

Steps to Selling in the Summer

Does your yearling have what Del Mar Sale buyers desire?

As part of the CTBA's ongoing efforts to assist local breeders and consignors in effectively marketing their horses this is the first in a series of articles, aimed at educating and informing readers on this subject, that will be featured in California Thoroughbred over the next six to eight months.

by **CLYDENE BOOTS**

It's time to start thinking about how and where to sell those newly-turned yearlings. In this article, we will look at both what the Del Mar Yearling Sale buyers have shown they want, so as to help breeders decide whether their yearling may fit that sale, as well as examining some pitfalls to avoid. The selection process will also be discussed, so breeders may have a better understanding of what is involved. The two go hand-in-hand, for the selection of yearlings for the Del Mar sale is based on what the buyers have shown they prefer.

This editorial is being written in early December, so there may be some "fine tuning" of some aspects of the sale later, but this article will touch on the things breeders need to be thinking about most at this point in time.

Do Those X-Rays Now!

Serious market breeders need to have radiographs taken of their yearlings in January or February. If detected early, some problems, like a small chip, can then be corrected surgically and come the time of the sale, new x-rays and the required disclosure will be easily accessible to buyers in the repository. Yearlings with major flaws that could greatly affect their saleability should not be sent to Del Mar, and should be withdrawn if they have already been entered at the time the problem is discovered. If such a yearling is sent any-

way, it is possible they may be scratched at the discretion of the sales company, just as a horse which is sent in an unacceptable physical condition. The seller who sends a horse with a major but hidden flaw, thinking it will not be noticed, harms everyone connected with the sale and seriously damages his own credibility and reputation with buyers and the sales company.

In the case of less serious flaws, it is a judgment call. Some buyers, especially pinhookers, require that the x-rays be completely clean. Other buyers may not be bothered at all by certain abnormalities, yet won't touch others. The breeder should consult with at least one veterinarian who has sales or racetrack experience to get their opinion on how buyers will likely react to the particular problem in question. And, it may be helpful to contact the California Thoroughbred Breeders Association to find out what their experience has been. The point of early screening radiographs is to avoid spending thousands of dollars on entry fees, sales prep, shipping, etc., only to get the horse to the sale and discover problems when the x-rays are done for the repository.

It is worth noting that nearly all the yearlings at the 2001 sale had x-rays in the repository. Those who didn't, received little buyer interest.

Yearlings should also be scoped early for the same reason as above—perhaps even before doing the screening x-rays. Chances are the airway will be fine, but what a shame to risk putting thousands more into a yearling who turns out to be unsalable.

Here's What Buyers Wanted

The 2001 Del Mar sale was very strong for the type of horses buyers wanted—big, correct, good-looking, early-maturing, athletic Cal-breds who vetted clean and who were by

commercially acceptable sires, out of reasonably strong female families.

No big surprises there—that is what Del Mar buyers have always wanted, though the overwhelming preference for Cal-breds is a recent and very welcome development and will be considered in this year's selection process.

What was pronounced in 2001, though, was the almost total lack of demand for yearlings who did not meet these criteria. Buyers just didn't bid for such yearlings. For example, sire power has become more important during the past couple of years. That hadn't necessarily been the case in some recent years, where an outstanding physical individual sometimes greatly outsold its pedigree.

In 2001, if the yearling was by a weak or unpopular stallion, it didn't matter how nice the individual was or how strong the female family seemed, there was little or no demand for them. Those same yearlings would probably have sold better at another sale where they may have been among the top yearlings at that event.

For alternatives to Del Mar, and ideas on matching your yearling to an appropriate sale, see the article "Options for Marketing Young Thoroughbreds" in the April 2001 issue of *California Thoroughbred* (page 33). It is critical that a yearling be placed in a sale where they are the type of yearling that the buyers at the sale want.

The worsening economy is a factor in the trend for greater perceived value, especially in the horse business, where quality is what holds up when times are tough. When the economy went downhill in 2000, buyers at yearling sales everywhere became highly selective in their purchases, and were even more selective in 2001. Unless

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the economy rebounds drastically in the next few months, we can expect for the trend to continue at the 2002 sales.

The sales committee is hoping that breeders will evaluate their yearlings realistically, and only nominate to Del Mar those who fit the characteristics described above. That \$100 nomination fee should not be risked on yearlings who have little chance of acceptance. The last couple of years, fees were refunded on some horses whose weak pedigrees did not justify physical inspection. However, this is not likely to be done again as it created two problems:

- 1) Really poorly-bred horses were still nominated, perhaps because people felt they had nothing to lose;
- 2) Some people apparently thought that if their horse was physically inspected, that meant it had already passed pedigree evaluation. Not so! But more on that later.

Here's the Selection Procedure

As mentioned earlier, there may be some fine-tuning by the sales committee later, but here is the basic framework and time schedule of the selection process.

As soon as nominations close, an initial screening of the pedigrees will occur based on the sire power of the stallion and the quality of racehorses produced by the immediate female family. Those yearlings whose pedigrees are clearly unsuitable for the sale will be eliminated at that point and not physically inspected.

Beginning in Southern California, physical inspections will start in April and continue into early May. Take note—just because a yearling is inspected, that does not mean it will be accepted into the sale if it has no serious conformation flaws. Once the physical inspections are completed, the sales committee will study all the yearlings—taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the pedigree, plus the physical characteristics of the individual as reported by

the inspector. Only then will the decision be made as to acceptance, typically by the second week of May.

A Closer Look at Pedigree Evaluation

For each nominee, a printout is obtained for at least the first two dams, showing the racehorses that this particular family has produced. There should be quality stakes horses within those first two generations or, at the very least, a pattern of good runners along with at least some black-type. First dams who have a number of horses of racing age without producing anything of quality (failed producers) are not looked on with favor.

The stallion's sire power, is determined by researching a variety of relevant factors such as:

- 1) How well are his runners doing at the track?
- 2) What prices did his yearlings, or weanlings if he is a first-crop sire, bring last year?
- 3) If new at stud, was he a quality stakes winner?
- 4) Is he by a sire of sires
- 5) Is he out of a strong, sire-producing female family?

If people are serious about breeding for success in the market, they need to be studying that kind of information when selecting bloodstock and making breeding decisions.

The Physical Inspection

The inspector will be looking for conformation flaws while the yearling stands quietly, and watching how the yearling walks. Does the individual have a long smooth athletic stride, and the size, maturity and appearance in April that suggests development by August into the big, well-developed and good-looking yearling that summer sale buyers demand (See "Preparing and Presenting Yearlings for Inspection" in the March 2001 *California Thoroughbred*, page 122.)

In recent years, an attempt has been made to use the yearling inspections as an educational tool and communication opportunity, but this has not really worked out as had been

hoped. Most Thoroughbred breeders are deeply involved with their horses, and the Del Mar inspection is an emotionally charged situation because of the significant investment in their yearling and the hopes and dreams that go along with it all. Understandably, what most people want to hear at that moment is something that they can construe as meaning that they have a Del Mar yearling. Most, though not all, are not in a mindset to be receptive to a discussion of their yearling's conformation and especially its flaws.

Plus, our Del Mar inspectors are trainers, not instructors. They are usually working under tight time constraints, and may be running late because a farm early on in the day's schedule didn't even have their dozen yearlings ready! So they are late getting to all the other farms, everyone's nerves are frayed, and the mood is hardly conducive to a positive learning experience.

Remember, no final decision on acceptance will be made until the sales committee studies the pedigrees and inspection reports, so it is hoped breeders will understand that they cannot be given an answer at the time of the inspection.

And, it is important to remember that the goal of the selection process is to place in the sale those horses that fit what the buyers are seeking most. A small or very plain yearling by a moderately successful but not commercially acceptable stallion may well become a top quality racehorse, but if offered at Del Mar it might not even get the minimum bid. So breeders should not take it as an insult to them or their horse if their yearling is not accepted. Only a small percentage of each year's foal crop will possess the pedigree and physical type required by select summer sale buyers.

Even though Del Mar has become a very successful sale, it will always be a work in progress. There will always be rough spots to iron out and things that might be done to improve it. So again, if you have questions or comments, please contact Doug Burge or Cookie Hackworth at the CTBA, and they'll help communicate any potential concerns on your behalf to the sales committee.