

Wiebe-Yde van de Lageweg

Views from the master



Wiebe-Yde van de Lageweg of VDL Stud gives his views on breeding the modern show jumping horse to Dr Alan M. Hurley of Teagasc

OWNERS of famous stallions like Nimmerdor, Indoctro, VDL Cardento and VDL Douglas, VDL Stud is well recognised as a leader in breeding and producing superior quality horses. When accessing the top results of any major show jumping class, you will likely find the stud represented. Since 1990, VDL Stud has bred the most KWPN Studbook Grand Prix Show Jumping horses with 43 horses reaching the highest level.

Originally started by Wiekpe van de Lageweg, the company is now run by him and his three sons, with his daughter and daughter-in-law also working in the family business. I sat down with Wiebe-Yde van de Lageweg, Wiekpe's oldest son, to discuss their breeding programme, their selection of young stallions and to seek his advice for breeders.

In total, VDL Stud owns approximately 800 horses with operations run on 300ha of land. In 2019, there were 145 mares in foal but as they limit the number of foals per year to 80, they need to sell mares.

"We are trying to keep the best mares and stallions in breeding so 80 foals a year is our limit; we don't want to sell some good horses, but we need to. You have to take care of clients ensuring that they will have good horses to breed and sell," says Wiebe-Yde.

Fundamental to any breeding program is a clearly defined breeding goal.



Dr Alan Hurley of Teagasc (left) with Wiebe-Yde van de Lageweg of VDL Stud

A breeding goal should focus on quality over quantity using only proven talented mares and stallions with good genetics for soundness, temperament and performance traits so the resulting foals meet an industry demand.

Wiebe-Yde states that their breeding goal is to "breed international level show jumpers having each generation genetically stronger than the previous. Our objective is to breed horses with balance, scope, excellent movement and a good temperament."

The more challenging the set of breeding goals, the more genetic improvement one can achieve.

Like many top breeders, VDL is really selective about its mare lines and prioritise those horses that have either been successful in the sport themselves or have a closely related individual performing well at international level.

"All horses are selected based on pedigree and natural ability. The dam line is very important. Not every horse will make it to the top of the sport but there is still a lucrative market for sound, balanced, good-looking rideable horses at 1.20m to 1.50m level. Most of our mares have never competed in the sport and go directly into our breeding program," says Wiebe-Yde.

Table 1 illustrates the percentage influence of individuals in a pedigree, by generation position. Breeders should note that previous generations can still have a major effect on the next generation (Colt/Filly). Therefore, the importance of having mares and stallions in multiple generations with the genetics to compete at the top level is what VDL strives to achieve in order to produce international performers.

Selecting stallions

In September, the team at VDL assess all two-year-old stallions' loose jumping as the KWPN studbook stallion selections start in December.

"Loose jumping to select young horses, works very well as you can identify future potential immediately. If you don't see it from the beginning you'll never get it," remarks Wiebe-Yde. When assessing young horses, the VDL team have strict criteria.

"First you need to look at the overall model. Key characteristics are balance, scope, temperament and a good canter."

Conformation is also very important when the VDL team are assessing

stallions. "Conformation is associated with health. Weak or crooked legs are a sign that the horse is not going to stay healthy, particularly when such horses begin hard work. Any stallion who doesn't meet the required standard is gelded and sent to pasture until they are three or four years old. It is paramount to the stud that stallions are successful in the sport. Sporting success is not only of commercial importance but also important for breeders to sell their progeny," says Wiebe-Yde.

In September, as stallions are assessed, X-rays are taken of all stallions to evaluate potential abnormalities including Osteochondrosis (OCD). While OCD is strongly influenced by environmental factors (e.g. management and nutrition) a large part (i.e. 25%) of the trait is heritable. This means, through selective breeding, the incidence of this trait can be greatly reduced.

The KWPN Studbook publishes an OC-index which measures the heritability of OCD. The index expresses a stallion's tendency to pass on OCD to his progeny. The KWPN Studbook X-rays a random sample of a stallion's progeny at 9-18 months to indicate genetic transmission of OCD. The genetic progress of OCD in the population is continuously updated through X-raying young animals. The KWPN Studbook normally refuses to licence stallions with a severe OC-remark; however, in some cases where the stallion demonstrates exceptional talent, they can be approved. Having this information available to breeders is highly valuable.

Breeders have the option to then stay clear of stallions that have a high tendency to pass on OCD to their progeny which can result in an immense loss in value of the animal. Horses can have the best genetics for athletic ability, but if they are not sound and therefore are unable to compete in competition, this is counterproductive.

Selecting a suitable stallion for your mare/mares

Wiebe-Yde says: "Breeders should avoid any emotional attachment to their mares and be very selective of them. They should be realistic when constructing individual breeding goals." Breeders are often counselled by the statement, "start with a good mare". This is obviously good advice, however, it does not highlight the critical point,

which is, learning to recognise a good mare. Sometimes, breeders fail to produce a foal that matches the quality of its excellent dam. The lack of objective criteria for evaluating horses could account for this observation. In addition, the inheritance pattern of highly valued traits of individual mares is unknown.

"Breeders need to properly identify the conformational strengths and weaknesses of their mares. The mare inspections can be highly valuable for such breeders," says Wiebe-Yde.

"Linear profiling can be very informative, but breeders should use results wisely. If you place too much emphasis on all the small things, the bigger picture may possibly be missed."

Examples of the main characteristics one needs to improve could include athletic ability, scope, power, strength, carefulness and mentality. A stallion that correctly fits your mare should be selected. When assessing sires to complement their mares, Wiebe-Yde suggests "breeders should focus on pedigree, performance, type, conformation, temperament, blood, rideability and assess the stallion's progeny".

When asked about using young sires, Wiebe-Yde says: "We use a lot of young stallions who should, in theory, be genetically better but may not always be the case."

Nonetheless, he says, "it is essential for the advancement of breeding to get young stallions breeding. If breeders don't use young stallions, then by the time we know they were really good genetically it can be too late as they are already dead or sold."

Advice to breeders

"My advice is to define your breeding goal. Buy the very best mare you can afford. It could take you 50 years to go from a bad mare to good mare. You must start with a good foundation; buy a good mare from a breeding line you know produces good horses. Most of the top horses come from a strong performance line," he adds.

When assessing mares and formulating desired breeding goal, breeders should ask themselves the following:

- Has the mare a performance record and to what level?
- Is the dam line capable of producing the type of horse outlined in your breeding goal?
- Has the dam line produced a horse at that level before?
- How closely related is the mare to that performance line?
- How many of the mare's siblings have already competed at the level your goal is aimed for?

These are fundamental questions breeders need to consider if an individual mare is not producing the desired breeding goal. Stack the odds in your favour as much as possible.

"Some people say the small breeder has no chance. I think they have a very good chance to become successful breeders if they have a good plan and approach breeding using the correct formula," says Wiebe-Yde.

The Sport Horse Industry in The Netherlands is thriving at the moment. In 2019, the KWPN studbook was ranked by the WBFSH as the number one studbook in the world in both show jumping and dressage.

The Irish Sport Horse Studbook is currently ranked 17th in the world for producing show-jumpers. To improve this ranking, a more scientific approach towards breeding must be adopted. Significant genetic advances can be achieved in the coming years in Ireland if the correct approach is implemented. It is now more important than ever to critically access your breeding strategies.

Dr Alan M Hurley: Equine specialist, Teagasc Rural Economy Development Programme

Table 1

| Generation | Relationship | DNA % | How Many? |
|------------|---------------------|--------|-----------|
| | Colt/Filly | 100% | 1 |
| 1 | Parents | 50% | 2 |
| 2 | Grandparents | 25% | 4 |
| 3 | Great-grandparents | 12.5% | 8 |
| 4 | GG-grandparents | 6.25% | 16 |
| 5 | GGG-grandparents | 3.125% | 32 |
| 6 | GGGG-grandparents | 1.56% | 64 |
| 7 | GGGGG-grandparents | 0.78% | 128 |
| 8 | GGGGGG-grandparents | 0.39% | 256 |