

CREATING A LEGACY

Everyone wants to produce a champion foal, one that not only tops the performance world, but produces foals of the same calibre. Everyone wants to produce a foal whose very name has value. Even the one mare owner has a hard time resisting the “legacy fever”. But it escapes most breeders both large and small.

Wing Commander, Tom Thumb, Dyoll Starlight, Yellow Mount, Three Bars are names that are recognised by all horsemen. You don't have to breed Quarter horses to know the name Doc Bar. Morgan owners know the name Bourbon King and Welsh owners know the name Bleddfa Shooting Star. You don't even have to be a horseman to recognise the name Man O'War. These animals became legacies because they all had one thing in common; they passed on to their offspring the outstanding qualities they possessed. But legacy animals are far and few between; mostly because their combinations of genes happened either with very little planning or in most cases by accident. And so, breeders both large and small continue to breed this mare to that stallion hoping a lucky star will shine on them and produce an animal whose name will be there in history along with the other greats.

Most legacies just happen, but there are those that are created; created by breeders whose belief in their breeding program proves them to be right. Their farm name, their prefix is well known to others in the breed. Coed Coch, Criban, Revel, Clan. When you look through the studbooks you see these names. There are certain things legacy breeders do; things that are not mystical or secrets handed down from past generations. They are sound breeding principles that, though they are common knowledge, are ignored by most breeders. They are principles that are often shoved aside through politics and fads, economics and personal whims.

The first thing to become a legacy breeder is a thorough knowledge of pedigrees, all of them! You must know the family lines as well as individual ponies, you must know the traits that are passed on by such families, and you must know from where they came. Legacy breeders start with the Stud Book Number One and work their way through every book. They will even trace back the pedigrees to other countries and begin the long process with those stud books. It doesn't end there, because the stud books can't tell you about the temperament or how an animal moved, the quality of his gaits. They look at picture after picture; they talk to other breeders for hours, people they don't even know; they write letter after letter with rarely an answer.

This type of perseverance leads to a deep understanding of the genetic expression for the breed. What makes a Shetland a Shetland, a Welsh Pony and Welsh Pony. They learn to appreciate the breed's unique character, and are dedicated to preserving these qualities. It would never occur to a legacy breeder to “improve” the breed. Every registered breed has its own breed standard, and to a legacy breeder, this standard is revered. To breed registered animals that have qualities in direct opposition to that standard is unthinkable. They would not breed fine boned Welsh; they would not breed tall, leggy Shetlands. To introduce outside blood for a “quick fix” is heresy. It wasn't legacy breeders who thought some Hackney blood would improve the American Shetland. Yes, those breeders did quickly produce a beautiful pony with striking action which dominated the show scene and sold for thousands. They also destroyed generations of pure blood. They created a new breed, totally unrecognisable to their British ancestors from the Shetland Isles. They produced and registered animals that were completely false to the Shetland breed standard. When the market pendulum made a swing back to the original type untouched by Hackney blood, no one had to go back to England for pure Shetland ponies. There were still ponies here who had grazed in pastures for years, their foals with them, unsaleable because their breeder would not be swayed by fads or trends. He continues to breed them, knowing they carried invaluable blood that would someday see a resurgence. A legacy breeder will not change, even if he can't sell a single animal for ten years. Legacy breeders believe in the breed, and will not change for any judge, for any market trend, for any amount of money.

The next step to becoming a legacy breeder is an understanding of genetics. But this part is not nearly as difficult as it sounds. A simple understanding of how traits are passed on is all that is needed. Your mare has traits which she expresses. She either has a long neck or she doesn't. If she has a long neck, then she carries genes for that trait. If animals only carried genes for the traits they expressed, then breeding legacies would be child's play. Unfortunately, your mare also carries genes for traits which she does not express and when bred to a stallion who carries these same unexpressed genes, you can have a foal that is quite a surprise, either good or bad.

Legacy breeders avoid having 'surprises', even the good ones. They breed by a standard that almost sounds too simple to be true. They breed towards good qualities, not away from bad. Their breeding program is not based on weeding out poor traits. Legacy breeders never, never ever breed opposite good traits to produce good breeding animals. They do not breed a mare with a long neck, strong back, but weak legs and plain head to a stallion with a gorgeous head and

fantastic legs, but his neck is shortish and his back could be better. No, the foal will not have a gorgeous head, long neck, strong back and fantastic legs. In fact, he may even have a plain head, short neck, weak back and poor legs! And even if he does come out perfect, he carries imperfect genes. With the varied genetic background he could very well sire a foal that ugly. What's more important is that you would never know WHEN would he. And some poor traits are not expressed for generations, but then show up when the genes get a match.

Legacy breeders breed good traits to good traits. They breed a mare with a long neck and strong back to a stallion who has a long neck and strong back. That foal should also have a long neck and strong back. If he has only one good trait, the legacy breeder will geld the colt and then seriously study the pedigree of both parents to pinpoint the culprit. If both the mare and stallion have long necks and strong backs, then ALL their foals should possess these traits. If they don't, either one is a poor candidate for a breeding programme. And it may be one or both.

When the legacy breeder gets the colt that possesses both good traits, he then breeds him to mares with the same good traits. And with each generation, new good qualities are added. Look at the pedigrees of their animals. Generation after generation will carry the farm prefix. They believe in their bloodlines and keep their own best stock to fulfil their breeding program. They could sell off their best ponies and make lots of money, but they keep them in order to maintain their breeding program. Look at who they stand to their mares. He carries their prefix; yes, they bred their own stallion to use with their mares. And they breed their own replacement stallion, a son of their senior sire, to continue the bloodlines as he grows too old. They don't geld their senior sire and then sell his remaining colts as stallion prospects. If the sire isn't good enough, how can the sons be any better? When a legacy breeder finds that a stallion has contributed all he can to his breeding program, he does not geld him or sell him to a non-breeder who is sure to geld him. To geld such a stallion only says that his bloodlines aren't important enough to save. A legacy breeder will do everything in his power to see that the stallion has the chance to contribute to other breeding programs. There are no 'surprises' in a legacy breeder's barn. He continues to breed good qualities to good qualities to the point where his foal crop is predictable. At that point, even his culls are better quality and truer to breed type than the best of other breeders.

Great horses and ponies appear to be surprises. In many cases, they are accidental breedings and their owners were lucky. In reality, their genetic background reveals the lineage of greatness that combined with each new generation to carry on these traits. They came from some of the very best. They passed on those traits

they inherited from their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on. Look at the story of ungainly Hambletonian, bought for \$125 by a hired hand, and later had earnings of over \$186 000. The story says his dam was a lame cart horse with no pedigree and Hambletonian was so ugly, neighbors called him “Rhysdyck's big bull”. It's a classic story of a poor, nobody horse making good. A closer check on his bloodlines reveals a different story. Hambletonian was a line-bred descendant of Messenger, a horse imported in 1788 and considered the foundation stallion of the Standard-bred trotter. Messenger carried the blood of the top thoroughbreds of the day, a close descendant of the great Darley Arabian, one of the three foundation stallions of the modern Thoroughbred. Hambletonian's dam, Charles' Kent Mare was a trotter with a record for the mile under saddle of 2:41. She was by Bellfounder, considered the finest stallion of the Norfolk trotters and he was imported to the U.S. in 1822. Her dam was One Eye, a granddaughter of Messenger. And Hambleton's sire – Abdallah; he was out of Amazonia, the fastest mare of her time with a record of 2:54 under saddle and a daughter of Messenger. Abdallah was by Mambrino who was by Messenger. Mambrino's dam was an imported English Thoroughbred mare. Hambletonian was not a freak. He inherited his qualities from some of the finest horses of the day, and he passed on those qualities to his foals.

Most breeders have short term goals. Their breeding program is to produce a foal better than the sire or dam. It ends there. It compares to a cross-breeding program. In one generation, a Shire and Thoroughbred can produce an outstanding heavy hunter. But he in turn cannot produce one. By breeding opposite good qualities, many breeders can get a show winner. He cannot produce one. By introducing outside blood, a breeder can produce 'refinement and quality' in one generation. Then with each passing generation, the animals lose the very traits that made them unique.

Every breed registry is subject to political pressure and conflicting interests. Talk to any breeder and he will tell you his concerns about the future of his breed. These are not theoretical suppositions. These things are happening now. Every breed registry from Arabians to Welsh is feeling the pressure of change.

The purity of the Section A Welsh Mountain pony is being jeopardised by the failure to register as Section A only those animals with Section A parents. Animals with blood from a completely separate breed, the Section B Welsh Pony of Riding Type, have been allowed to be registered as Section A because they didn't grow tall enough! The Section B pony has had several infusions of Arabian blood to increase their height and make them more suitable as a riding pony. With that

Arabian blood came several inferior traits unknown in the Welsh pony until that introduction. While the Section B has its roots in the Section A, they are not the same breed. The Section B has evolved into a different animal, with distinct conformation and movement in the same way the Saddlebred evolved from the Morgan. Because of the very purity of the Section A blood, it can be counted on to produce the qualities it is known for; beautiful full eyes, small ears, good flat bone, strong backs and light, airy action. And they can be counted on for qualities you don't see; gentle, willing dispositions and giving hearts. They are the foundation stock that breeders can return to in recapturing qualities that have been lost through poor breeding practices. The pure Section A pony has that ability only because of its pure blood, proven over the generations to pass these qualities from one animal to the next.

Many breeds are showing the effect that outside bloodlines produce – loss of breed type. The very definition of a breed is that it can pass on to its progeny the characteristics and traits that it possesses. Yet, now within a breed there are registered animals so distinct from each other, they are classified as another 'type'. Allowing animals of other breeds and even animals of unknown lineage to be used as breeding animals defeats the very purpose of a registry. Legacy breeders maintain the breed standard even when the registry does not. It is legacy breeders who are responsible for those few stallions and mares left today with pure Connemara blood. It was a lone legacy breeder who maintained a set of books for the Welsh Cob when the national registry stopped from lack of interest. Without her dedication, those bloodlines would have been lost. Every breed has legacy breeders. Every breed has those who are dedicated to the breed's original standard and will not change.

You can be a legacy breeder.

This edited article was found amongst some old papers. It is obviously American, apparently from a publication called 'Ponies'. Neither the author nor the year of publication are identified. It makes for interesting reading and is thought-provoking.