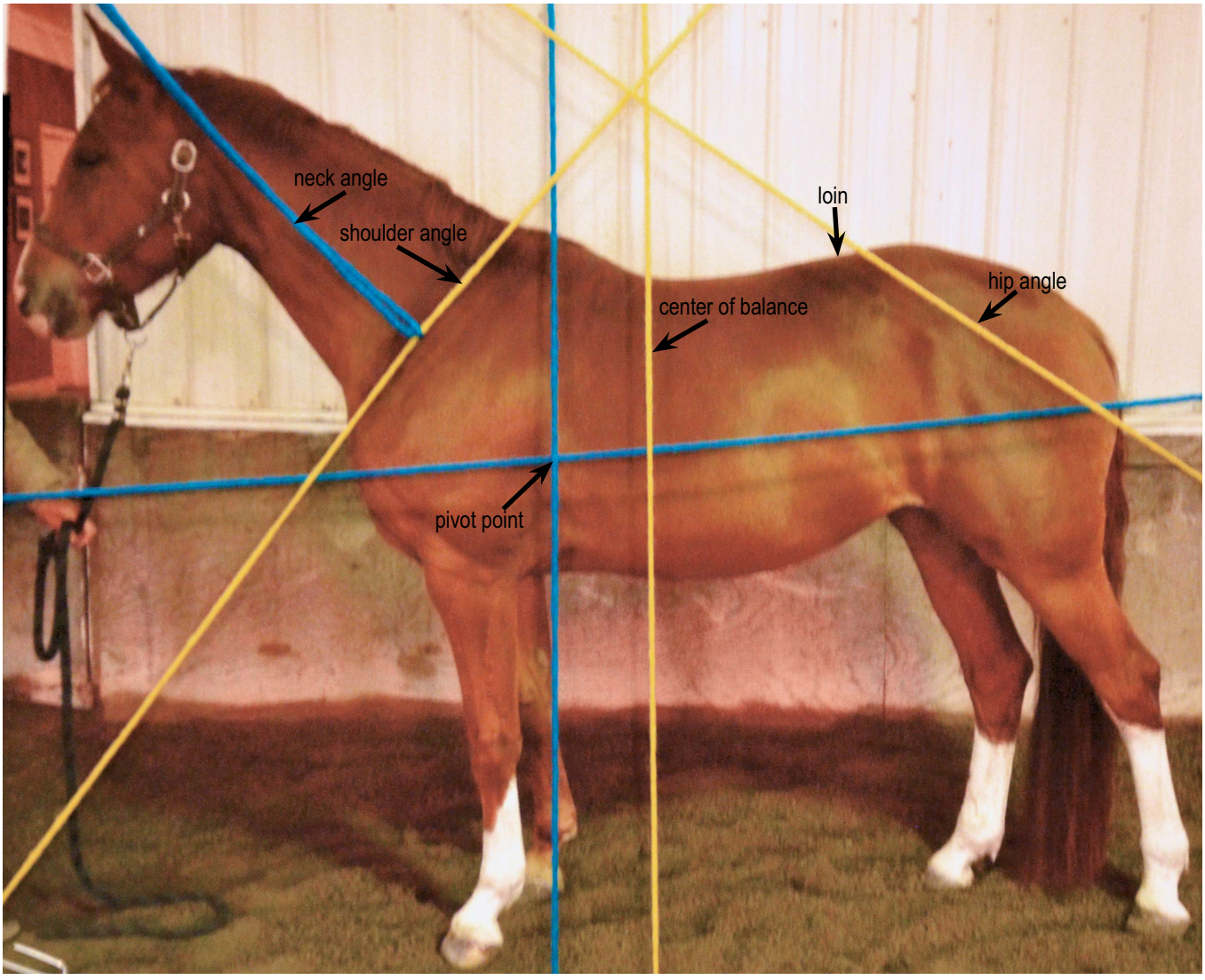
Sport-Horse Crash Course

At the USDF convention, a buyer's guide from two veteran sport-horse judges

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER O. BRYANT



CONFORMATION ANALYSIS: *Colored yarn strands show angles and plumb lines to evaluate in considering a horse's aptitude for dressage work*

How do I evaluate a horse's potential for dressage? What things should I check when looking to purchase a sport horse?

Many USDF members want to know the answers to these questions, judging by the standing-room-only crowd at a session at December's 2013 Adequan/USDF National Convention in Lexington, KY. Dressage sport-horse breeding judges Kristi Wysocki and William Solyntjes, presenters of the 2014 USDF Sport Horse Seminar (see sidebar), offered a summary of the major issues to consider in selecting a sport horse. Entitled "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Finding Your Dressage Sport Horse," the session offered an overview of how to evaluate a horse's strengths and weaknesses, regardless of breed or budget.

The Buyer's Plan of Attack

According to Wysocki and Solyntjes, before you start horse-shopping in earnest, it's important to establish criteria that will help to narrow the choices. By doing so, you'll also help to clarify what kind of horse you're looking for.

Ask yourself:

What do I want?

What can I afford?

What can I accept?

What should I walk away from?

Ideally with a knowledgeable instructor who knows you well, formulate a description of your dream horse. Be realistic as to what will work for you. Is it a quiet lower-level partner? An upper-level schoolmaster? A talented young prospect? A clear-eyed look at your dressage goals and at your riding experience and skill level is part of this process.

Next, the budget. This may include not only the sales price but also horse-shopping travel expenses, commissions, veterinary fees for the prepurchase exam, and costs to transport your new horse home, Wysocki and Solyntjes reminded.

Our judges focused their lecture on the last two items: what to accept and what to walk away from.

No Horse Is Perfect, but…

…while some flaws can be tolerated, others spell an iffy future for the horse as a sound, happy, suitable dressage partner. Your task as a buyer is to know which are which.

Note: We're not talking about preexisting health or soundness problems here. If you go to look at a sale horse that's sick or lame, or if you're not willing to live with something in its health history, then obviously you're not going to pursue that horse further. Wysocki and Solyntjes drew a distinction among minor flaws, moderate issues, and severe faults. The latter, they said, are likely to short-circuit a horse's dressage career and therefore are the "walk away" indicators.

Let's look at the three areas on which our experts base their equine evaluations.

Temperament

Careful observation will yield valuable clues about a horse's personality.

Wysocki and Solyntjes advise watching the horse's ears and eyes. A worried or tense expression, pinned ears, and the like may indicate fear, tension, or physical discomfort.

Watch the horse being groomed, tacked up, and handled in hand.

During work, tail-swishing can be a sign of tension, Wysocki and Solyntjes said. A raised tail can indicate a tight back.

To tire a horse and make him seem quieter, some sellers will work him before the buyer arrives. "Show up a little early," Wysocki advised.

Conformation

Conformation is more than good looks. It encompasses what Wysocki and Solyntjes call the horse's balance and foundation, as well as the connections between body parts.

Although conformation should be evaluated in tandem with movement (which we'll discuss in a minute), the way a horse is put together is an indicator of what kinds of tasks he's best suited for, and how likely he is to remain sound over the course of his chosen career. This is where the dressage "breed issue" comes up. During the session, Wysocki and Solyntjes showed numerous photographs of horses of all breeds. Many were prize-winning examples of their breeds, but because of their build, some may find the demands of dressage more difficult, the experts said.

Start by looking at the horse's overall balance—the total picture. "Can you picture this horse doing dressage? Does he have an 'uphill' tendency? These are more important if your goal is the higher levels," Solyntjes said.

To aid in your conformation critique, bring a still camera as well as a video camera to the sales appointment, Wysocki recommended. Take photos of the horse unsaddled and in the classic conformation pose (near legs perpendicular to the ground, off legs slightly toward the horse's midline) for later scrutiny.

Aided by horse photographs with colorful strands of yarn attached, Wysocki and Solyntjes showed how to evaluate a horse's conformation using plumb lines. Start by determining the **pivot point**: the intersection of a vertical

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION: *An attendee practices on one of the many "test horses" at the sport-horse session*

line from the highest point of withers to the ground, and a horizontal line from the point of the shoulder to the point of the buttocks (see photo on page 64 for an illustration). The further forward and lower the pivot point, the more "downhill" the horse's build. For dressage, the ideal location of the pivot point (indicating an "uphill" build) is higher and further back, closer to where the rider sits, they said. Such a horse can more easily lighten his forehand and carry weight over his hindquarters. Dressage work is easier for a horse with this conformation, and therefore he may stand a better chance of remaining sound.

Appearances can be deceiving, which is why it's important to do the plumb-line tests, the experts said. To illustrate the point, they compared a photo of a warmblood to one of a stock horse. Both horses were attractive, with withers about level with their hindquarters. But the plumb lines revealed that the stock horse's pivot point was much further forward, the result of a higher buttocks point and lower shoulder point. Combined with a wither set closer to the forehand, which moved the pivot point even further forward, that particular stock horse is apt to find the demands of true collection more challenging than the pictured warmblood, they said.

Next, draw a line representing the horse's shoulder angle, beginning at the point of the shoulder and extending upward. Draw a second line representing the hip angle, beginning at the point of the hip. The two lines will intersect somewhere over the top of the horse. Draw a vertical line from the intersection point to the ground; the place that this line crosses the horse's body indicates his **center of balance**.

For dressage, the ideal center of balance coincides with the deepest point of the saddle, where the rider sits; it is then easier for the rider to sit "with" the horse, Wysocki and Solyntjes said. A center of balance located farther forward, as with a forward pivot point, indicates a greater challenge in developing uphill balance.

To find a horse's **pillar of support**, draw a vertical line through the groove of the forearm. For better odds of longevity and soundness, this line should be forward of the withers and end in the rear quarter of the hoof. If it falls behind the hoof, the horse may be at greater risk of tendon or ligament strain. A pillar of support that aligns with the front of the hoof indicates greater concussion, Wysocki and Solyntjes said.

The other part to scrutinize is the horse's **loin** (the area behind the saddle), which Wysocki and Solyntjes called "the energy-transfer station."

"You want the loin fairly short and well muscled—short from back to front, but wide across," Wysocki said. The croup itself should have an angle of at least 15 degrees but not much more than 18 degrees. The hindquarters themselves should take the shape of an isosceles triangle, and the hock should be slightly higher than the knee, she said.

A rectangular-shaped horse—with a balanced front, middle, and hind end—is more desirable than a square one, the experts said.

"A rectangular horse does not equal a long horse," Wysocki said. "The shape should come from big shoulders and hindquarters, not a long back."

Other positive attributes: a well-muscled topline, good depth of heart girth, and long front legs, she said.

Conformation faults. These are classified as mild, moderate, or severe. "Recognize serious faults in conformation, and be willing to walk away," Wysocki said.

Examples of serious faults: behind at the knee, ewe neck, soft pasterns, a curb, club foot, small feet, a thick throatlatch, steep withers, no withers, roaring, very straight hind legs, long cannon bones, parrot mouth, a very small mouth, severe cow hocks, an overly short loin, and concave hoof walls.

Wysocki and Solyntjes also mentioned a couple of head-and-neck conformation attributes that can affect performance. First, it is easier for a horse with a fan-shaped poll to go on the bit, they said, because this shape makes poll flexion more comfortable and natural.

Another point to watch is the underside of the neck. Some horses have a tendency toward a bulge in this area, and "Every inch it bulges lowers the balance point by an inch. The back drops. This can lead to absolute elevation [head and neck raised but back dropped and haunches not lowered] instead of the desired relative elevation [forehand raised as a result of lowered hindquarters]," Solyntjes said.

Meet the Experts

SPORT-HORSE AUTHORITIES: *Kristi Wysocki and William Solyntjes*

Kristi Wysocki, Elbert, CO, is a USEF "S" and dressage sport-horse breeding "R" judge, as well as an FEI 4* dressage and para-equestrian dressage judge. She is the chair of the USDF Sport Horse Committee.

William Solyntjes, Hamel, MN, is a USEF "S" and DSHB "R" judge. He is a member of the USDF Sport Horse Committee.

Gaits and Movement

When evaluating a horse's gaits, "rhythm is number one," Wysocki said. Momentary irregularity is a moderate fault, but persistent irregularity is a serious fault and judges will penalize it harshly, she said.

Tip: Pay attention to the rhythm as the horse turns, both in hand and under saddle. "You might see a moment of irregularity," she said.

Of the three gaits, the trot is the easiest to improve, while there's not as much a rider can do to improve the walk.

"The walk must be pure," Solyntjes said. "A huge walk may be prone to rhythm problems."

Examine not only the quality of the gaits but also the correctness, the experts said, referring to the desired straight line of travel. Some horses paddle (swing the forelimbs out as they travel), which is not considered a serious fault; but winging (swinging the forelimbs inward) is undesirable because the legs can be injured, they said. Plaiting (placing one foot in front of the other) is a severe fault.

Don't let yourself be so dazzled by extravagant gaits that you overlook rhythm problems or other severe faults, the experts cautioned. Big movement alone doesn't guarantee success.

"Three normal gaits and a good mind will get you closer to the FEI ring than anything," Solyntjes said. ▲

Attend the USDF Sport Horse Seminar

This article contains just a sliver of the information presented at the two-day USDF Sport Horse Seminar. DSHB judges Kristi Wysocki and William Solyntjes will conduct the 2014 Sport Horse Seminar July 26-27 at Iron Spring Farm, Coatesville, PA. The seminar is hosted by the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association.

For more information, contact the seminar organizer, Anne Moss, at annemoss@verizon.net or (610) 380-1518.