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Multiple Choice
Feature - Matching Stallions

Matching the most appropriate stallion to your mare is just the beginning of a breeder's decision-making process. We threw a few scenarios – some common, some not so – at four of the industry's most successful breeders, and let them make the call. Bill Andrew, Larry Drysdale, Walter Parkinson and Harry Rutherford offer their thoughts on what they would do.

Story by Karen Briggs



Our game-show participants? Four names which need little introduction in harness racing: Larry Drysdale, of Winbak Farm's Canadian operation in Caledon, Ontario (and before that, of Armstrong Bros.), Harry Rutherford of Cool Creek Farm in Mount Pleasant, Ontario (producers of Pure Ivory, Casual Breeze, and Elegantimage, to name only a few), Bill Andrew of Meridian Farms in Alberta and PEI, and Walter Parkinson, Assistant Farm Manager of Seelster Farms in Lucan, Ontario.

HERE'S THEIR TAKE ON OUR HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS.

Q: You have a broodmare who has aborted two years in a row. What steps do you take to keep it from happening again – and when do you decide it's time to stop trying?

Drysdale: The first thing is to find out what's making her abort. We'd do a biopsy if it was indicated, and necropsy on the slipped foal if we can. If it's something we can address medically, that's the best approach – and there's always the embryo transfer route with a mare like this. If she's valuable enough you can give it a shot.

Some people believe that switching stallions can help, but honestly, I can't see (aborting) being the stallion's fault.

In most circumstances I don't think I'd be going longer than three years with a problem mare like this.

Rutherford: It depends on how good the mare is, and whether the abortions were just bad luck and unrelated, or whether it's a recurring problem. I think we persevere longer than some farms do, but if she aborted twice for the same reason I'd be looking at moving her on.

Andrew: A broodmare who has aborted two years in a row would need an exceptional pedigree to keep from being moved out of the broodmare band. In all likelihood, after the first lost foal the mare would have been put on a program of hormone therapy and vaccine administration to reduce the risk of abortion. Thus, a second

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abortion would not be viewed favourably.

Parkinson: We'd run all the tests to see if we could figure out the cause of the abortions, and if we can identify the root cause and treat it, then yes, we'd try again with that mare. We've had mares that have aborted two years in a row in the past, but it was just bad luck. I think the third year would usually determine whether she stays or goes. The more we have invested in a mare, of course, the more she's worth spending the time on to get the issue resolved.

Q: You have a mare who was a successful racehorse, but is physically an oversized bruiser of a mare. What do you look for in a stallion who would complement her physical type and conformation?

Drysdale: A big mare is better than worrying about a very small mare, in terms of foaling. I'd look for a medium-sized stallion whose conformation is correct – on the pacing side, maybe something who has Abercrombie bloodlines. It's not rocket science.

Rutherford: You can't always tell by looking at the sire what size of horse he will throw. Look at Striking Sahbra – he was just a little guy, but his offspring were a decent size. You have to look at the babies of a stallion that's been around a while. I wouldn't have a clue with a freshman sire, so for a mare like that I'd stick with a stallion who already has progeny on the ground, and assess their size and conformation.

Andrew: We love big mares. Especially long-barrelled big mares. We believe a big mare has less chance of a problem pregnancy and birth. Also, (this type) allows a breeder lots of choice in stallion selection. We would generally avoid breeding an extremely large mare to a plus-sized stallion. Most buyers don't want either small yearlings or very large yearlings, but as a rule like some size and range in foals.

Parkinson: The most important thing with an oversized mare is to find a stallion who's well-proportioned and of a medium size, with a pedigree that matches hers. We do see most of the stallions we breed to, before we make our decisions. We know whether they stamp their foals. If we were considering a freshman sire for this big mare, I guess we'd look at related stallions and see what they've been producing, size-wise.

Q: You have a prolific broodmare who is now getting a little long in the tooth. How do you determine when it's time to stop asking her to carry one more foal?

Drysdale: Armbro Flight gave birth to Armbro Goal, who was a Hambo winner (1988), when she was 24. She was always a good, healthy mare. She had one more foal after Armbro Goal, and lived to be 33 or 34. So there are mares who can keep going well into their 20's. We just look at the overall health of the mare and the ease with which she has foaled in the past. But we also keep in mind what Armbro used to call the golden rule, which is that we generally take the insurance off them after they're 15.

Rutherford: If she has been a good producer, we're inclined to keep going with her, but only if her foals are still bringing decent money. Even if she's still having nice foals, there's no point if the market isn't interested anymore. We always have a few retirees – we've got three right now.

Andrew: The three most important things to look at in a mare are: ease of breeding and getting in foal, her ability to nurture that foal in the critical early stages of development, and the mare's overall health. So with each mare, it is a combination of the health of her reproductive organs, her ability to produce milk and provide it to her foal, and the condition of her joints and respiratory system. Each individual is different. The important thing is not to cause the mare any undue duress by prolonging her reproductive life at a time when her overall condition makes pregnancy a risky proposition.

Parkinson: We never want to breed a mare past her ability to carry that foal safely. It varies from mare to mare, of course, but by their late teens or early 20s, you have to start assessing her quite closely each year before you go ahead. Her physical condition has to be good, and we'll have our farm veterinarian go over her pretty carefully. And we also take her past foaling history into account. A mare who has carried and delivered easily, year after year, is a better candidate to keep going than a mare who has historically had difficulties.

Once we do decide to retire a mare, she joins the retirement band, and we'll keep her as long as she's happy and healthy.

Q: You have a mare who is pacing-bred, but preferred to trot. She was stakes-placed as a trotter, and now she's joining the broodmare band. Which way do you go in selecting a stallion for her?

Drysdale: I think I'd be breeding her to a trotter, if she really wanted to trot. Horton Hanover was bred to trot but switched to the pace (and won the Canadian Pacing Derby in 1970) – I can never remember breeding him to a trotter those first few years because he was such a successful pacer, but then along came Hortons Miss (who was also double-gaited), and suddenly he had trotting mares. Of course you don't see nearly as much of that these days.

Rutherford: That's a tough call. I would certainly try to breed her to a trotter, but I'm not sure how expensive I'd go. It would be a bit of a gamble. I'd see how good-gaited her foals were and make future decisions based on that.

Andrew: If we had a pacing-bred exceptional trotting mare, we would breed her to a trotting stallion. There's a good chance that a buyer exists who will key on the mare's performance as a trotter. Her pedigree would leave her wide open to any stallion, so we would look for a stallion with complimentary conformation.

Parkinson: We'd look at pacing stallions. Commercially, it's too hard to sell a double-gaited horse. We'd go through the same criteria as we would with any mare, conformation- and pedigree-wise.

Q: You have a mare who you've sent back to the same stallion year after year because it has been such a successful nick. Now, however, that stallion is no longer around. Do you go to a related stallion Or do you do something completely different?

Drysdale: Most people would try to find those same bloodlines, but I wouldn't be afraid to try something different, at least for one year. If I were to look for a horse of similar bloodlines, I'd probably look at sons of the original stallion.

Rutherford: We breed for what the public is going to want three years down the road, which is why we like to breed to popular, first-year sires. But we have sometimes used the same stallion repeatedly – we bred to Balanced Image year after year, for example, because his babies always sold well. I would probably try something new in this situation.

Andrew: We believe in nicks, so we probably would look for similar breeding to the old stallion, in a new one. If we can't find one that suits, then we would go to the best available fit for the mare.

Parkinson: We might go either way. If I were looking for similar breeding, I might consider a brother or half-brother to the original stallion, with success at the racetrack a key component. Physically he should also be a similar type of horse. But the demise of the original stallion might be a chance to try that mare with an exciting first-crop sire. People like to see something different – they'll jump at the opportunity.

