

In-hand showing: display the horse's maximum potential

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The objective of in-hand showing of sport horses is to evaluate the quality of conformation and movement of individual horses. The underlying thought is, that these properties reflect the suitability of the horse as a future sport horse, or as a breeding animal to produce the next generation of sport horses.

When horses are taken to competitions, the performance we are looking at is really the performance of the combination. The final result, the points obtained for a dressage test or a jumping round, are the reward for the joint efforts of the horse and the rider, including the training that precedes the competition.



Figure 1. Presentation of a mare at a KWPN 'keuring', an in-hand show.

As in any performance-oriented sport, the result is always limited one way or

the other. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link so to speak, and many different factors can place constraints on the performance.

- The horse may be limited by its physiology (form and function). For example, there is a maximum to the energy-burst that the body can produce, required to clear a jump, or the build of the joints may limit the folding of the front legs in the jump. The horse may be afraid to jump above a certain height, so it has a mental limitation. Similarly, a dressage horse may have restrictions in its nervous system making it unable to pick up the rhythm required to do piaffe, or its skeleton may not be physically capable of showing an elevated and elastic trot.
- It could also be that the rider ability constrains the performance of the combination. The rider may not 'connect' to the horse, or might not be fit enough to be able to follow the horse's movements, or may be afraid when jumping and thus interfere with the horse.
- Nutrition can also affect the

horses performance by an unbalanced diet, inadequate mineral or vitamin supply thus affecting the condition of the horse.

All in all, there is always a reason why the level of performance wasn't higher than that was achieved.

The ultimate objective of a breeder is to breed a horse that in no way restricts the performance of the combination. In other words, a horse that will only perform better as you add to its training. If a horse reaches its maximum performance level then further training will not significantly improve the performance and this will ultimately frustrate both rider and horse.



Figure 2. The KWPN jury at work

The purpose of breeding classes is to show what the individual horse is capable of in terms of movement, as well as establishing the functionality of the conformation. These properties can also be seen as a predictor of future performance. The KWPN (the Royal Dutch Warmblood Studbook) has done extensive studies to identify predictors of future performance at an early stage from traits that can be accurately measured on young horses. The judgment of movement and conformation are part of the overall

horse evaluation scheme for KWPN. Most studbooks have a well defined breeding objective, with aims to breed a horse that is able to perform at the highest possible level in the chosen discipline, and which has a functional conformation to support that goal.



Figure 3. Presentation of a KWPN foal.

In-hand showing in breeding classes gives an objective estimation of the traits that contribute to performance abilities. In general, a horse that has desired conformational characteristics will achieve better results than those who don't meet these criteria. Similarly, movement can also be a predictor of future performance. A horse with flat, choppy movement is less likely to be a future dressage star than one that shows elevation and elasticity.

The judge has a checklist of important traits that he/she evaluates each individual animal on. Each trait has a weighting factor, and depending on the importance of it, a value is assigned for it. For example, in Horse of the Year (2008), a weight of 40% was put on conformational traits and a weight of 60% was assigned to movement traits. That indicates that the committee had considered movement of higher importance than conformation.

Movement is an aggregation of traits like: elevation, length of pace in walk, trot, and canter, posture, and balance in the gaits. Conformation is made up from traits like: slope of croup, strength of back, strength of loins, hoof shape, posture of legs, slope of shoulder and others. Together, these traits represent the suitability of the horse to perform in its discipline, and the weight of the different sub-traits should be different for different disciplines. For example, in a dressage-horse the elevation is very important, whereas for a show jumper, the ability to collect and extend quickly in the canter is critical.



Figure 4. Presentation of progeny from Appleton DHU at Horse of the Year, 2010, Hastings.

The task for the judge is to score for all these traits in a very short period of time, and given the number of horses presented and the limited available time, not a trivial task. However, a trained eye becomes accustomed to very quickly judging these.

Obviously, it is very important that the horse shows its maximum capabilities when presented to the judges. If the horse being shown cannot demonstrate what it is capable of in terms of movement, the judge is unable to see the full potential of the horse, which is

the goal of the whole exercise. The judge will then have to assume that the horse is not capable of performing better than it has shown. To minimise the chance of this it is very common for there to be two handlers in the ring whilst showing the horse: one to hold/lead the animal, and one to chase it up (by waving a whip or using a box that makes a rattling noise). This ensures the horse will show his maximum extension in the trot and presentation to the judge.

Another factor that can affect the performance of a horse in the show ring is the condition and/ or the clothing of the runner. If the runner limits the movement of the horse because he/ she cannot keep pace with it in the trot out then the expression of the animal is limited. Therefore, it is common to have multiple runners for one horse- when one needs a break, the horse is handed over to the next; the ultimate goal being to show the maximum potential of the horse and not limit the horse in its expression of its capabilities in movement.



Figure 5. The resulting ribbons for two progeny of Appleton DHU

In conclusion we can say that in order to enable a judge to make a balanced

evaluation of a horse, the horse should be in now way limited to demonstrate its abilities.

About the author

Responsible for the formation and running of Dutch Horses Unlimited, alongside his wife, horse trainer and instructor Nicole Bours. Ane Visser's extensive experience in setting up breeding programmes for horses has gained a high visibility in The Netherlands. Now in New Zealand, he hopes to contribute to the genetic progress in the population of NZ sport horses. To this end, he and his wife have imported their breeding stock into NZ.