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Responsible horse breeding

By Brianne Henderson and Janet Henderson

There are many reasons why people breed horses. However, when we bring a life into this world we have to take responsibility for that life, which leads to the question of “responsible breeding.”

What is responsible breeding?

Simply owning a mare and/or stallion does not license a person to breed horses. Take the time to ask yourself a few questions.

What qualities does your mare or stallion possess? If you do not understand conformation – how a horse is put together – then you need to start with your own education on conformation, movement and form to function. If you think of form to function as “how muscles move bones,” it’s a good starting point. Can you identify quality movement? Do you understand gait analysis? In order to do this, you first must know the sequence of footfalls in each gait, and then develop your depth of knowledge on what is a quality walk, jog/trot, and lope/canter. Do you understand the basics of unsoundness? If your horse has conformation defects that are known to be genetic (passed down from one generation to another), then perhaps this is where you end your examination of whether to breed.

Seek advice from qualified people to help you determine the quality of your horse and whether or not to breed. Also, network through local clubs to find reputable breeders or horse show judges who can give you unbiased opinions on quality. We all tend to be a little “barn blind” in that we sometimes don’t want to see inadequacies of our own horses because we love them.

If you determine that your mare/stallion does, in fact, possess average or, preferably, above average conformation and movement, then move on to temperament and performance records. Is your horse easy to work with, compliant and confident? Have you proven your horse’s tractability with actual work? Whether the work is driving, trail riding, or competing, the “trainability” needs to be proven.

Is your horse a registered animal? Pedigree and registration certificates increase the value of an animal. The history of the production and performance of horses are more easily traced through registration.

Now, you have spent time increasing your own depth of knowledge, you have determined your horse is of good quality and have an unbiased third party opinion that confirms your determination. Now what?

Is your horse healthy for breeding? There are many genetic diseases that are too easily passed on to subsequent generations. Educate yourself as to which genetic diseases are possible for the breed of horse you



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own. Have your horse tested for these genetic diseases. If your horse comes up positive for any of the possible diseases, then perhaps this is where your decision not to breed is made.

Some of the genetic diseases are considered recessive. If your horse tests positive, you need to have a guarantee that the horse to which you are breeding your horse has a negative result on testing. If all people involved with breeding horses make responsible decisions when it comes to genetic predisposition, then there is hope the recessive diseases can be obliterated through time.

Once you have established that you have a well-built horse with quality movement that has tested negative for genetic diseases, the next important consideration is the future of the foal. What is your plan for the foal and can you afford to keep it, feed it, train it etc.? If you think you are going to breed to sell the foal, keep in mind that the market has suffered with the economic downturn. Do your research on your target market in order to have a plan for the sale of the foal.

The next step is to make an appointment with your equine veterinarian.

Your veterinarian will guide you through any pre-breeding protocol. Does your horse need to be tested for any STDs? Is your horse in good general health? Is it current with its vaccinations, parasite control (including fecal count with targeted administration of worming medication) and dental care?

Once your veterinarian says your horse is healthy and ready to breed, then for the mare owner, the search for a good stallion can begin. The same considerations and questions you asked about your mare, which were outlined at the beginning of this article, also apply to the stallion.

Once you have found the stallion, signed a contract with the stallion owner (a separate article could be written on conditions of this contract, which can include live foal guarantee, stallion health, etc.), paid the deposit or fee, you are ready to go – not quite.

Arrangements for your mare to be bred will depend on whether she will be bred at home via artificial insemination, or be delivered to a repro specialist facility for the artificial insemination (A.I.) or be delivered to the farm where the stallion is located.

If your mare is to be bred at home via A.I., then your relationship with your qualified equine veterinarian becomes crucial. It will be necessary to have an ultra-sounded conducted on your mare as soon as she comes into heat (which means you need to be clocking her schedule beginning at least two months in advance) and then again a couple of days later, to determine the growth of the follicle. You will then need to contact the stallion owner to request the shipment or pick up of the semen. You will have your vet inseminate the mare and then, sometime after two weeks post-breeding, another ultrasound will determine if your mare is pregnant.



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Once your mare is confirmed pregnant, consult with your veterinarian on vaccination protocol and parasite control for the pregnancy. Specifically, Equine Rhinopneumonitis (EVR/EHV-1) is imperative. Gestation in mares is approximately 340 days (over 11 months), so care and nutrition to ensure a healthy foal is up to you. Research the process of foaling so you understand the timeline and have your vet on call when you are getting close so he/she can be there at the birth, or very soon after. The foal will need some specific attention/tests by your vet to ensure a good outcome.

When one takes the time to examine the numbers of horses in this country that are going to slaughter and the number of horses that are living in deplorable conditions, a responsible breeder understands the implications and the broader picture, and makes informed choices.

The equine industry is constantly adapting to economic stressors and changes in the horse ownership population. It should be the goal of every horseperson to improve the quality of the Canadian horse population and limit the number of surplus horses, as well as ensure the quality of care provided to these horses surpasses the basic standard of care.

For information about breeding biosecurity click [here](#).

About the authors:

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