

The XXX Factor

Can a high-quality broodmare really produce a quicker return on your breeding investment?

By Jessica Hein

Today's performance horse market is an ever-evolving entity, where cutting-edge technology gives breeders easy access to the leading genetics in the industry. Now, a quick phone call across the state, the nation or even the globe gives you next-day access to top stallions.

So, in this on-demand market, where does your broodmare fit in? Is it possible to produce the next Super Stakes or futurity champion using "the old gray mare," as one breeder says, as part of the equation? Can you rely on an exceptional stallion to compensate for a mare's less-than-perfect attributes?

For the answers to these questions, we asked representatives of four successful breeding operations about the value of broodmares. Although their opinions differed on the exact amount of influence a mare can have on her foal, they all agreed on one point—without the solid foundation laid down by a quality mare, it's unlikely that you'll produce a quality foal.

"It seems like such a simple thing," says Kevin Meyer, a trainer at Waggonhound Land & Livestock Co. in Douglas, Wyoming. "What is the importance of mares in a program? Well, without mares, you don't have foals, but there's so much more to it than that."

Motherly influence

At one time, it was routine for breeders to put less emphasis on the mares they chose to breed.

"Traditionally, in the past we've bred horses that were crippled, bad-

minded, not athletic, or just, in general, not good horses," says Jim Babcock, owner of Babcock Ranch in Valley View, Texas. "They became our broodmares because they weren't good enough to be our show horses."

Times have changed, however. As Marshall Chesrown, owner of Black Rock Ranch in Harrison, Idaho, says, many breeders now evaluate the mares they are going to use for breeding just as critically as they do their performing stock.

"When I was a kid, there seemed to be a lot more emphasis put on the stallion," recalls Chesrown. "People think you can breed a great stallion to the old gray mare out behind the house and get great offspring. There has been a reversal of that philosophy in the last 20 years, where I think less emphasis is put on the stallion."

"From our perspective, the mare is the most important part of the equation."

Biologically speaking, a sire and dam each contribute 50 percent of the foal's genetic material. However, some breeders believe that because the mare has extended contact with the foal, her impact could be greater. In fact, Chesrown believes that in some situations, a mare's influence can dictate up to 75 percent of the foal's physical, mental and behavioral capabilities.

And this doesn't apply to just biological dams. Vickie Benedict, the owner of DLR Ranch and Stallion Station in Weatherford, Texas, also says a recipient mare can have a powerful effect on a foal's makeup.

The high-level of competition in today's performance horse industry has left some owners wondering if they can actually get a future Super Stakes winner out of their backyard mare.





SUSAN MORRISON

Although a mare contributes 50 percent of her foal's genetic material, experts argue that, due to her extended contact with her offspring, a dam's influence can be greater than a sire's.

"We have one mare with a baby that's scared of its own shadow," Benedict says. "None of the other full brothers and sisters are that way. The mare had influence on that foal for five to six months of its life, so she imprinted her nervous ways on the baby."

Similarly, Babcock's experience has given him a vantage point from which to observe the dominance a mare can have. Although he acknowledges that the exact nature of a mare's influence has been an unanswered question for decades, he believes that a mare's contributions to a foal can overpower those of a stallion.

"The consistency, in my mind, comes from the genetics of the mother," he says. "You will find that most mares will dominate the stallion about 90 percent of the time. There are very few stallions that dominate the mare. Therefore, I think the mare is extremely important, and she's the one that's going to raise that baby."

Breeding versatility

In today's discriminating performance horse market, it's important to consider the marketability of a potential foal before taking your mare to the stud farm.

All of the operations consulted—Babcock Ranch, Black Rock Ranch, DLR Ranch and Wagonhound Land & Livestock—believe in producing athletic performers that can excel in a variety of situations. Then, for example, if a prospect fails to live up to expectations in the cutting pen, it may still find success in reining, working cow horse or roping, or ranch horse events.

"I think a lot of breeders get hung up with trying to produce for one market," says Babcock. "We want a shot at all of the markets, so we produce horses that are really strong in cow genetics."

Benedict agrees with that philosophy.

"Just because you breed a cutting horse to a cutting horse doesn't mean you're always going to get [a cutting horse]," she explains. "You just always have to have other avenues for them to go into. Keep your doors open, and your mind open."

When breeding for a versatile horse, a few broodmare qualities top these breeders' lists. Among the traits they consider most important are good conformation, natural athletic ability and a pleasant, "workmanlike" disposition.

"We concentrate on conformation," says Chesrown. "If they aren't put together to do the job, they have less of a chance of being able to do it."

Benedict says that cow sense is another important quality that has to show up in a foal if the baby is going to eventually be successful.

"[Performers] have to have cow ability—the ability to track a cow and read a cow," she says. "You can train them to read cattle, but it helps when they're bred to do that and have that sense already. They've already got that knowledge in their DNA of what they're supposed to be doing."

A trait going hand-in-hand with cow sense is athleticism. Many breeders gravitate toward "black-type" mares that have proven themselves as winners in the show pen, but Benedict says an earnings record is not the sole indicator of performance ability. She suggests also evaluating the mare's pedigree for performance winners, and looking at what her siblings and progeny have attained.



SUSAN MORRISON

In recent years, the process of embryo transfer has been blamed for pushing potentially valuable broodmares into the background.

“If a horse is bred to be a cutting horse, it’s probably still going to have that ability,” she says. “Look at mares that have been injured in the past. Some of those are your top-producing mares right now in the NCHA. They’ve never won a dollar, but their babies have won hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

Benedict speaks from experience. Camp Bar Spot, the dam of her foundation broodmare, Marcellena, earned no money in competition, but produced a long line of champions when bred to Doc O’Lena. And after seeing how well Marcellena fared in the show pen (her lifetime earnings exceed \$140,000) and breeding shed—she’s the dam of Peptollena (more than \$57,000 in earnings) and the grand-dam of This Cat Can Dance (more than \$6,000 in earnings)—Benedict was compelled to purchase her sibling.

“I went to a sale three years ago and bought Marcellena’s full sister, Dox Lady Amhurst,” says Benedict. “She herself had only won about \$19,000, but she’s a full sister to Scarlett O’Lena, who’s won nearly \$250,000, and a full-sister to Marcellena. That whole pedigree has worked and produced.”

Chesrown prefers his mares to have performance experience of their own, but acknowledges that an exceptional production record can carry just as much importance as competition wins. And while a mare’s show record cannot guarantee her progeny’s future success, it may enhance her odds of producing money-earning offspring.

“Ultimately, a key philosophy in any breeding program should be striving to increase your quality,” says Rita Hunsucker, a member of the Wag-onhound Land & Livestock Co. equine reproduction team. “If you’re breeding a mare that has, say, poor conformation—poor legs or poor feet—you’re looking at the possibility of your babies coming out with it, and that’s not something that you want to bring on down the line.

“Look at all aspects of the mare and stud, and make sure that what you’re breeding is something you’d want to get on the next progeny. Always breed to increase your quality, instead of keeping it the same or bringing it down.”

The embryo effect

Procedures such as embryo transfer have affected the equine market in both positive and negative ways, so that’s another aspect to evaluate before breeding your mare. Is her quality strong enough to command top dollar for the resulting foal?

“Our business is a supply and demand business, and multiple embryos have caused additional supply, which usually drives up the middle of the market,” says Chesrown.

Meyer says that while embryo transfer has helped increase the value of some mares, other potentially valuable broodmares have been pushed into the background.

“We’re starting to breed the top mares over and over again to certain bloodlines,” he says. “That is probably going to inflate their value a little bit, if they find one that’s a proven producer by any given stud. I think maybe lost in the mix are some mares that would have been great producers, but their value has gone down a little bit because we’re so busy breeding the top horses so many times a year.”

Due to a strong belief in the value of good genetics, Babcock has capitalized on the use of embryo transfer by creating a “designer foal program.” Entering its fourth year, Babcock Ranch’s program gives small breeders a boost by offering access to top genetics in the cutting and reining industries for a fraction of the price. Breeders select a mare and stallion that best suit their goals from Babcock Ranch’s herd, and a foal is then bred via embryo

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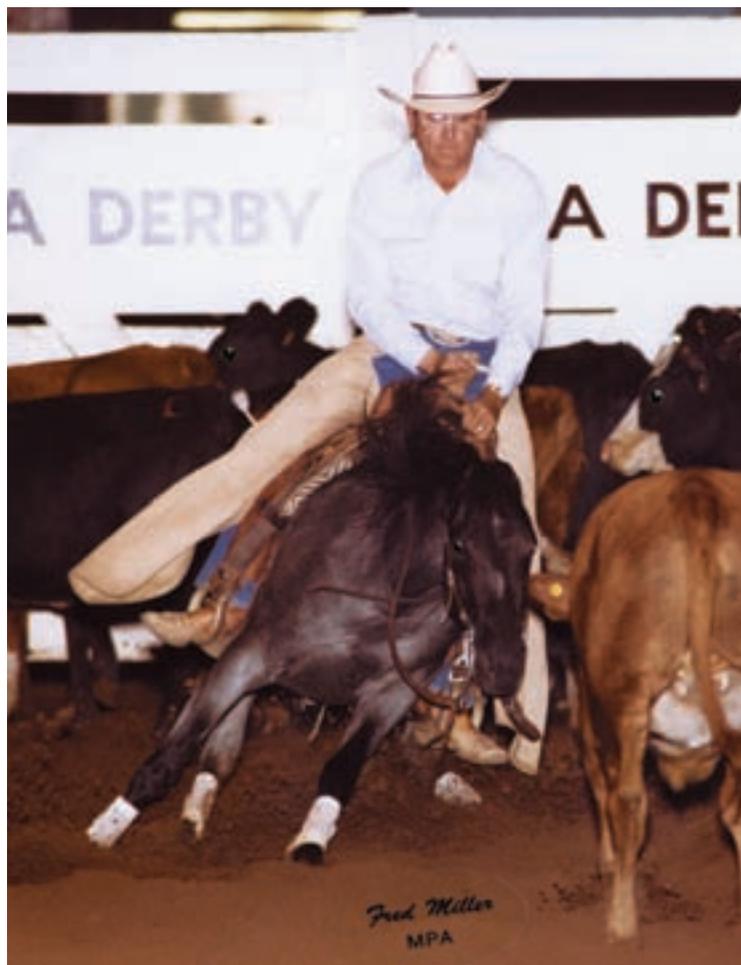


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transfer.

"I can make the opportunity available to get the high-end genetics and not spend the big dollars," says Babcock. "For 20 cents on the dollar, they can buy an egg out of a really good mare, instead of buying an expensive mare.

"The designer foal program was designed to let somebody take that same amount of money and conceivably buy three, four or five embryos. It's the same investment, but now they have genetics out of three, four or five great mares, and they don't have the risk factors."

An additional advantage of procedures such as embryo transfer is that they can help keep a mare in the public eye. Theoretically, at one competition a breeder or prospective buyer could watch a mare compete in an aged event and see her offspring in the futurities.

"If you have a big gap between the last time that horse showed and the first time one of its offspring shows, it's a battle to keep the memory of that horse—keep the image and the name—out there and keep interest up for that horse," says Meyer.

Although important for sires and dams alike, Meyer says it's a harder challenge for a mare to overcome, because most owners choose not to advertise and market a mare in the same manner as they do a stallion. Embryo transfer can help decrease the amount of time it takes for a breeder to see a return on their investment.

"Mares get famous off of their offspring," says Meyer, "more so than from what they did. She has to advertise herself, and she can only do that so many times a year."



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Royal Blue Boon

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One mare that has already proven the benefits of embryo transfer is Cowgirls Are Smart, says Babcock.

"Cowgirls Are Smart is by 'Chic' [Smart Chic Olena] and out of a daughter of Peppy San Badger," Babcock says. "She has a great show record in the reined cow horse business.

"Her first two foals sold for \$50,000 apiece, and those were two embryos. She now has somewhere near seven foals on the ground, and she's only 9 years old. We really expect her to generate somewhere between \$1 million to \$1.5 million in her lifetime, just in what she produces. With a mare like that, how many mares does a small ranch have to own?"

Just one

A quality mare—one that embodies the traits that are important to your breeding program—is simply invaluable. Owning and breeding horses is expensive, so the best return on your investment will most likely come from the highest-quality mare in your band, says Meyer.

"From the time her first foal is born until a mare can be called a producer, it is a minimum of three years," he says. "Do you want to gamble on three years if you're not sure that horse is going to return for you?"

In the end, it doesn't matter whether you own the largest, most prestigious breeding operation in the country or you're a backyard entrepreneur, having access to a great mare or mares is a common need for all breeders.

"If you have a Royal Blue Boon [the all-time leading dam of cutting horses and mother of NCHA Futurity champion Peptoboonsmal], you only need one," says Chesrown. "The quality of your mares drives how many you need. We have a big operation for several reasons, but as time goes on, if you can end up with a handful of Royal Blue Boons, you sure don't need the rest of them." ♡

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