

Breeding the Stal Hendrix way

Teagasc equine specialist, Dr Alan M. Hurley speaks to Paul Hendrix about breeding the modern show jumping horse

Paul Hendrix

Alan Hurley

BREEDER Paul Hendrix considers himself a practical man but at the same time knows that the application of science is important for the future of sport horse breeding. I visited Paul at his base in beautiful Kessel and got an exclusive tour of his operation. Paul Hendrix and his brother Emile are the duo behind Stal Hendrix.

We discussed how science can help breeders make more informed breeding decisions, key considerations when selecting and buying foals and Paul's views on the use of young unproven stallions in his breeding programme.

Over the last four decades, Stal Hendrix has developed into a globally recognised business. Today the third generation – Tim, Michel and Janou – are all heavily involved in the business.

Can science help breeders to make more informed breeding decisions?

PH: "I really believe in data and I'm convinced that science will get us further in breeding. We are only in the early stages of what's possible with DNA technologies. The Osteochondrois (OCD) story is a guideline for many breeders."

In 2016, the KWPN studbook introduced genomic breeding values for OCD, providing breeders with an estimate of the likelihood the horse will pass OCD to the next generation. Through advancements in genetic technologies, such as the use of genomics, some of the guesswork involved in matings will be reduced while the chances of producing a foal with the necessary genetic attributes for their chosen discipline will be significantly improved. By selecting desirable traits within a balanced breeding programme, horses could not only become stronger and more athletic but can also become healthier.

Do you use breeding values in your breeding programme?

PH: "I never look at breeding values as I know the Dutch damlines so well that breeding values don't have any added value for me. You have to know the better families. I see many horses in training daily and go to competitions all over the world. However, not every breeder has the knowledge I have. For them, knowledge of breeding values is valuable."

Horse Sport Ireland publishes breeding values for show jumpers and these can assist breeders in pinpointing the genetically superior animals within the population. The breeding value is determined by factors included in their calculation such as the individual's pedigree, own performance and the performance of offspring. The quality of the data determines the quality

of the breeding value. Breeding values should support breeding decisions rather than guide.

You buy several foals each year – what criteria do you look for?

PH: "First you need to look at the overall model. Key characteristics are balance, conformation, lightness, natural ability and a good eye. As you can't see the foal jump you must access the movement. The canter is really important for show jumpers. The foal should be light-footed and carry themselves with ease. A weak foal will ultimately be a weak horse for the first few years. When I'm considering purchasing foals, I need to know the sire and dam. Knowledge of their sports career and the way they were ridden is also paramount. I only buy offspring on what I know from sires and dams. The foal must also have functional conformation. The KWPN studbook is very specific about conformation but a horse with perfect conformation does not exist. Good horses, at the end of the day, are hard to find. The majority of the top horses have a strong performance line. One thing we know for sure - we don't breed top Grand Prix horses with stallions that are unable to jump above 1.30m or 1.40m."

What is your view of loose jumping at the KWPN stallion show?

PH: "We can be fooled by loose jumping in competitions. Loose jumping at home, to select young horses, works well. In the stallion selection, it has become a competition to see who can prepare and present best. In my view, the handler's influence has become too great. I think we need to start screening and putting greater selection pressure on horses under saddle. At the end of the day, the one thing that counts is performance in competitions. The process for mare selections is different as breeders want an early indication of the mares strengths and weaknesses from knowledgeable inspectors."

For breeders, getting their stock inspected can be invaluable when making future breeding decisions. The process gives the owner a detailed description of an animal's conformational strengths and weaknesses.

How do you decide on the best fillies to breed?

PH: "My goal is to breed an athletic horse with the technical ability and mind to get to Grand Prix level. Therefore, I base my selection on the filly that has the best pedigree and natural jumping ability. I'm very selective and must like the model. We select as yearlings on free jumping, where 90% of my selections are made. You see a certain attitude and you can evaluate natural technique. I like to see certain lightness in the trot and then selection starts when they jump over a pole. Once I have made my selection, the yearlings are then sent to farms to grow and mature. Any horses whose technique I'm unsatisfied with are sold. If the damline indicates potential to jump then these are given a second chance to prove their ability. When horses are accessed again as two-year-olds, 90% are exactly what I expected."

How do you choose a stallion for your mare?

PH: "You need to analyse your mare as much as possible. My broodmares have the basic purpose to serve the breeding industry. This may be because they're genetically interesting or because they were very good jumpers. I try to compensate my mare's shortcomings with a stallion. I know how the stallion breeds, and I know the damlines. Sometimes I deliberately take a risk. I also have to think commercially. The majority need to be marketable. Ninety-five percent of the horses I sell go to the United States and are good jumpers. You can trace that back to their movement and functional conformation. A good show jumper has good conformation, although there are a few exceptions."

How important is it for breeders to use young stallions?

PH: "It's essential for the advancement of breeding to get young stallions breeding. In theory, young stallions should be genetically better. I want to know how my own stallions breed, so I use young stallions for half my mare stock. For me, the turning point is about 25 mares; then I can make a good estimate of the genetic transmission. I'm committed to bringing the

offspring of young stallions to my own auctions."

How do you select a thoroughbred stallion and how much blood is required?

PH: "I like to see him jump, he must be a good mover with good conformation. A certain percentage of thoroughbred often gives the lightness. It's difficult to say how much blood is required in percentages. Our breeding programme definitely needs blood. We bought a stallion at the 2020 KWPN stallion show crossed two times by a thoroughbred stallion in the damline. I like to see this and this also makes him very commercial."

Have you any advice for breeders in Ireland?

PH: "You need to be more selective on the damline. You have got good facilities and some of the best riders in the world. You have excellent conditions to raise young horses. This is a great platform to work from. I would buy horses in Ireland if the correct type came up. My advice to breeders is to go to shows, follow the sport quietly, observe not only the big shows but also the young horse classes where you can get lots of information. Lanaken, for example, is fantastic, you can gather lots of useful information."

Have you any specific advice for amateur breeders?

"Be absolutely clear in your breeding goal and then buy directly into a good line which gives you the greatest opportunity to be successful. Our goal is to breed international show jumpers, therefore I would buy a filly who is the progeny from a top Grand Prix mare."

Breeding course

If you would like to learn more about equine breeding, the Teagasc Sport Horse Breeding Distance Learning Course will commence on April 6th and run over a six-week period. For further details, please contact Alan Hurley at alan.hurley@teagasc.ie



Paul Hendrix (centre) and Hans Dings (left) with Teagasc's Dr Alan M. Hurley pictured with Kardinaal HX, one of Paul's stallions standing at Kessel