

What are we breeding these days?

By John Moore

Are sentimental and unknowledgeable breeders degrading breeds and creating low quality horses? And are sentimental and unknowledgeable buyers providing a market for these horses and thereby perpetuating the problem? While you're pondering these questions here are a few things to think about.

Rarity of a breed

As a clinician I have the unique opportunity to work with hundreds of horses per year of various breeds. And being a clinician from the U.S. who works in a lot of other countries gives me the opportunity to see and work with breeds that are uncommon and often unheard of by the average U.S. horse person. It also gives me the opportunity to work with horses that are unfamiliar to many Europeans. I have come to learn that sometimes what is bred and shown in a foreign country is not always representative of the breed in its home country.

This situation is created in part because the rarity of a breed in a foreign country often causes amateur breeders there to breed mares to sub-standard stallions, or vice versa, just to create another horse of a particular breed. For example, if there are not many quarter horses in a country they are worth more simply because they are rare, often regardless of quality. I see many quarter horses in other countries that are of such poor quality that a professional breeder in the U.S. would be out of business in no time if this was the product they put on the market each year. In their home country these horses more than likely would be rejected as breeding or show prospects for reasons like poor conformation or a bad temperament.

Another potential problem can occur when an amateur breeder travels to a foreign country to purchase horses of a particular breed that would be rare back home, and therefore be highly profitable to breed and sell there. This can be a great idea, but I know of a few uneducated amateurs who have done this and returned home with a sub-standard representative of the breed without realizing it. It is disturbing to realize how little some of these folks know about the basic criteria used to define a high quality horse, even though they think they do. The seller in the foreign country will sell them anything they want to buy, often at a high price. And I often wonder if this is not a great opportunity for a seller to unload some horses that are hard to sell in that country where buyers are more educated about the breed. Buying horses is a "buyer beware" situation, and it is the responsibility of the buyer to know what he or she wants. Unless a seller deceitfully sells a horse with a health problem or injury that is undetectable, it is up to the buyer to know what a good horse is. Even though he may be a "Spanish Horse", he may not be a good one. But lots of people back home will pay lots of money for the foals because they are rare and prestigious there.

I encounter many mare owners of "rare" breeds who often learn for the first time at one of my clinics that their horse has serious conformational defects that disqualify it as a serious prospect for the type of riding they intended to do with the horse. Often these defects have already begun to affect the horse in the form of lameness. Now they are looking at a horse they've paid top dollar for as an investment for competition and breeding only to realize that the responsible thing to do is to not breed the mare, even though there is a market for the foal among unknowledgeable buyers. It's a tough choice to make, but also a preventable one with a little advance research.

From wild to domestic to specific breeds

Anyone interested in horses should take the time to learn a little about genetics and how wild animals are domesticated in order to fully appreciate what irresponsible breeding can do to a breed. Humans have spent literally thousands of years selectively breeding horses to accept training and leadership by humans. Through selective breeding over generations and millennia, humans were able to create an animal that is, in many ways, unlike its wild ancestor. They developed horses with particular body types and temperamental characteristics that made them far more compatible with humans, and much more suitable for the specific tasks they were needed to perform. All of this continues today. The various breeds we have now were developed and are maintained through planned, extremely selective breeding. This can be quickly unraveled by unwittingly breeding poor quality horses to each other to create even poorer quality offspring.

The fact that many amateur breeders have no idea what constitutes a quality horse can be verified by looking at the offspring their horses produce. There is no secret to learning how to judge good conformation and temperament in horses. The information is out there for anyone to learn. The science of genetics is also out there for anyone to learn. I see the results of completely uninformed, unselective breeding at nearly every clinic I teach. An opinion on any topic is only as good as the objectivity and experience of the opinion holder, and I am convinced that many amateur, recreational breeders often lack both. Either that, or the lure of the dollar is very strong, but I think it is more the former. By this I mean if they only knew how much easier a well-bred, well-conformed horse with a good mind is to train, they would be amazed. They would also find that well conformed horses are much more likely to stay sound.

Sentimental breeding

When I ask the average non-professional owner of a pregnant mare why they bred that particular mare, the answer is usually "because I own her". And if the owner is particularly sentimental the answer is along the lines of "she's so special, and I didn't want her to be cheated out of having children". And when I ask why they chose that particular stallion for their mare, out of all the stallions in the world, the answer is usually: "because he lives just down the road", or "because he was cheap" or "because everyone else breeds to him so he must be OK".

Too many mare owners feel cheated if they don't get a baby from their favorite mare. But even though it's difficult emotionally, it is not wise to breed a horse that is sub-standard just because she's the love of your life and you want to have a baby to remember her by when she's gone. Or, breed her just to get a free horse. Too many mare owners suffer from *anthropomorphism* – the transfer of their human wants and emotional needs to an animal.

If you actually do have a good quality mare and can't afford a high-quality stallion, then don't just breed to a poor quality stallion – save your money and do it next year. The world doesn't need more poor quality horses. Only the best representatives of a breed should do the breeding in order to maintain the quality of the breed, which also means there are way too many stallions out there that probably ought to be geldings.

The goal of any responsible breeder is to improve the quality of their stock with each generation. This insures a good price for quality young horses and also insures the future of the breed. You can't do this by breeding just any average horse to another average horse and realistically expect much improvement. And there are many, many horses out there that will never produce offspring that will be an improvement on themselves. And if you breed sandstone to granite what are the chances of getting a diamond? Not much.

Consider what happens when domestic animals are released back to the wild where breeding pairs are not selected by humans with a plan to maintain a breed, temperament or type. Remember, in the wild there is also selective breeding, but nature selects for a very different purpose than for what may be best in a trainable horse. Nature selects for survival in a dangerous world.

In the wild, toughness, intelligence and strong survival instincts are what it takes to get by. Toughness can be of both body and mind, and intelligence is necessary to learn from experiences. Survival instincts, those we refer to as the "instinctive characteristics of a prey animal", are very close to the surface in any wild animal. Toughness of body is desirable in a domestic horse, and intelligence certainly is. But toughness of mind in the form of stubbornness or hard headedness can be a problem. We all admire a horse's survival instincts, but it takes knowledge to know how to work with those instincts rather than against them. And a horse that is hard-headed with extremely strong instincts of flight, panic, claustrophobia or dominance can require such an experienced and talented trainer that it will not be suitable for the average person.

At this point someone is probably thinking "what about wild mustangs? I hear they make great riding horses". I've worked with many of them, and it is my observation that some do and some don't. Remember, nature selects for its own purposes. And in an unsupervised situation in the wild, the toughest mare (the lead mare) usually breeds to the toughest stallion who has chased away the competition. After a few generations of this it is obvious what the result can be. America's wild horses are descended from domestic horses that were released into the wild. Some were released over 400 years ago and are descended from the original horses brought by the Spanish to America. The majority though, are a hodge-podge of mixed-breed domestic horses released off and on throughout the interim years, and as recently as just a few years ago. All through their history most herds have been augmented by released domestic horses from ranches and other sources. All of this can offset some of the dominant-to-dominant breeding. So, with wild horses there is a great variation in quality depending on where you look. Some make great riding horses and are very trainable, but some can be tough minded and don't accept human direction well at all. Some, too, may require an expert trainer but turn out very well and make excellent riding horses. My point is that selective breeding is a natural occurrence in the wild, and we can learn from this natural process and apply it to create the type of horses that are most compatible with us.

Breeding by the papers

When it comes to breeding, you can select for size, shape, color, conformation, temperament, hoof quality or anything else controlled by genetics. But to get *what* you want you must only breed *to* what you want. To accomplish this, professional breeders must sometimes in-breed, creating a sub-group, or "line", within a breed wherein all members are closely related and linked to a progenitor. In-breeding cannot go on forever though, so a breeder must occasionally introduce fresh genetics into the program to avoid problems associated with in-breeding.

A common mistake made by amateur breeders is what is commonly called "breeding by the papers", not taking into account that even in the best looking lineages there is the occasional poor quality foal, as distasteful as this may sound to sentimental people. I can't tell you how many times I've stood looking at a poor quality horse while the proud owner stood next to me and said "I know he's good because his registration papers have these great names on them". But looking at the horse you'd think his parents had been fished out of the shallow end of the gene pool. How could this be, with all those great horses in his pedigree? The answer is that any breeder will always have some foals that are below standard, no matter what horses they breed to. This is why all professional breeders "cull". "Culling" means removing any sub-standard horses from the breeding program. This doesn't necessarily mean they are "bad" horses, as most become good horses, usable for some purpose unless they were culled because of a bad temperament or a serious physical problem.

In the days when people used horses to do real jobs, culling was done a lot more by everyone, not just by professional breeders. A horse with crooked legs may not stand work as well as a straight legged horse, and so may be culled from the work program - and the breeding program as well. A brood mare that consistently had babies with crooked legs or a bad temperament, even when bred to a good stallion, was not kept. In those days, when horses had to be useful to justify their ownership, her only value may have been for meat. Today, when horses are mostly a luxury item there is not usually a need to sell the horse for meat, but it should at least be removed from the gene pool. Many recreational breeders mistakenly think that good conformation isn't that important anymore since horses are now mostly a luxury item and don't work much. Competitive riders know better than this, for they see the consequences of poor conformation when the stresses of training and competition take their toll. Recreational riders also need to pay attention to this, since conformational issues can affect them as well. This is where the advice of someone more experienced like your veterinarian or qualified trainer can be helpful in identifying the risks associated with poor conformation. Many recreational horses are plagued with problems that are aggravated and often predisposed by poor conformation.

Keeping a poor quality horse is fine as long as nobody gets hurt. But what is not fine is that uneducated, sentimental horse owners too often breed them and produce even worse quality horses. Then, uneducated, sentimental people buy these horses and think they're actually getting a good deal because it's a "quarter horse" (or "curly" or "paint" or "Iceland horse" or "whatever") and its got great looking papers with all kinds of famous horse names on it – even though they're four generations back. But they paid a top quality price for a low quality horse that may be difficult to train, fit to a saddle or keep sound. Think of what this does to a breed and its reputation.

Breeding for color

I mentioned earlier that only the best representatives of a breed should be selected to do the breeding in order to maintain the quality of the breed. So what defines quality? Is it color, temperament, conformation or what? There is an old saying that a good horse doesn't come in a bad color, with the exception of certain colors that may cause physical problems. Therefore, color in horses is largely a matter of personal preference, which is very unlike the other two criteria – temperament and conformation, which define quality. What we call bad conformation in a horse is not a subjective thing. Neither is bad temperament. A shortcoming in either of these qualities can have disastrous results. But you'll never see a cutting horse who would cut better if he were a sorrel instead of a bay, or a dun instead of a gray. And you won't see a jumping horse who could jump higher if he were a different color.

We all have our favorite colors, and there's nothing wrong with that. And everyone knows that an uneducated buyer will probably be impressed by a horse of a flashy color. The buyer may not know enough to be impressed (or not) by the horse's conformation or mind, but they know what color impresses them. The goal of a responsible breeder is to produce a high quality horse, and hopefully, the desired color if it can be achieved without sacrificing quality. A breeder who prioritizes color can make the mistake of de-prioritizing temperament and conformation to try to get the flashy colors that bring more money from uneducated buyers. It is no secret why *some lines* of colored breeds have a bad reputation. And owners of these breeds should not be defensive about it, but should instead be policing their ranks in order to save the integrity of the breed.

Where responsible breeders compete in the horse market, they realize that only a certain percentage of their foals will have that special color that will bring the high price. Some of their foals will not be as handsomely colored and others will be rather plain colored. These horses will be the majority and must be good quality horses in order to also bring a good price in a competitive market and to maintain the good reputation of the breeder. Poor quality horses won't sell to knowledgeable buyers and can bankrupt the business. But in situations where the breeder is a hobbyist and is not relying on having to produce top quality horses to stay in business, and in places where the buying public is more impressed

by color than quality, ignorant or unethical breeders sometimes sacrifice quality to get the color, and the money – and degrade the breed in the process.

All of these things I've talked about are not meant to discourage anyone from breeding or owning the horse they're comfortable with. Just keep in mind that when breeding, you owe it to the horses themselves not to breed horses that may go lame, be hard to fit to a saddle, be hard to train or may become aggressive.

Breeding without considering temperament.

I know it is popular for many clinicians to always tell people how "natural" horses are and that if there's a problem it's always the person's fault. I agree with this only to a point. It sometimes depends on what type of problem you're talking about. A miscommunication, inconsistency or lack of clarity in communication is a person's fault. But a horse that tries to hurt you for having the nerve to step out of your social rank is not your fault. People make mistakes when working with horses, and we are lucky to have thousands of years of selective breeding on our side to give us horses who forgive us for our mistakes. Horses who don't allow you to make mistakes can be dangerous. And just because you may not have encountered this type of horse doesn't mean they don't exist.

The vast majority of horses I see at clinics are wonderful companions, who try hard to learn and are patient with their owners who are making mistakes as they learn the art of horse training. Often, the owners have been allowing the horse to dominate them, but these horses are only acting dominant because the owner is acting submissive. When the owners start learning how to be leaders and begin to take more control, these horses willingly allow the human to change roles and peacefully submit to the "new" human. We can thank professional horse breeders for that. These horses are the product of a selective breeding program that created horses that are willing to accept training.

But I also see a few horses who have been dominating their owners for years and become offended and sometimes very aggressive and dangerous when the owner decides to take back the role of leader. These horses are actually acting "natural" in that they do what any wild horse would do when a horse who is lower in social rank steps out of line – they threaten and sometimes punish the misbehaving subordinate. In many of these cases you can thank someone who bred their mare just to get a baby, or just to get a color or just to get the money.

The amateur market supports it

Ultimately, the reason this whole mess exists is because the market supports it. Uneducated and emotional people often make terrible decisions when buying a horse. And as long as people will pay good money for low quality horses they will continue to be produced. My hope is for the horse buying public to become well enough educated about what a good quality horse is that it will become impossible to sell a low quality horse at a high price.

So how can the buying public become well enough educated? By learning the fundamentals of what a good quality horse looks and acts like. A truly good looking horse does not just possess big brown eyes. Its body is constructed in a way that enables the horse to perform physically without becoming lame and in a way that allows the horse to balance and collect itself. These things make an enormous difference in the physical ability and trainability of a horse.

And temperament, also known as "disposition", is critical when considering any horse for buying, recreational riding, training for an event or breeding. Once again, clinicians can sometimes fall into the trap of only focusing on the faults of the human student. Focusing on these faults and correcting them is important and is the main focus of a clinic. But it isn't the whole picture. Sometimes, I believe, not

enough attention is paid to the fact that the horse a student may be working with is extremely unsuitable and unsafe for that student. As I mentioned earlier, students (and all of us) make mistakes, and if the student has a horse that may retaliate when the student has the nerve to act like a leader, then I would consider that horse to be unsuitable for a beginning student to learn on. And if you own a mare like this, you should really think long and hard before reproducing this trait in a foal.

Also, certain temperaments are more suitable for certain tasks than others. This isn't a judgement of quality necessarily, but rather one of aptitude. A bull terrier dog and a golden retriever are bred for two different purposes, and you wouldn't achieve maximum success trying to win the retriever championships with a bull terrier. Yes, you can teach a bull terrier to retrieve. But, it doesn't have the same talent and temperament for that particular job that the golden retriever has, and training would be more difficult and would likely not bring the highest success. It's the same with horses. You can spend two hours teaching something to a horse who doesn't have the talent, body or temperament for the job. But it would take you ten minutes to teach it to a horse with the talent, body and temperament, and you wouldn't wear out *your* body nearly as much as you would with the first horse. So you must decide what your time and health are worth in relation to what you get in exchange for them.

And finally...

We should always consider quality when buying or breeding any horse, and we should always remember that a horse is the product of its breeding (genetics) and its environment (training). In nature, horses are selectively bred for survival in the environment in which they live. The domestic horse that we are familiar with is the product of a human controlled selective breeding program designed to emphasize the natural traits best suited to our specific purposes. Unwise, uninformed breeders who breed horses without a goal-oriented plan can inadvertently focus on the wrong criteria and create a class of horse that is the opposite of what selective breeding is supposed to accomplish. Remember, we humans are the ones who do the selecting, wisely or unwisely – for better or for worse.