

Matchmaking 101—Choosing The Right Stallion For Your Mare  
by Joe Alberti

It may come as a surprise to some readers to see my name on an editorial about breeding, since my reputation in the Arabian horse industry is primarily as a trainer. Even I said, “*Me?*” when the Arabian Horse Times asked me to write up my thoughts on the subject. But maybe it is not so strange after all, because not only do I stand four stallions at Chestnuthill Arabians, but trainers in general see a lot of horses. We present our own and we check out our competition, and if we aren’t aware of what is good and what is bad, we probably aren’t long for this business. Understanding what goes into creating a top-of-the-line Arabian is important for our own longevity. Breeding horses isn’t rocket science, and I don’t pretend to know all the answers, but I do know a lot of the questions that should be asked before selecting a certain stallion for a certain mare. I hope that they are of use to anyone looking for nuts-and-bolts information on making breeding decisions.

Here goes. As everyone knows, nothing is guaranteed in the breeding of horses. The most popular description of the process, even for a careful breeder, is “crapshoot.” I agree, but I think there is a lot we can do to improve our odds. If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times—too many people go to Scottsdale or the Nationals and just sign their mare up to whoever wins or to the latest trendy name. When I fell in love with Arabians, there were more true breeders, and by that I mean those who went to the most competitive shows, watched the stallion class and studied every entry, and came away saying, “That tenth-place horse is going to be the best stud for my mare.” That’s not to take anything away from the winner, but even the best stallion is not right for every mare.

In breeding horses, we know that each one has a phenotype (physical appearance) and genotype (pedigree) to consider. In my opinion, phenotype comes first; I’m a pedigree buff, but even I have to admit that no matter how great a pedigree is, it is secondary to a horse’s appearance. So let’s start there.

The first step is to properly evaluate your mare. That means understanding not only her strengths, but her weaknesses—and even the best horses have “holes,” so this is not a time for barn-blindness. If you don’t understand her shortcomings, you can’t begin to breed away from them. Take a long, hard, critical look at her conformation and decide what needs to be improved. Then thoroughly research her pedigree, because some individuals are true representatives of their pedigree and some are not. If your horse has a very long neck, and that is not a trait of its pedigree, there is a good chance that that’s not something it will pass on, so you can’t count on it to help. On the other hand, if you have a horse that has a long neck, and everything in its pedigree dictates that it should have a long neck, and you want to breed it to a shorter-necked horse, you have a better chance of success.

Getting thoroughly familiar with a pedigree is not a small task. The chances are you may have seen a few horses in your mare’s lineage. Make note of the characteristics that she inherited from them. Then round up all the photos and videos you can of everyone else in the pedigree and look for the same information. Is her conformation what her pedigree leads you to expect? If not, what are the unexplained elements? Those are the ones you probably can’t count on.

The next step is to do the same thing for the stallions you are considering. I like a

stallion not only to complement my mare, but to be *really* strong where she is weak. I want to know that not only does that stallion have the right looks, but he also has a pedigree that says he will most likely be passing that on to his foals, just as he inherited it from his ancestors.

This is a good place to add that when looking at all those photos and videos, you learn to look critically. You have to get past the beauty. Professional photographers in the Arabian business are the best at shooting beautiful photos; these horses are all going to look good, so you have to learn to dissect the stallion with your eyes. The same thing goes for videos. Stallion owners spend thousands of dollars on videos. Do you really think they're going to send you one that shows a horse's faults? Not on your life.

Now, this is going to sound like a contradiction, but also take into consideration that some horses are no more photogenic than some people are. For example, in my opinion, \*Aladdinn never looked as good in his pictures as he did in person. When I saw him in person for the first time at the 2005 U.S. Nationals, I was blown away—and he was 30 years old! So, in researching these horses, read what you can, talk to people, do whatever you can to put together an accurate picture of the ones you haven't seen in person.

That leads us to the next step: Go to see the finalists in the your search for the right stallion. As a 100 percent rule, I would never breed to a horse I haven't seen in person. I need to touch it and see it—not just for its look, but also to get a sense of its personality and behavior. I know that stallions are stallions, and I take that into account; I'm not saying it needs to be a puppy dog, but I want to see who handles it and how they handle it. Do they bring it out with two chains over its nose? Are they going to let me come up and pet it, or are they going to keep me at a distance? Will they stand it up and let me look at it, or run it around in a field at a distance, and then put it away and be done? I'm not happy about a tough attitude, but before I cross a horse off the list for that, I want to find out if it is due to mishandling or if basic bad humor is in a bloodline.

If a stallion has no foals on the ground, then that is probably all you can do to research him as an individual potential match for your mare. It would pay, however, to check out as many foals as you can from the same cross of bloodlines you are considering. If all the ones you can find produced horses that were not beautiful and not useful, then maybe you want to rethink your plans.

In most cases, though, you will have seen at least a few of the stallion's foals. They may have been what led you to notice him in the first place. So assuming that all systems are 'go' so far—you like him and his pedigree, and think that he is a true representative of that pedigree—then it is helpful, if possible, to see some of the mares who have produced the foals that caught your eye. There are two reasons for this. One, you want to see what the stallion brought to the table, and two, you want an idea of how much he is going to let your mare's characteristics come through. You know your mare's strong points, and it is important that a stallion helps her weaknesses, it is equally important that he doesn't override her good contributions.

If all of this sounds like a lot of work, it is—but to me, it is one of the most rewarding experiences of having horses. I love it, and I think most people who love their horses will too. It probably also sounds like you will find out that a lot of stallions that you thought might be good for your mare will not turn out to have the best odds. That is probably true, but open your mind up to what stallions are available. There are some great ones for your mare out there! And so many mistakes can be avoided by just doing in your homework.

I recall when someone I know chose a stallion based on the fact that he had just sired some foals that were winning in the ring, and it seemed like a good business move to get on the bandwagon early. But the following spring, to their surprise, the resulting foal turned out with a conformation characteristic they didn't like. Well, it was easy to see why it happened. The stallion had the same trait. His foals winning in competition came from mares that could correct that flaw, and theirs wasn't one of them. Objective research might have convinced them to switch to another sire in the first place.

Before I get off the subject, I should add the obvious: When you're breeding Arabian horses, of course you should know what the ideal Arabian should be. One reason I'm writing this is that I hope we can all become better breeders, because I think the Arabian breed is facing some challenges these days. It is important that we all do our best to keep that ideal firmly in mind when making our breeding plans. When we are evaluating the conformation we are trying to create in our foals, we need to be firm in our standards.

For instance, I think we need to watch out how we're breeding legs. The ideal Arabian has good, straight legs with feet that are the same, with flat bones, and long forearms and short cannons. A pet peeve of mine is that we are congratulating ourselves for breeding longer-legged horses today, but too often, we're doing that by elongating the cannon bone. There are horses showing out there now whose *their* cannon bones are as long as their forearms, and that's not what we're supposed to have. The Arabian *is* gets its strength from a long forearm and a short cannon bone. So if you have a short-legged mare and you want to lengthen the legs in the foal, then by all means go for a stallion who throws long legs, but first check the proportion on the legs that he sires. If he is just stretching out the cannon bone, then he is making the leg much, much weaker.

Another important point to remember is that breeding a good horse is not limited just to conformation and type. There is no sense in having a beautiful horse that you can't do anything with. Part of the reason you want to observe a stallion's attitude is that you want your foal to have a good work ethic. We've become very much an amateur-friendly industry. The amateur and youth market is huge, and if you are hoping to sell your foal, that increases your opportunities. There is not a stallion at Chestnuthill Arabians that I can't have my junior riders handle.

In addition to the amateur aspect, a willing, useable attitude is an integral part of the Arabian horse. Our industry now is specializing in halter horses and performance horses, but that does not mean that a halter horse should not have athletic ability. The Arabian was a war horse; yes, it was beautiful, but it was a war horse, which means—guess what—we were on its back. It would not have been worth anything to anyone if it was not athletic, and that dictated the ideal conformation. If a horse didn't have strong legs and well-sprung ribs (so that when it was going into battle the saddle didn't fall off behind its tail), it would not have succeeded in its job. That's what started this breed, and you can't take that out of the halter horse. We ride all of our halter horses here. (An added benefit is that I have found that once those halter horses have learned to concentrate and focus for an extended period of time, and they've learned to come off pressure and learned to move laterally, they are easy horses to break. I would much rather have them than a 3-year-old who's been in a field all of its life and comes in knowing nothing.)

So, in my opinion, all those factors go into making a good Arabian, and they are part of the picture when breeding horses. It all starts with being ridiculously, brutally honest

about your mare and the stallions you are considering. I critique our horses all the time, because especially when they are young, they are constantly changing. A good broodmare may not change all that much, but every foal you produce will tell you more about her, so it never hurts to keep evaluating.

To go back to my opening comment that it might sound strange that a trainer is writing about breeding, I should add that I am a breeder too. I believe that in the Arabian industry, everything is related—halter and performance, training and breeding. It's all just one big circle, and the best experience is when you are a part of it all.

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