

Evaluate Your Young Horse's Dressage Potential

The telling qualities are soundness, the desire to perform and good basic gaits

by Kyle Karnosh

You've selected the stallion and gotten your mare in foal. You've endured the 11-month wait and have successfully arrived at the point where you have a healthy, adorable foal on the ground. But as you look at this cute, fuzzy bundle with unbelievably long legs, you wonder: will this foal really turn out to be all I've hoped for? Will this foal be the one to bring me up through the levels, and how will I know? The answer to these questions is that you won't really know until you actually try, but there are early indications and clues to your dressage horse's potential. A foal is not easy to judge, and each one matures at a different rate, but try following an old breeder's adage, "three days, three weeks, three months, three years." These are approximate times when your foal is most likely to be at a balanced stage of growth where he can be evaluated.

The First Few Months

First, you'll want to begin observing how your foal is built. "By the first few days, I usually have a pretty good idea of the foal's general conformation," says Dr. Gail Hoff-Carmona, American Horse Shows Association (AHSA) "S" judge and "r" Dressage Sport Horse Breeding judge. At birth, the foal's overall bone structure is usually the most obvious. You can more easily compare the foal to its parents to correlate which features are

more similar to the sire and which remind you of the dam. Later on, the foal gains weight and muscle, sometimes making his skeletal structure more difficult to see.

The legs of a newborn foal seem to go in all four directions at once. Tendon and muscle laxity or, in some cases, contraction, make it difficult to tell much about a foal's legs until he gets older and stronger. After a few weeks, your foal's legs should seem more organized. Because most foals are growing rapidly, they tend to be more upright in their pasterns at this time. Later, as a weanling and yearling, your youngster's true pastern angle will become more apparent. Also, you won't see what kind of hooves he has until his baby feet grow out after a few months. Glenwood Farms' Judy Ehlers, longtime Hanoverian breeder and president of the American Hanoverian Society comments, "I prefer to wait until three to five months before making a serious assessment, because foals can and will surprise you."

Although judging gaits in a foal can be tricky, you can begin watching how your youngster moves a few days after his birth and continue to monitor his gaits as he matures. Young foals may show a tendency toward good rhythm and tempo in their gaits, but they do not yet have the strength to show much extension or variation within the gait. They are still learning not to trip over the long legs that they

have. As Hoff-Carmona points out, "The cannon bones of a foal are almost their full-grown length. The forearms, on the other hand, still have a lot of growing to do. With the cannon bones so long, relative to the forearms, many young foals can't coordinate their legs well enough to really show what their mature movement will be."

After your foal has developed for a few months, you can get a better idea of his movement. "The most important thing is a well balanced, ground-covering canter," says Hoff-Carmona. The canter should be solid, distinctly three beat with a period of suspension. "If your foal canters all the time and never trots, don't worry - about the trot, it will come," she advises. "Trotting most of the time is also okay, as long as the canter is good when he does canter. Ideally, the trot would be uphill, from the hindquarters with a free shoulder and natural elastic, cadenced steps, not too quick and of a regular rhythm." A foal that is stiff, moves in short strides and lacks suspension or rhythm is probably not a good prospect. "There are horses that just move their legs, and then there are horses that move their whole bodies and swing their backs. I like the body movers," says Hoff-Carmona.

To evaluate your foal's canter, watch him playing in the pasture with his buddies, where he is likely to be relaxed, yet energetic. The problem with this type of evalua-

THE STAGES OF GROWTH

Here is the same dressage horse at various stages of his life



As a one-day-old foal, you can see his general bone structure and well set-on neck, but his legs, particularly the hind ones, are still unfolding.



At two-to-three weeks old, he is much stronger and well-developed with good angles and a long sloping hindquarter.

Is this the same horse? He's now in the awkward yearling stage. His neck no longer looks so well set-on, he's very high behind and his hind legs look straighter.



But don't worry, because as a 3-year-old he shows the same good characteristics he displayed as a foal.



tion is that foals rarely play on demand, so you have to be in the right place at the right time to see anything.

The walk is more difficult to assess. Whether it can be judged accurately in foals is somewhat controversial. Some experts think that the ability to track up and the purity in the walk come and go during the various growth stages. Ehlers points out, "The changing angles in foals can directly affect the walk, especially if the foal is high behind-the croup is higher than the withers-limiting his ability to step under [his body]." Ehlers recommends waiting to judge the walk until the foal is a little older and can be led quietly. However, according to Hoff-Carmona, "Good walks are born. The walk can be improved, but it's not easy." Both Ehlers and Hoff-Carmona agree that the important factor is to judge the walk when the youngster is relaxed, yet energetically moving forward. This can be difficult to see in a young foal.

From Weanling to 3-Year-Old

You will note that, in the breeders' adage, there is a very long age gap between three months and three years. It is extremely difficult to judge weanlings and yearlings due to their incredible growth spurts. "After about five months, things begin to go askew," says Ehlers, "and sometimes they stay that way until at least 2 years. Some youngsters stay balanced, and they are a joy, but it's not typical." This age is comparable to the adolescent period in humans. Some young horses, especially large warmbloods, can become very home-ly, gangly and unbalanced. during this time. Many develop straight-looking hind legs during weanling and yearling growth spurts. Also, since growing young horses are frequently high behind, their balance and ability to step under behind

will change as they mature. This is why in Germany, one of the centers of sporthorse breeding, there are no classes at shows or formal evaluations for yearlings or 2-year-olds.

This is not to say that you can't learn anything about your youngster when he is a yearling or 2-year-old, just try not to be too disappointed with what you see. Regarding the quality of movement during this time, Ehlers says, "If you see it, it's there. But, if you don't see it, that doesn't mean it's not there." Hoff-Carmona notes that young horses can go through stages of devel-

opment where they push out behind their bodies with their hind legs while moving, and then they later develop the ability to carry themselves again.

Aside from soundness and gaits, trainers agree that temperament is one of the most important factors to evaluate in your young prospect. "Temperament is number one," says noted trainer and Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) competitor Lendon Gray. "A horse with a good brain can overcome many physical weaknesses, given that he has the proper training. All the talent in the world doesn't mean a thing if the horse doesn't have the willingness to perform."

After weaning is the best time to judge temperament, according to Ehlers, because "the mother has a big influence on the foal, and sometimes things change dramatically when the foal is separated from his dam, especially as far as the relationship to people is concerned." Opinions vary on the ideal time for weaning, but it usually occurs between four and six months.

Working with your weanling can tell you quite a bit about how fast he learns and how he reacts to new situations. Ehlers suggests that you "see how many repetitions it takes before the weanling understands something," such as leading or standing for fly spray. Observe if he improves with each lesson, or whether you find yourself constantly repeating the same lessons over and over. "This is a good indication of his learning ability and future willingness under saddle," Ehlers says. Also, try not to confuse youthful exuberance and inexperience with a difficult disposition.

As you study your youngster's

temperament, consider whether or not it suits your own temperament. A more sensitive horse may be more forward-moving but require more work on relaxation. A more laid-back horse will not have that problem but may require work to develop the necessary impulsion. You should consider which temperament best fits your personality and riding style and evaluate your prospect accordingly.

FROM FOAL TO MATURITY



Jerr Miller



This foal(top) is 5 to 6 months old here, however, he has not yet reached a truly awkward stage. The same horse is shown at 5 years of age(bottom). The length of his legs has stayed basically the same, while his body has grown in both depth and length. His withers have developed and the diameter of his legs has increased. However, the attachment of his neck and the angles in his shoulder and hip are basically the same in the foal and mature horse.

As your prospect matures, Hoff-Carmona recommends periodically free longeing him to get an idea of how his gaits and temperament are developing. When evaluating him, Ehlers says, "The young horse must be relaxed; tension will always change the gaits." While an excited horse may show a huge trot with lots of hock action, he is likely to be hollow backed and not stepping under. He also may be showing reduced quality of the gaits, especially the elasticity. As Ehlers points out, this isn't the movement you want to see under saddle. It's better to look at your prospect after he's accustomed to being worked and is more relaxed about it, rather than the first time out. "The effect of tension is particularly noticeable in the canter, which can get quick and stiff, especially behind."

Ehlers also says to keep in mind that some calm youngsters may have movement they don't show due to their more laid-back natures. These horses may transform once they're under saddle.

3-Year-old and Older

Warmbloods are notoriously slow to mature, and some experts believe that evaluating a horse at 3 years may not be that accurate. "I have seen many unimpressive 3-year-olds bloom as older horses," says Hoff-Carmona, who feels you don't see the complete horse until; he's reached age 4 to 5. Nevertheless, at this stage conformation features that were glimpsed in the foal begin to become more apparent as the horse approaches maturity. These attributes can influence how easy it will be for your horse to do dressage work. While rideability - the combination of temperament and gaits that makes horse easy to ride and train-is very desirable,

it's the only important factor. As Ehlers points out, "You must have soundness and rideability, but poor conformation affects rideability. If you want the horse to be balanced underneath you, you must have balanced conformation." Specifically, Ehlers says, "Too long a loin makes dressage harder; a short, well-coupled loin makes a huge difference in riding." Since the loin is the "transmission" that connects the power developed by the hindquarters to the rest of horse, a poor transmission can lead to a lack of thrust from behind. Ehlers adds, "An uphill build 1 a well set-on neck is really important."

Gray concurs, noting that "The Quarter Horse type of build, with the neck coming low out of the shoulder, is one of the harder handicaps to overcome." Other less-than ideal traits are a flat pelvis, which makes it harder for the horse to step underneath his body and a thick throatlatch combined with a heavy jowl, which makes flexion especially physically difficult.

Hoff-Carmona emphasizes the importance of bone structure, especially the humerus, which runs from the point of the shoulder to the point of the elbow, and the femur, which connects the pelvis, in front of the point of buttock, to the stifle. She thinks that a long humerus, plus an open angle between shoulder and humerus, give freedom in the forehand for extended gaits as well as passage. In addition, she prefers a long, not-too-steep hip and a forward-sloping femur to enable the horse to better carry himself.

As Gray says, "A horse that by nature moves well underneath himself from behind and has natural balance, engagement and suppleness is easier to train." She

looks for a youngster who uses all of his joints when moving and has strength in the hindquarters, enabling him to more easily do pirouettes and collected movements. Gray sums up what she looks for in a prospect, regardless of his conformation: "I want a clean walk. Purity is important. And I want a brilliant canter round and uphill. The trot doesn't matter so much. Given time, the trot can be dramatically improved."

Opportunities for Evaluation

Developing the ability to accurately evaluate young growing horses can take years of experience. It is also 'more difficult to be objective when evaluating your own horse, not to mention a foal you've bred and raised. So, at some point, if you are uncertain about your ability to judge your youngster, you may want to see what a more objective person thinks of your prospect. Other than consulting an experienced breeder, the main opportunities for this are breed shows and breed inspections. With some exceptions, the format of both breed shows and inspections is the same. The horse is stood up for conformation evaluation, then the walk and trot are evaluated, usually on a triangle so that the judge can see the horse coming, going and from the side.

Inspections are held by a specific breed registry to select breeding-stock. Accordingly, most registries inspect only foals, 3-year-old or older mares and stallions eligible for that registry. A few registries offer evaluation of yearlings and 2-year-olds, and some evaluate geldings as well as mares. As far as under-saddle evaluations are concerned, inspections have performance tests only for mares and

stallions. Contacting the registry of interest is the best way to get information about the options offered at an inspection site. Since inspectors look at hundreds of foals a year, they are experienced at evaluating growing horses. This expertise is one of the major benefits of inspections.

Breed shows usually offer a range of classes, from current-year foals to 3-years or older. Sometimes under-saddle suitability classes are offered, which is an option you won't find at an inspection. The United States Dressage Federation has developed a new program to offer "Material" classes for young horses under saddle, similar to those in Europe. These classes are judged on conformation as well as gaits. Breed shows have

the advantage of classes for every age group, but the results may vary widely depending on the judge. Judges at breed shows are usually very familiar with the demands of the sport of dressage, however, their experience at judging young stock may vary.

Both breed shows and inspections can give you useful feedback, but take the results with a grain of salt. "You have to remember that this one day is just a snapshot in time," advises Hoff-Carmona, "and don't get too discouraged if you don't do well." The judge can only score what he or she sees at that particular moment, while you have the advantage of seeing the horse as he develops over time. There are many variables that can affect the outcome your youngster could be at an awkward stage of growth or

be tense and not showing well; the judge or inspector could be looking for a different type. "Judging, by its nature, is subjective," emphasizes Ehlers, "and judges will have different personal preferences on things like type or style of movement, depending on their background. The placing or score of the horse is not as important as the actual evaluation and comments."

Finally, remember that no horse is absolutely perfect, and a foal can have a number of negative traits and still grow up to succeed. According to Hoff-Carmona, "many horses with less-than-ideal conformation make it anyway. "For example, Gigolo, Isabell Werth's partner at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, was nothing special to look at standing still, but under saddle he was transformed and won the gold medal. Often horses compensate for a fault by being strong in other areas. Every horse has some weakness to overcome, but if he has a good brain and good basic gaits, your journey will be fruitful, educational and fun.

Judy Ehlers has been breeding sporthorses since 1966, most recently at her Glenwood Farms Hannoverians in Wilton, California. She and husband, Volker, breed their eight warmblood stallions to more than 250 mares each season. They also raise and market the foals produced by their own 30 broodmares.

Lendon Gray rides and teaches at her farm, Gleneden Dressage, in Bedford, New York. In more than 20 years as a teacher and trainer, Gray has acquired a broad base of experience working with a variety of breeds and young horses, taking them from Training to FEI levels.

BEAUTY IS AS BEAUTY DOES



If your youngster has less-than-ideal conformation, don't despair. This imported Danish Warmblood mare, shown here at age 3, has several conformation flaws, including a very long loin. But because of compensating strengths, her good gaits and temperament, she became a successful competitor up to Intermediare I with scores up to 65%.

She represented the United States at the 1988 Olympic Games and the 1980 Alternate Olympics.

Gail Hoff-Carmona, PhD, breeds and raises Swedish Warmbloods. As owner and director of the Los Alamos Dressage Center in Freehold, New Jersey, Hoff-Carmona trains horses and riders at all levels. She is an AHSA “s” dressage judge, an “r” dressage sport horse breeding judge, an FEI competitor and USDF gold, silver and bronze medalist.

Kyle Karnosh and her husband, ***Tim Carey***, have bred Hanoverian, Dutch Warmblood, Oldenburg and Swedish Warmblood sporthorses since 1984 at their Con Brio Farms in Gilroy, California. In addition to writing breeding related articles, Karnosh also is a board member of the International Sporthorse Registry /Oldenburg North America.