



PEDIGREE DYNAMICS

*A Beginner's Guide to
SHORTLISTING THE RIGHT YEARLINGS*

Racehorse ownership is within many people's reach these days. Gone is the era when it was seen as the elite 'sport of kings'. Syndication, partnerships and leasing make it an affordable sport for those keen to participate in the immeasurable pleasure of not just backing a winner, but also leading it in, holding the trophy and collecting both the glory and prizemoney.

For some, ownership may commence when the horse has already come into the hands of a trainer or syndicator, but for others the first step is taken at the yearling sales.

Selection and purchase of a yearling is one of the most exciting stages of owning a racehorse.

Being part of an audience of prospective buyers watching beautifully conditioned horses parading to the frenetic accompaniment of the auctioneer is as exciting as being in the Owners Area for a Group One race.

Like punters, yearling buyers vary in the extent to which they do their homework in the quest for a 'winner'. Purchasing a yearling based on a former association with another horse in the pedigree and a cursory inspection can be likened to betting on a horse because you like the name or saddlecloth number. In both cases, a myriad of important factors which in total can maximise the chances of selecting a potential winner, have been totally ignored

The big difference between the two however, is that instead of selecting a horse on which to put a few dollars from a race field of eighteen, you are looking at spending maybe tens of thousands on a horse in a field of several hundred lots. It is obvious that 'doing the form' for the yearling sales is probably the best value homework of all!

THE CATALOGUE

Available several weeks beforehand, the sales catalogue is a source of most of the information used in arriving at an initial shortlist of yearlings.

Vendors

Starting at the top of the catalogue page, the first factor offered for consideration is the vendor.

Usually the vendor has also raised the yearling and therefore has taken a crucial part in the health and welfare of the horse. The vendor usually also prepares the yearling for sale, and therefore the condition of the yearling and its behaviour is a good indicator of the way it has been raised. At major yearling sales where the top of the crop vie for buyer attention, it can be safely said that all lots have had the best of attention and preparation, however the proof of proficiency lies in whether the vendor has a good track record for breeding or producing winners.

In the case of relatively new vendors, often the sales agent or other bloodstock agents will have a good idea of their level of expertise.

Colour and Sex

Underneath the vendor's name appears the colour and sex of the yearling. One thing that does NOT need to be considered is the colour. Despite some thoughts regarding the progeny of some stallions, the ratio of winners or stakes winners to the various colours produced by individual stallions is in direct proportion. What appears to distort the incidence of one colour progeny

being more successful than another in some stallions is that there is MORE of that particular colour produced, dictated by the genotype of both the stallion and his many partners. For instance a heterozygous bay or brown stallion - has one (dominant) bay gene and one (recessive) chestnut gene - may produce around 73% bays/browns and 23% chestnuts with a few greys (say 4 %) from grey mares thrown in. Such stallions include Canny Lad, Geiger Counter, Kaapstad and Sir Tristram. A homozygous bay or brown stallion has two dominant genes and therefore will never produce a chestnut. Danehill, Zabeel and Bletchingly are examples. A chestnut stallion has two chestnut (recessive) genes and therefore will be colour-dominated by mares with at least one bay/brown gene, if that is the gene passed on by her.

Grey is not a colour but a factor that (as in humans) overrides the genetic hair colour. A heterozygous factor grey stallion such as Kenmare may produce 50% greys (more if put to several grey mares) and, depending on his genotype, roughly 25% bays/browns and 25% chestnuts. A homozygous factor grey stallion such as Raffindale can only produce greys as the factor dominates all colours. Even homozygous bay stallions can produce a grey when put to a grey mare. Remember Danehill's grey son Lion Hunter?

There is no genetic data linking colour inheritance with performance, but it would be true to say that a particular stallion has more stakeswinners of one colour than any other, indicating not a colour bias, only that he had more of one colour progeny to represent him.

With regards to the gender of the yearling, some owners or trainers prefer to race one particular sex over the other. Colts, especially when gelded, are perhaps overall more consistent than fillies, some of which are affected by their hormone cycles. Statistics however, reveal that fillies have a very healthy representation in the winner's circle and have the added advantage of residual use as breeding stock. Well performed mid-pedigreed fillies can command good prices as brood mares. Only the most successful and/or very well bred colts have any real value as sires, and of course geldings can only seek further employment in the leisure riding arena.

A very few stallions have a 'sex bias', producing either more top quality fillies or colts.

For instance, the stakes performers produced by the former Champion Western Australian sire Jungle Boy over a ten year period were comprised of 67% fillies and 33% colts. Unless a stallion has been at stud for many years however, it is very difficult to accurately determine whether a sex bias exists.

Foaling Date

The foaling date is next on the catalogue page. Although many prefer to buy a yearling born as close as possible to the 1st August in order to gain an age advantage on the racetrack, another opinion is that foals born in September and October are actually the ones who have the bigger advantage. August foals are more likely to be subjected to cold, wet weather and reduced nutrition as a start to their lives, whereas in Spring the weather is warming up and the fodder on which their dams are feeding more nutritious, thereby improving the milk. Foals born in November and December are not as popular with buyers and this is because they understandably look less mature at the sales, and it follows on that as early two year olds, their older peers have a slight physical advantage.

If you set out to buy a stayer however, the foaling date is likely to be of little long term relevance. Yearlings bred for longer distance races generally take longer to mature and are in any case unsuitable for the early juvenile races, which are run over sprint distances.

Tabulated Pedigree

The tabulated pedigree of the yearling is next displayed on the page. Three full generations are usually shown along with the fourth generation sires. Pedigree research is not a new science,

however it is much more popular globally today than when master breeders such as Federico Tesio (breeder of Ribot, Nearco, Donatello II, Niccolo dell' Arca etc from a band of around 20 mares) were implementing the theories of linebreeding and inbreeding 60 or so years ago.

The three and a half generations displayed on a catalogue page are only useful for identifying inbreeding (which is not always a desirable trait) or well known 'nicks'.

In order to be able to have a good look at a pedigree, it must be taken back at least six generations, and preferably further. Interpreting the data is another matter – although both sire and dam were good racehorses or producers, are their pedigrees compatible? With some knowledge, it is possible to observe the common ancestors and their close relations in the pedigree, and thereby get an idea of the level of genetic reinforcement made available to each yearling via his parents. Those buyers with sufficient knowledge to analyse pedigrees themselves can use stud books and stallion registers to get their information and the Australian Stud Book is also available on the internet at no charge.

Affordable pedigree research computer programs are now available which can build a family tree and print out pedigrees in a few seconds. Some programs do more of the background work by highlighting or listing the ancestors that are repeated in the pedigree for your assessment.

If you find pedigree research too time consuming there are specialist pedigree analysts who provide a service to assist yearling buyers in shortlisting those lots with the highest levels of genetic potential.

Astute vendors are beginning to react to buyers' demand for further pedigree information by displaying six or seven generation tabulated pedigrees of the yearling, highlighting linebreeding and inbreeding, alongside the catalogue page on each stable door. Some are also employing pedigree analysts to draw up a short report on the merits of the mating.

Sire Details

The stallion's race and breeding record is displayed underneath the tabulated pedigree on the catalogue page. The winners to runners figure is also often listed. On average a respectable winners to runners ratio is about 50%. First season (freshman) stallions will have had no runners, making it impossible to assess their ability to pass on their desirable characteristics. They are usually well promoted, and there is a novelty factor in buying the progeny of appealing first season sires. This appeal often drops off along with the hype in the second year that their progeny go through the sales, especially if they have had two-year-olds to run in the preceding few months with little early success.

This can be a particularly misleading factor when the stallion in question is not bred to produce early two-year-olds. The upside of this fact is that buyers may find that they don't have to pay as much for yearlings by second or third season sires than they would have in their debut year.

Mare's Family Details

The remainder of the catalogue page is taken up with information relating to the performances of the female line and its offspring. Just as some sirelines pass on higher levels of racing ability than others, so do some female families. The presence of names in bold black type indicates that an individual won (uppercase bold type) or was placed (lower case) in one or more stakes races. With all other things being equal, a yearling whose family is well endowed with black type performers will command a much higher price than those with less, for genetic racing ability is obviously being successfully transmitted. And naturally, the closer related the black type performers to the yearling, the better it augurs for his or her inherent talent. Having well performed family members listed under the third or fourth dam has reduced relevance when the second and first dams did not produce a significant winner. It may indicate that the genetic

strengths of the family have been diluted by non-selective breeding, however it is advisable to check with the breeder to find out if there is any other reasons why the family has not done well in recent times.

There are always examples of champions coming out of mediocre families, however the chances of this are significantly lower than those in a 'happening' family.

Dam's Age

The age of the dam is another factor some buyers consider important. Many trainers and owners rule a line through yearlings whose dams are beyond a certain age, usually around 14 years old. Why is this? Some do this because they observe that there are not as many top racehorses about whose dams are that old, however this can be partly explained by the fact that there are less mares breeding at that age and they miss more frequently, therefore producing fewer foals. Others assert that a mare's best foals are usually within her first few progeny. This could be attributed to declining uterine function, which may mean that in some mares, foals do not receive the same level of nutrition that their older siblings were given.

From the inception of the breed however, many great racehorses have been out of mares over 15 years old ranging from Galopin, Stockwell, St. Simon, Man o' War, Nearco, Native Dancer, Bull Dog, Irish River, Halo, Buckpasser, Damascus, Bernborough and Baguette through to more modern names such as Royal Academy, Timber Country, Bubble Gum Fellow, Polish Navy and Soviet Lad and those still racing in Australia, such as Commands, Adam and Pins.

From a breeding perspective, there are several outstanding broodmares who are the progeny of old mares, including the dams of Mr. Prospector and Danzig, which were both 16 years old.

THE YEARLING INSPECTION

Having done all the homework leading up to the sale, a shortlist of yearlings that fulfil all your criteria should have emerged. Now it is time to see the catalogue pages 'come to life'.

It takes practice to 'get your eye in' on the conformation of horses, and doing a crash course on the day of the sale is not a wise idea. Be realistic. If you are not yet practised enough to make an accurate assessment of a horse's conformation, it is essential to have an experienced person look the horse over for you.

Conformation and its assessment is too complex a subject to cover properly as a part of one article. In fact it could never be fully understood by reading alone, however if you are a complete novice, it is a good idea to go armed with knowledge of the terminology and structural fundamentals so that you don't appear to be completely ignorant should someone try to point something out to you. There are excellent books as well as videos available on the subject to get you started.

At major horse sales, the yearlings have usually been pre-inspected by the sales company.

Animals with obvious or serious conformational problems have already been excluded, therefore faults will be even harder to spot. Your advisor can explain to you what is wrong or right about a particular feature, which is an excellent way to gain experience yourself. If you have a trainer in mind for your prospective purchase, he or she will most likely be happy to inspect it with you. Ideas can differ on what constitutes a 'fault' and what is an acceptable variation of normal, so if a possible problem is identified it is a good idea to get a second opinion, preferably from a veterinarian.

Assessment of the yearling starts while it is still in the box to see how it reacts to its surroundings and to the handler entering. An excessively nervous, aggressive or agitated animal is probably not going to be easy to train. Bear in mind however, that some yearlings have made a long trip to the sales and others are brought out of their boxes for inspection many times a day.

This will make some a little uncooperative and particularly in hot weather, many will look depressed and lack-lustre.

The horse is brought out and stood up for you to inspect up close. Many trainers put much stock in the look of a horse's eye. A large, kind eye hints at a co-operative nature. Some horses have no pigment (in one or both eyes) in the outermost rim of the visible eyeball. This is not the same pale coloured part of the eyeball shown when a horse rolls the eye back in terror or anger. It is purely a genetic marking as is a stocking or star, and is usually associated with a large white facial marking. It does not, as some maintain, denote bad temperament.

The yearling should also show signs of good health (glowing coat, bright eyes, good colour to gums, etc), muscle tone and development.

As far as touching the animal, it is acceptable to run a hand over the body and down the legs, have a look in the mouth, under the tail (in the case of future brood mares) and at the sole of the hoof. It is probably best for both you and the horse (considering the amount of inspections to which it may be subjected) that the finer details of poking and prodding be left to your veterinarian.

Conformation should be assessed when the horse is both standing and walking. Ask the handler to walk the horse away from you and back. You will then be able to have a good view of both front and hind leg movement, the manner and extension of the walk, the horse's level of coordination by the way it turns around and also comes to a halt.

Take the opportunity to talk to the vendor and find out as much about the individual as possible. If some of its siblings are yet to race, the vendor may know how they are progressing or be able to tell you who is training them, in which case you can then enquire with the trainers. If there are any unraced full or half relations, you should also find out why they didn't make it to the track. Unsoundness can run in families and if there are many unraced relations, it could be a bad sign.

It is a very good idea to have a veterinarian check over all the lots on your shortlist after you inspect them to determine whether there are any problems or conformational faults not obvious to the layperson's eye. These checks usually include listening to the heart, the breathing, inspecting the mouth, eyesight, genitalia, hooves, the legs, movement and an overall impression. The vet will give his or her opinion, trimming your shortlist even further.

Scoping (examination of the upper respiratory tract) by an approved vet within 24 hours of purchase (provided the horse does not leave the sales complex) can determine whether the horse is likely to develop breathing problems. The sale may be terminated if the purchaser can provide evidence to that effect.

THE AUCTION

No doubt you will also have an idea what you want to spend to secure yourself a suitable yearling. Although most vendors won't impart their reserve price (if any) to you until after the horse has been through the ring, you can usually ascertain the approximate price they are expecting the yearling to fetch.

You are now ready to bid on your shortlisted lots. You need to make pre-arrangements with the sales company so they are confident that you will be able to pay for the yearlings you so enthusiastically bid on.

If you are the final bidder, you are deemed to be the new owner from the fall of the hammer. If you intend to insure your purchase, it can be arranged to commence at that moment. It is now your responsibility to arrange for the horse to be moved to a new abode. There are always horse transport firms awaiting your business at the sales!

If any of the lots on which you bid are passed in having not reached their reserve, you can always approach the vendor with an offer which will be subject to the same sales conditions. If you are really keen on a particular lot that has sold to a higher bid, the buyer (especially if it is a trainer or syndicator) may be willing to sell or lease you a share in the horse.

Owning a racehorse is one big exciting gamble. By doing your homework and selecting a yearling 'most likely to succeed' however, you can be satisfied in the knowledge that you have done all to minimise the gamble by starting out with the right raw material.

From here a new set of stages arise, all leading towards a career on the racecourse. There are many pitfalls along the way and much excitement and anticipation and hopefully monetary rewards to be enjoyed. Good luck with your purchase!