

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE INSPECTED

A first-timer's guide to the keuring process for sport horses

BY NATALIE DEFEE MENDIK





Owners, breeders, and riders agree: There's nothing like a great sport horse with super conformation, movement, athleticism, rideability, and that little *je ne sais quoi*. To that end, warmblood breeders dedicate themselves to producing world-class sport horses designed to excel in a variety of disciplines.

One of the best tools available to help warmblood breeders chart their course is the keuring (Dutch for "inspection") of breeding stock. Inspections, which are organized and conducted by the various warmblood registries, are designed to improve the breed while guiding breeders, owners, and prospective owners. Inspectors' comments and evaluations are a valuable measure for keeping breeding on target, with the goal of producing horses with the ability and disposition to succeed. Think quality control.

There can be a lot riding on the outcome of an inspection: a horse's sale and breeding value, for starters, not to mention the potential marketing opportunities. In addition, in an effort to produce high-quality foals, many warmblood-breeding farms offer reduced stud fees for mares that earn special honors at keurings.

If you're new to the inspection process, you'll need to learn how to prepare your horses so that they receive their best possible scores at a keuring. In this article, three top sport-horse breeders share their secrets for making the most of the breed-inspection experience.

Beyond the Requirements

If you're in the warmblood industry, inspections are (or should be) part of your business model, experts say.

"For all of us in sport-horse breeding, inspections are built in as a requirement for registration and approval of breeding stock," says Natalie DiBerardinis, general manager and breeding manager at Hilltop Farm, Coloma, MD.

Keurings are also an opportunity for breeders and owners to grow and learn. "In simplest terms, they're an independent check of your own eye, your breeding program, and the choices you're making to be sure you are still on the right track," says USDF and USEF top dressage breeder Ken Borden Jr., owner and operator of Little Bit Farm, Wilmington, IL. "It's difficult to stay objective on our own horses if we don't get out and see what others are producing and where our breed is going. At inspections, we hear from other professionals who see hundreds, even thousands, of horses each year. It's helpful to the breed as a whole. As breeders, we get to see the positive and negative attributes a particular mare or stallion is producing. Often breeding gets trendy. The inspection provides guidelines to help consistently upgrade the breed." ⇨

BEST FEET FORWARD: Careful preparation makes for a better keuring presentation. Handler Jens Richter with the colt Redemption (Raphael – Dostoyevsky Palindrome, D'Olympic), owned by Rebecca Gonzalez-Cook (CA), at the 2013 Oldenburg GOV keuring at Hidden Springs Ranch, Mountain Center, CA

ERPELDING PHOTOGRAPHY



PROUD 'PAPA': Owner/handler Ken Borden Jr. at an ISR-Oldenburg Registry NA keuring with the premium 2007 colt Sir Flemmingh (by Sir Donnerhall) and dam Shirly (Flemmingh x Furore)

A keuring is different from a competition; you aren't there just to show your horse, but rather to take part in a process. Members of inspection juries are selected based on their demonstrated knowledge of and commitment to the breed, such as experience as breeders, involvement with the breed organization, judging credentials, and experts' recommendations. The savvy breeder takes advantage of this opportunity to glean invaluable advice from the inspection-jury members.

"This is a great time to get answers from inspectors; they are very knowledgeable experts. Ask questions," says Borden. "They often give you specific recommendations for your mare. They know the pedigree of the horse, so they may comment on the sire and the dam and his or her lineage. I think that's very beneficial; it's not just the phenotype—what they see in that individual—but also what's in the generations back. Often traits skip generations and come up in a foal that you've produced. It helps me control my potential as a breeder. We all want to increase our odds for success, not only in selling the foal but also in producing something that's better."

Paperwork and Protocol

So you've got a spectacular mare, stallion, or foal and are ready to take a crack at the inspection game. Start by contacting the appropriate breed association for inspection details and its calendar of keurings. Some registries schedule keuring tours during which inspectors travel to various locations around the country, often sport-horse facilities well known for producing that breed of horse. Organize all necessary paperwork well in advance, including memberships, entries, and registration papers; the registry can advise you of what's required.

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Study the information your breed registry provides regarding inspections. For example, the KWPN-NA (the North American branch of the Dutch Warmblood registry) website (kwpn-na.org) lists detailed rules regarding handler attire, shoeing guidelines, acceptable tack, and how foals must be presented. Contact your breed association if you have any questions.

Not all inspections are conducted alike, as each breed association determines the format in which horses are evaluated for acceptance into its registry. The best way to learn what to expect at a keuring is to go as a spectator before you take your own horse, recommend Borden and DiBerardinis. Besides, DiBerardinis notes, attending inspections is fun. "I encourage everyone to go out and watch, even if you're not a breeder. They're a great way to educate your eye."

Preparing for the Keuring

According to Willy Arts, owner/trainer at DG Bar Ranch in Hanford, CA, and a top breeder of Dutch Warmbloods, the keys to a good keuring experience are long-term planning and preparation.

He means really long-term: According to Arts, a foal in good condition is a product not only of good care but of a healthy dam. And a mare who's in good shape during her

pregnancy is more likely to give birth to a robust foal. "It gives the foal a head start," he explains.

DiBerardinis agrees. "Start many, many months in advance," she advises. "You don't want to wait until June when the inspection's in July and decide, 'OK, now I'm going to change my feeding program, or now I'm going to start training my horse for the inspection.' We take everything from a long-distance approach."

Avoid making drastic changes to a horse's feeding or management program, especially prior to the keuring, Arts advises. "Obviously this applies to any horse, but it is especially important for foals, yearlings, and two-year olds," he says.

Well before the keuring, learn what will be required of your horse, and devise a training and conditioning plan accordingly. Each breed association determines the format in which horses are presented for evaluation. Some require horses to be shown at liberty, on the triangle, or both. Some inspections include free-jumping or performing under saddle and over fences. (For specifics, see "Keuring Procedures" on page 37.)

Foals should be halter-broke and accustomed to daily handling well before the keuring. "Our broodmares and babies get a lot of daily handling, but we don't do anything specific before the keuring in terms of exercise. They live out in large fields, so they are running and playing and

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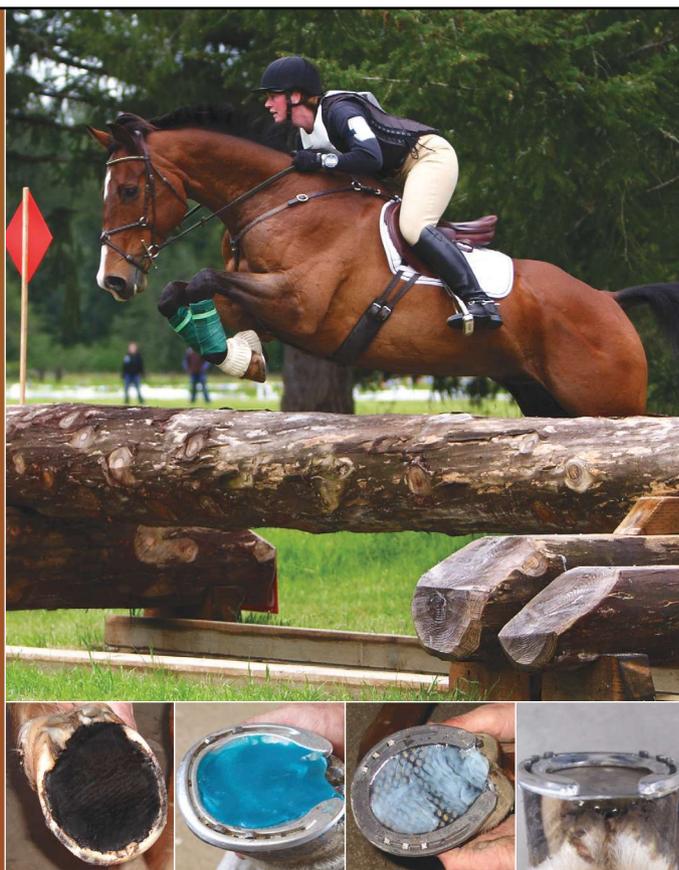
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doing their own conditioning,” says DiBerardinis. “We do work with our babies before the inspection, even though they are going to be shown loose on the triangle. We want them comfortable with the process of coming in, standing up, walking away from Mom, walking near Mom, trotting a little bit in hand. This is just so they are comfortable with the whole thing and it’s not a total shock when they come into the ring for the first time.”

Two-year-olds can take part in a more structured conditioning program. “Starting horses in the two-year-old year at the walk builds strength without wear and tear,” says Arts. He recommends daily time on an exercise mill (a European-style horse walker) if available; otherwise, 30 to 45 minutes of hand-walking at a nicely active pace also does the job. Starting a two-year-old on the lunge line—ideally in a round pen for optimum control and safety—is also appropriate, he says. Lunging instills in the horse a respect for the handler and an understanding of voice commands, both of which are necessary at a keuring, he adds. And stallions, who need to show

good muscling and fitness, need appropriate conditioning as well, so that they move in hand as they would under saddle.

Keuring prep goes beyond physical conditioning. For a polished in-hand presentation, “the horse should understand voice commands and respect the handler,” Arts says.

Don’t leave details until the last minute, our experts advise. Arts recommends having any farrier work done two to three weeks before the inspection to avoid any chances of the horse’s being tender-footed on the big day. Hilltop Farm body-clips its horses two to three weeks in advance, as well. “It has them looking their best,” says DiBerardinis, who adds that “a lot of people don’t body clip, and you certainly don’t have to. It depends on where you live and what time of year the inspection or keuring is.”

Pick the Right Time

Young horses go through awkward growth stages, and your desired keuring date might fall at a gawky time. Knowing this, Borden selects inspections whose timing works well for the youngster, even if it means not presenting the horse at an inspection held at his own farm but hauling to another site at a more conducive time. Know that a weaned foal often doesn’t show as well as a foal at its dam’s side, he notes.

“Foals often show better with their dams because they are far more relaxed with their mommies,” Borden explains. “They may even show much better movement while running alongside and trying to open up their strides to match their dams’ strides, and oftentimes the judges see their potential because they see the similarities between the two.”

Keurings are important for prospective broodmares, too. DiBerardinis recommends having mares inspected before they begin their breeding careers. “You will get the professional input and feedback [from the keuring jury] on your mare’s strengths and weakness before you choose the stallion,” she says. Furthermore, “If you have a young performance mare in work, I really encourage you to go get her inspected then, because she’ll have a better topline and conditioning than she’ll have as a broodmare a couple of years down the road. If they’re in work, even if you don’t have plans of breeding them later, it’s still a great time to get the inspection taken care of.”

Grooming and Turnout

You’ve got a quality horse; now show it at its best. At the inspection, as at a horse show, perfect grooming and turnout create a perfect picture. The horse should be immaculate—although Borden quips that he often does best when the horse is just a bit dirty. Do as much at home as you can to minimize stress (on both the horse and yourself) on inspection day.

Keuring *Faux Pas*

According to our experts, some common inspection blunders include:

- Horses that are not in good shape and condition.
- Horses that are not groomed well or properly turned out.
- Handlers who are unable to show the horse to its fullest potential.
- Owners who are unprepared for the day’s events.

If you are new to the keuring game, don’t be shy. Many professionals are happy to help, so reach out to breeders and handlers for advice. In addition, detailed information packets are available from the various breed registries.

“Read through the breed registry’s rules and guidelines before going, which can answer a lot as to what to expect and how things are run,” says Natalie DiBerardinis, general manager and breeding manager at Hilltop Farm, Colora, MD. “Each inspection runs differently. Be open to asking questions. Call the inspection’s host to touch bases beforehand.”

Keurings, like dressage shows, have rules; know them before you go. “At least once a year we see someone show up with a mare without a bridle, when mares need to be presented in the bridle,” says DiBerardinis.

“We do all the prep we would do for a horse show,” says DiBerardinis: pulling the mane, bathing, braiding, and hoof polish. Arts and Borden both recommend choosing a braiding style to complement the horse’s neck.

A high-quality, refined bridle shows off a beautiful head. A flash noseband can be a good choice for mouthy horses, especially young stallions, who may be tempted to nibble on the reins. Check your breed association’s rules regarding permitted tack.

DIY?

You’ll need to make one important decision: present your horse yourself or enlist the services of a professional handler?

The handler’s job is very important. The keuring jury must evaluate the horse as it is presented, for better or for worse. Their score goes down on the horse’s permanent record, as it were, and a good handler can make a big difference in that score. While some owners and breeders may be up for the job, others may find elements of good presentation, such as running in sync with the horse, difficult.

DiBerardinis, for one, believes that hiring a pro is the way to go. “Presenting your own horse is usually a detriment,” she says. “Not always—there are people who can present their horse well—but I’d guess 90 percent of the

time you’d be best off with a professional handler.”

Borden is a bit more encouraging. “Many amateur handlers are capable if they’re fit enough to run,” he says. But he adds: “Though I find if it’s your own personal product, you tend to be a little conservative in how you handle and may pamper the horse a little bit. Also, while conformation and movement should be weighted pretty equally, I still find the better the mover, the better the foal is going to score.” To that end, a skilled handler can tip the scales in the horse’s favor.

If you choose to use a professional handler, plan well in advance. Let him or her know as much as possible about your horse, including information about his personality, way of going, and cues he’s been taught.

Keuring Procedures

An in-hand evaluation usually includes what’s known as showing on the triangle. The handler leads the horse at a walk, describing the shape of a small triangle, then trots in hand on a larger surrounding triangle. The horse is led clockwise on the triangle, with the handler on the outside (the left side) of the figure. The handler “stands up” the horse at the apex of the triangle so that the inspectors can evaluate his conformation. The horse must be taught to stand quietly and

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HANDLER TEAM: Working together, the handler (holding horse) and the assistant handler (green shirt) strive to present the horse to its best advantage. This photo was taken at Dressage at Devon (PA) 2013, not at a keuring, but the same principles apply. Handler Brendan Curtis (MD) with the Oldenburg mare *Flairance* (Serano Gold x Rubin Royal), owned by Sandie Gaines-Beddard (NC) and bred by Clemens von Merveldt (GER).

in the correct pose: front legs nearly square, hind legs slightly open. The legs closest to the judge should be positioned farther apart from one another than the legs on the opposite side—the so-called open stance. The handler should be able to maneuver out of the judge’s line of sight and adjust the horse’s legs to suit the judge’s viewpoint.

The savvy handler knows all of this, of course, plus some tricks of the trade.

“A good handler knows how to stand a horse up well for the judges beyond the basic open stance we see in every photo taken for sport-horse magazines,” explains DiBerardinis. “A good handler knows how to adapt just a little for that horse’s particular needs and what will show that individual horse off best—whether the neck should be lower or higher, or whether they want the legs a little further apart or closer together. It can change the general appearance. It’s not going to change the correctness of the legs or hide a conformation flaw, but you want to present the horses to their very best. For handlers that are very experienced, this goes into their thought process as they set a horse up.

“The timing and intuitiveness of the handling is just as important,” DiBerardinis continues. “The handler has to be aware. For example, someone who is running a mare and foal pair needs to know how to set up the mare to best show the foal, and also needs to be aware of where the foal is at all times when running the mare.”

Some handlers use an assistant whose job is to care-

fully wield a whip to encourage the horse to show the best trot movement possible. Timing and discretion, as you may imagine, are paramount.

“You don’t want to hype up the horse but energize the horse so it steps under from behind,” explains Borden.

The handling team needs to practice before the keuring. “Ideally the handler and whip person have worked together and have a common shorthand,” says DiBerardinis.

A handler’s clothing should be neutral, conservative, and easy to run in. Each breed association has its own preferred colors, and handler and assistant should match to present a unified look. Sneakers for running, gloves to protect your hands, and a dressage whip as an aid are all common.

A Day in the Life

Make the most of the keuring experience. A positive inspection outcome brings credible marketability to breeding stock, and information gleaned from the judges serves to improve future breeding. Breed-registry inspections improve the sport, encouraging the production of quality horses with correct gaits and conformation as well as overall sport-horse potential.

That said, Borden observes, “Often the best foals don’t show well that first day. Remember, it’s just one day in the life of a foal.” ▲

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