

Breeding Sport Horses

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Horse breeding today continues to generate as much interest as it did twenty or more years ago. How things have changed since then.

Changing Breeding Patterns

Traditionally the Irish sport horse was a cross between the Irish Draught mare and the thoroughbred stallion. However as there are now only 700 Registered Irish Draught mares breeding in Ireland out of a population of approximately 7000 active breeding mares traditional breeding has been in decline. In 2003 only 114 foals were bred traditionally.

Breeding from what is described as the reverse cross, which is the RID stallion covering the thoroughbred mare produced only 41 foals in 2003. The past couple of years have seen an increase in the breeding of purebred Irish Draught horses. Of the 659 foals born from RID mares 391 (59%) are pure bred up from 40% a couple of years ago.

So if our sport horse industry is to continue to be influenced by the Irish Draught more breeders must produce purebred stock. The majority of brood mares currently registered are themselves sport horses. With these mares breeders have more options and a wider choice of stallion to choose from.

The big changes in Irish Sport Horse breeding is the increase in the use of sport horses or half bred stallion and foreign bred stallions. In 1978 there were 249 thoroughbred stallions approved with Bord na gCappall, 27 Irish Sport Horse and 62 Registered Irish Draught stallions. Almost 70 % of the foals registered were by thoroughbred stallions. There were no foals registered by European breeds.

Table 1 and 2 show how breeding patterns have changed.

Table 1: Number of approved stallions

Breed	1978	1990	2004
XX *	249	145	117
ISH	27	49	61
RID	62	90	79
FBSH **	0	4	39 +51***

* XX = thoroughbred

** FBSH = Foreign Bred Sport Horse

*** 39 foreign bred stallions are standing in Ireland while another 51 are approved for use here but are standing abroad.

Table 2. Per cent of foals registered by breed of sire

	XX	ISH	RID	FBSH
1981	69.1%	3.4%	27.5%	0.0%
1990	41.8%	15.9%	40.2%	1.1%
2003	25.3%	29.3%	16.1%	26.1%

The success of European breeds in international competitions has influenced Irish breeding in recent years. The first of the foreign-bred stallions were approved in the mid to late 1980's. The Approved Stallions 1987 booklet lists two. They were Punchline, a Westphalian and Horace, an Anglo-Arab.

In the 2004 - 2005 Approved Stallion book there are 18 different foreign breeds listed. FBSH now account for 26% of the foals registered.

Breeding Programme

Every breeding program should have a breeding goal or objective. Why do you want to breed a foal? What do you want the foal to do as an adult horse – show jump, event, dressage, race, or leisure riding? The first step in a breeding programme is to define your breeding objective.

Having decided that you want to breed, for example a jumper, the second question is, is there a market for the horse you breed. There is no point whatever in breeding an animal nobody wants. This leads us to selection of breeding stock. The essence of any good breeding programme is to breed the best to the best. So we must identify the best.

Select the best mare that will help you achieve your objective. First we have to define what we mean by the best. Race horses are the best for speed, others are best at jumping while others are best at dressage. Arabs are best at endurance. If you want to breed a jumper then the mare should have the necessary characteristics required to do that. She must be athletic and have a jumping pedigree or background. If there is a weakness somewhere in the back breeding it could appear at any time.

Other important parameters for selection are conformation, movement, temperament, riding ability and veterinary soundness. It is often said that the mare has the greatest influence on the breeding of a foal. Genetically she does not have a greater influence. At the time of fertilisation, i.e. shortly after covering when the sperm meets the egg in the fallopian tube, the characteristics of the foal are set. The colour is determined, the height it will grow to, the good and the bad conformation points are all fixed. The genes on the chromosomes determine these - genetics.

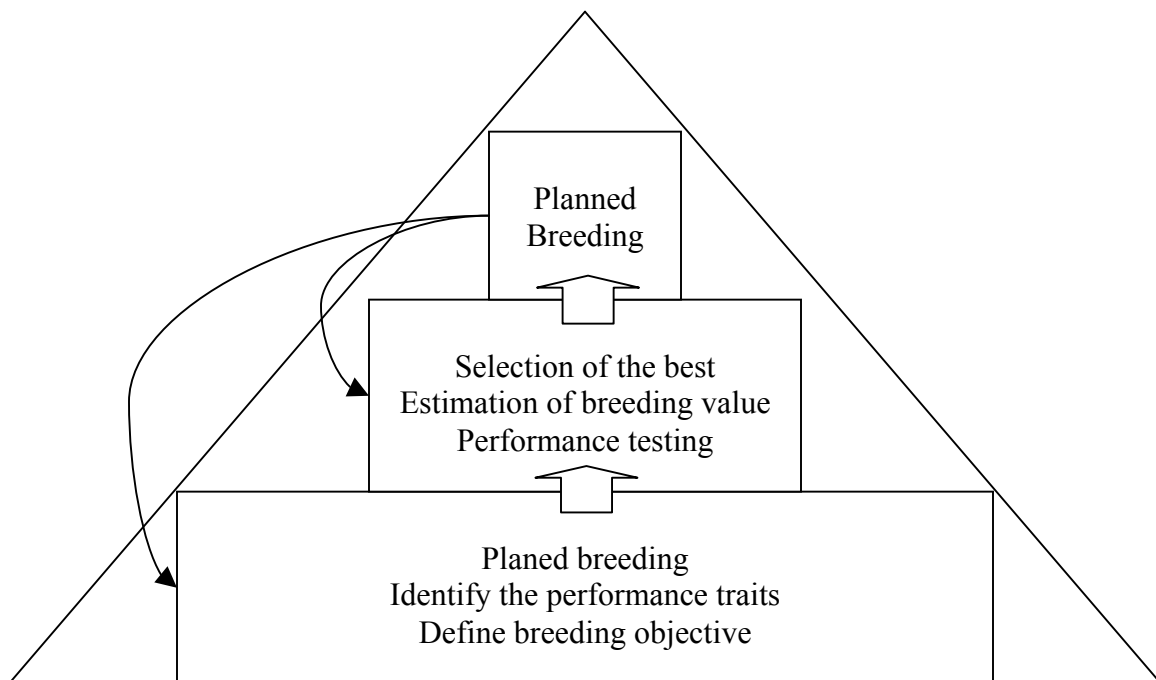
Half of the genes come from the mare and half from the stallion. Some genes are more dominant than others which give the appearance of one parent having more influence. Therefore all foals receive half of their genetic make up from the sire and half from the dam. It does not matter whether or not she is a good or bad mare half (50%) of the genetic make up of the foal comes from her. The other half is from the stallion.

Having selected the mare the next step is to select a stallion. Again remembering your breeding objective the stallion should be a known producer of the type you require in this case a jumper. The stallion must have a jumping pedigree and a performance history, either himself or be know to be the sire of jumpers. He must also have good conformation and movement and be veterinary sound.

Will he suit your mare? Will he improve where she is weak? Evaluate the conformation of your mare and select a stallion that will complement her.

If you wish to produce eventers you will have to use thoroughbreds while foreign breeds are more suitable for dressage. When the foal is born next year registration is important. Without a passport the progeny will be excluded from many competitions when they come of age. If the foal you breed is successful and it is properly identified then you should benefit from the sale of relatives of this animal.

The final piece in a breeding programme is to assess the progeny. Do they measure up to your expectations? Are they an improvement on the mare? We now have the bases for a good breeding pyramid.



Starting at the bottom we set the breeding objective, which leads to the identification of the horses with the performance traits we want. Planned breeding for these genetic characters then follows.

Step two is to identify the progeny that conform to what we want through performance testing and estimating the breeding value. Then we are able to select the best.

Step three at the top of the pyramid we mate the best to the best and hope for the best. Any breeding without selection is useless. Without strong and sometimes unpopular selection decisions no improvement can be made – all our efforts are wasted. We are then simply multipliers and not breeders.

Remember that up to 90% of the horses we breed are sold to riders who are riding in their leisure time. At the same time we are looking for horses that are athletic with good movement and can perform. With a little bit of luck horse breeding can be a business and a hobby. Sport horse breeding should be looked on as an additional enterprise. Run as a business it can be a very successful enterprise both financially and for enjoyment.