

Courtesy of the *bloodhorse.com* ©2005

Lengthening the Short List

Date Posted: 9/7/2005 9:49:30 AM

Last Updated: 9/7/2005 9:49:30 AM

By Dr. Jeffrey T. Berk

Aside from the winner's circle, there is no place more exciting in the Thoroughbred world than the public auction, where buyers congregate at the sale ring in an attempt to purchase the next "big horse," whether it be designated for resale or racing.

Many factors are weighed in the process of evaluating a young Thoroughbred for purchase. Conformation, pedigree, and walk (or in the case of 2-year-olds in training, the breeze) are important factors in assessing an individual's suitability for purchase.

The veterinary examination is also an integral part of the process. Primarily, this consists of an endoscopic examination of the upper airway to evaluate laryngeal structure and function and a radiographic evaluation of the horse's bone structure, inclusive of knees, hocks, stifles, and front and hind fetlocks.

An experienced buyer will compile all the information and then decide if the horse is suitable and how much he is willing to pay for it. Customarily, the buyer and/or agent will hire a veterinarian to scope and read repository radiographs on the individuals that have made the "short list."

The veterinary findings are important as one of several factors to be considered, but the current trend is to give them an inordinate amount of importance. In an attempt to maintain a client base and err on the side of caution, many veterinarians will discredit potential purchases based on findings that may never be a factor in the horse's future racing soundness.

The fact is, we are trying to make predictions about questionable findings only God can make, and in the bargain, many good prospects are eliminated from consideration.

"What's the harm in that?" one might ask. The problem with that approach is it hurts buyers, sellers, and veterinarians. The buyers are hurt because they often have to watch horses they liked but were afraid to bid on win for someone else. The sellers are hurt because the product they work so hard to present at the sale ends up selling for less than its value. The veterinarians' reputations are damaged because they try to represent themselves as being able to look into the future.

Of course, there are some veterinary findings that are universally acknowledged to be significant. A horse with an airway whose arytenoid cartilage cannot fully abduct, or a horse with lower knee joint disease--these are clearly individuals that would carry a high potential for compromised usefulness.

However, the vast majority of veterinary findings, i.e., laryngeal asynchrony on an endoscopic exam, or various OCD lesions, or bone fragments in areas which are unlikely to affect racing soundness, should not be used to discredit a prospect's potential.

For example, there have been several recent studies involving significant numbers of horses that demonstrate there is no difference in subsequent racing performance between yearlings whose throats have perfect symmetry on endoscopic exam versus those whose throats have mild to moderate laryngeal asynchrony. Assuming the other throat parameters are normal, this would

suggest asynchrony of laryngeal function is a variation of normal in a veterinary evaluation of a yearling Thoroughbred's throat.

Three factors that contribute to winning in Thoroughbred racehorses are inherent speed, desire to win, and ability to remain sound. These cannot be measured by the veterinarian. The nearest measurement we have is in the pedigree.

The challenge is placed before us the next two weeks as more than 5,000 Thoroughbred yearlings are offered for sale at Keeneland. This might be a good time to put things in perspective; namely, to assign veterinary findings their proper significance, neither more, nor less.