

Who's Your Daddy?

Top breeders explain how they choose stallions for their mares

BY AMBER HEINTZBERGER



The offspring: Rashka



The sire: GP Raymeister



The dam: Tashka



The damsire: Opus

GENERATIONS OF EXCELLENCE: The 2004 Oldenburg stallion Rashka (GP Raymeister – Tashka) has been a superstar for breeder/owner/rider Kenneth Borden (IL), winning five Adequan/USDF Horse of the Year titles and earning a record high score at his stallion testing. Tashka's sire, the Holsteiner GP Raymeister (Rantares – Miss Nickel Annie), owned by Ginna Frantz (IL), has also earned multiple titles, including 2010 Adequan/USDF Intermediate II Horse of the Year with rider Yvonne Barteau. Dam Tashka (Opus – Bashka), also bred by Borden, received eight HOY titles between USDF and the ISR/Oldenburg registry. And Tashka's sire, the Dutch Warmblood Opus (Idocus – Elite J. Adelian), owned by Borden, is also highly decorated, with an impressive stallion-testing score.

Perhaps you have a talented mare that you want a foal from, or maybe you're still looking for the right mare to launch your breeding program. Either way, your goal is the same: to produce a quality sport horse.

Even after you've found that perfect broodmare, your work is hardly over. Now you have to try to find Mr. Right. You'll undoubtedly page through magazines like this one, studying the glossy stallion ads with their gorgeous photos, detailed pedigrees, and competition records. You may already know which stallions and bloodlines are currently in vogue—but that doesn't mean they're right for your mare.

To help you sort through the decision-making process, we asked three top sport-horse breeders to explain how they go about finding the perfect match.

Establish a Goal

"If you're a dressage person, you're breeding for dressage horses; but what type of horse are you looking for?" asks Deborah Harrison, DVM, of San Juan Bautista, CA. "A lot of people, I think, don't have a clear idea of what they want to produce."

Before you even begin browsing the stallion ads, think about what segment of the market you'll aim for, advises Harrison, who was ranked fifth in USDF's 2009 Breeder of the Year standings. A breeder of award-winning Dutch Warmbloods since 1981, she stands the stallions Ijsselmeer Ikepono (Vosmaer – Cadenza ster) and Lauwersmeer Laka (Farmer – Gisela). Recently her homebred Casanova (Lauwersmeer Laka – Abolien ster) claimed fourth place in the four-year-old division at the 2011 Markel/USEF National Young Dressage Horse Championships and was the US-bred high-point winner.

Do you want a nice, quiet amateur horse? Are you interested in participating in the FEI Young Horse classes, or even aiming for Grand Prix? Maybe you want to establish a breeding program and develop the foundation stock for future generations.

Harrison suggests that new and would-be breeders find a mentor—a knowledgeable breeding expert who is willing to help guide you through the process. Benefiting from his or her experience can save you time, money, and possibly frustration, she says.

And, of course, you'll want to educate yourself. Research bloodlines and types of horses. Go to sport-horse-breeding

YOUNG TALENT: *The Dutch Warmblood gelding Casanova finished fourth in the 2011 Markel/USEF Four-Year-Old Dressage National Championships with owner/rider Jocelyn Hamann. Breeder Deborah Harrison stands Casanova's sire, the award-winning FEI-level Dutch stallion Lauwersmeer Laka, pictured with rider Chelsey Sibley. Dam Abolien (Indiaan – Jabolie) has produced multiple FEI-level dressage horses.*



The offspring: Casanova



The sire: Lauwersmeer Laka



The dam: Abolien

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For more information, visit usdf.org.

competitions and educational events. Look at what other breeders are producing. Improving your eye for quality is important as you develop your breeding goals and plan.

Start with a Good Mare

Top breeders agree that it is essential to start with the best mare that you can find. An OK mare may produce a better-quality foal once in a while; but if you want to breed the best, it pays to be selective.

Harrison says that her breeding program has been successful "largely because I was careful and started with very good mares from Holland; I am now on the fifth generation. It's amazing how those mares come down through their daughters! People use whatever mare they have and try picking a stallion that will improve her, but the mare counts for more than 50 percent, so you want to start with the best mare possible."

The first thing breeder Kenneth Borden Jr. considers when evaluating a potential broodmare is her pedigree. "Genotype [genetic composition] is far more important than phenotype [observable characteristics]," says Borden, whose Little Bit Farm, Wilmington, IL, stands the approved stallions Opus, Masterpiece, and Rashka. On USEF and USDF lists of leading breeders since 2006, Borden was the 2009-2011 Adequan/USDF Dressage Breeder of the Year.

"Too many breeders look at how pretty the mare is and don't seriously consider at least the last four generations in the pedigree," Borden explains. "The mares often will pro-

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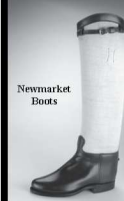
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duce more of their pedigree than their phenotype; type is last thing to be considered.”

“People think they want whatever is the flavor of the month in terms of the stallion, but the mare is the most important part,” Borden concludes. “I’m mainly concerned with what she has produced in the past. But her topline and structure, especially that of the neck placement, are major considerations.”

Assess for Success

Julie Ballard Haralson breeds Dutch and German warmbloods for dressage and the hunter/jumper disciplines at her Haralson Farm in Newnan, GA. She produces only a few foals each year but has won numerous USDF and KWPN-NA (the North American branch of the Royal Dutch Warmblood Studbook) awards. In 2007, she ranked fourth in the Adequan/USDF Dressage Sport Horse Breeding Breeder of the Year award standings.

Haralson says: “Before I even pick a stallion, I take a hard look at my mare—her conformation and abilities and what she has produced in the past. Then I decide what I want to improve. I pick one or two things about her conformation or movement that need improvement and look for a stallion that can improve those traits.”

“Very important is to choose a stallion that is equally strong in those things I want to keep because I don’t want to take away the things that are good about my mare,” Haralson continues. “My favorite is to pick a stallion that can improve on my mare’s weakest traits and hold on to her best traits; often they may even have the same ‘look.’”

But breeding, of course, is not an exact science. “I do keep in mind that breeding rarely gives you exactly what is ideal from both the sire and the dam. A good foal usually comes from informed breeding, and a great foal comes from that and a little bit of magic,” Borden says.

In Borden’s (admittedly controversial) opinion, crossbreeding a mare and a stallion from different registries is the way to go.

“Everyone wants the rare individual, and many registries keep breeding the same stallion over and over again,” he reasons. “New blood creates new dynasties. In fact, I believe many of the mares are best bred to stallions outside their own registry. It seems [Selle Français stallion] Quidam de Revel is used quite often in other registries; he is producing a lot of approved stallions as a result.”

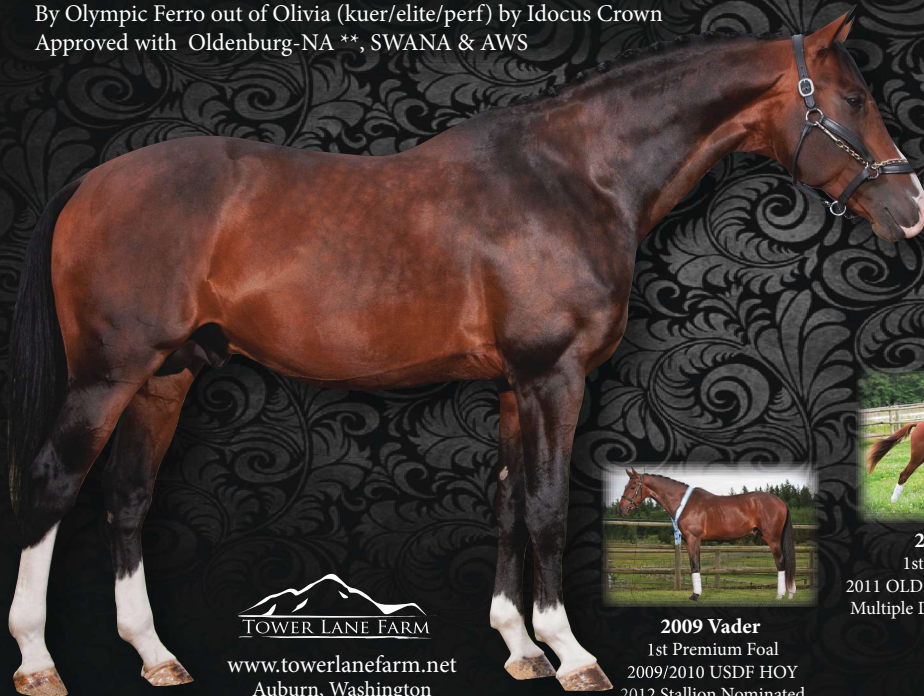
Harrison agrees as to the importance of the broodmare. “If you have a really strong mare line, they will produce good foals no matter what decent stallion you breed them

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Have a Backup Plan

You can pick the most brilliant stallion in the world, but it won't do you any good if he can't get your broodmare pregnant.

Some mares don't conceive using frozen semen, says Georgia-based breeder Julie Ballard Haralson—but with some stallions, frozen is all you can get. If Haralson's top pick for a particular mare is a frozen-semen-only stallion, then she selects a backup whose semen is available as fresh cooled.

"Luckily there are great stallions available in the US via fresh cooled," she says.

to; quality mares are the most important thing in breeding. There are very few prepotent stallions" that stamp their characteristics on their offspring; "you are better off getting a prepotent mare. Casanova's mother was a fabulous producer, and every one of her offspring can really move."

Consider the Stallion's Assets

Borden considers ridability, long-term soundness, and temperament—in that order—when evaluating a breeding stallion. He looks closely at the horse's conformation because, he says, soundness is directly related to the correctness of a horse's legs. He tends to avoid horses with club feet, noting that this conformation flaw often causes either soundness problems or issues in the canter. Finally, "I want only stallions with a minimum of one-quarter to one-third Thoroughbred blood. That is where, generally, the good canter and heart come from."

Matchmaking Checklist: Breeders' Top 10 Tips

Top sport-horse breeders Kenneth Borden Jr., Julie Ballard Haralson, and Deborah Harrison, DVM, offer this list of considerations in making breeding decisions:

1. Decide on your breeding goal.
2. Make a list of your mare's strengths and weaknesses.
3. Look beyond the current "hot" stallions.
4. Choose a stallion that is strong in your mare's weak areas. Otherwise you risk doubling the likelihood of reproducing those faults.
5. Study up on pedigrees and bloodlines. Learn about proven crosses, known as nicks; one well-known nick is Donnerhall/Pik Bube.
6. Even after boning up on bloodlines, look at the stallion as an individual.
7. Find out whether any of the stallion's offspring have made it to Grand Prix.
8. Evaluate the stallion's conformation, particularly in terms of soundness and "uphill" build. The latter tends to facilitate collected work and therefore makes dressage easier and the horse more ridable in our chosen sport.
9. Handsome is as handsome does.
10. Develop your eye. If you can't make it to any big sport-horse breeding shows, or you can't afford a plane ticket to Europe, check out videos online and learn what different bloodlines produce.

A stallion's disposition is a key consideration, but even more important is the temperament of his offspring, according to Haralson. "The KWPN helps make it easier by publishing a yearly assessment of the offspring of each approved stallion," she says. "You can see which traits the stallion passes on."

So if you want to improve your mare (and who doesn't?), how much will a stallion's strengths compensate for her shortcomings, and vice versa?

"Some stallions are very prepotent for certain traits, but my mares better be good to start with. For sure I am not going to pick a stallion that is not as good as she is!" Haralson says.

"I want to know more about what a stallion produces than what he has done himself," says Borden, "but the mare seems more dominant than the stallion in most offspring, so I always want to see the mares of any stallion's offspring."

Haralson strongly considers the success of a stallion's progeny when making her decision. "I am a small breeder and I need to hedge as many bets as possible," she explains. "If I am going to breed to a young, unproven stallion, it is best for me if it's to a mare that I know well and I am pretty confident of what she is going to produce. I'm not saying that I haven't done it, but in this day and age I can't afford to breed on a whim."

Like Haralson, Harrison prefers proven stallions over young, unproven ones. "You may have a wonderful stallion, but if he's young you don't know what he'll pass on to his offspring. Some stallions pass on their flaws. There's no perfect horse, of course, but it's nice to see what he passes on and whether that's something you can live with," she says.

Harrison advises looking beyond the fancy advertising photos or even the stallion videos, which naturally tend to focus on a horse's strong points. "I try to at least have seen the stallion myself close up," she says. "Seeing pictures and even videos can be deceiving. If possible, you want to get up close to the stallion to evaluate conformation. Even seeing him in the ring is not enough."

When to Walk Away

Our experts believe that there are times when, even if a stallion looks good on paper, it's best to keep looking for that perfect match.

For Haralson, red flags include untrainable offspring and unacceptable conformation flaws. So does lack of credentials: For her own breeding program, she sticks to stallions that have gone through a testing process and earned approval from a registry.

Borden, on the other hand, believes that many of the best stallions in the world are overlooked at stallion inspections. "Just look at the number-one jumper, Hickstead, and the number-one dressage horse, Totilas," he says. "Both were not originally approved for breeding! So were some of the other greats: Cor de la Bryere was not recommended by one of the Selle Français inspectors. Lingh, Rubinstein, and

even the US superstars Raymeister and Ravel, to name only a few of the US legends, were not originally approved—but have all proved their worth."

A Little Research, a Little Luck

Haralson tries to avoid reinventing the wheel when it comes to matching mares to stallions. "You see multiple successful crosses produced by others," she says. "For the KWPN-NA, for example, these are Ferro/Flemmingh, Jazz/Ferro, et cetera. The Internet makes it easy to track down mares bred similarly to your own and search for successful crosses."

At the same time, Haralson acknowledges that gut feelings play a role in the final decision. "I hate to say it like this, but after I make a list of suitable stallions that meet the above-described criteria, there is little sense to me in breeding if the stallion himself does not make your heart race or have the 'wow' factor. There is usually one stallion on the list that I keep coming back to again and again." ▲

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