

A Breeder's Notebook: Big Show Temperament

By Johan Dreyer

A prancing, snorting, wild-eyed horse is a sight to behold. With his tail over his back on a spine tintiling pasture trot he impresses horses and humans alike, their responses differ though. A horse will inquire as to what brought this on, the human wants to acquire the prancing individual. Oom Wilco Schwarzer said: "a snort adds R1000 to the price". This has the result that in shows, the ones who seem to be blowing their minds are proclaimed champions. It isn't the horse that's nuts - it's the owners, breeding with hyperactive horses proliferate the defect.



Alert, Frank Hunt's sire, unfortunately deceased

In order to breed prancing, snorting horses but eliminate the hyperactive ones, the only sustainable strategy is to select for the individuals that, in terms of temperament in showing (and racing), have an ambition to dominate, known as: Big Show Temperament. Temperament is defined as a prevailing dominant quality of mind that characterizes somebody (Encarta). Therefore **Big Show Temperament** in a horse has to be a **prevailing dominant quality of mind that allows the individual to exhibit himself in a remarkable way**.

To explain: horses evolved as herd animals. Discipline in a herd is kept in a ranked order - the pecking order. It is disseminated from the leader down to the lowest mare. Within the herd horses compete for a better position on that order: the more dominant the higher his ranking. Horses do not give speeches or write memos. They communicate by doing, in other words by means of body language - as the ad goes: "no lawyers, definitely no lawyers". In racing a horse strives to dominate the new herd by out running them. In showing the horse dominates the new herd with his body form. Humans call it *a big heart* in racing, or *big show temperament* in showing; it's nothing mystical - it's an ever present herd instinct that's being utilized. This phenomenon in both racing and showing could be summarised as **an ambition to dominate**.

But this *ambition to dominate* is not that simple an issue. The level of competitiveness in the herd is determined by the characters of individual members. A further complication is that competitiveness as a motivating force differs widely in individuals. (In racing you do not want the one who run with the herd, you aim to select the one who out-run the herd). Exuberance is certainly part of this *ambition to dominate*, but acting-big is also well documented as a defence mechanism within a herd. It is accepted that for horses as in the Maslow theory there exists a hierarchy of needs, with food right on top and security a close second with social position a tied third or a fourth place to belonging-to. In practice this implies that:

- In an existing herd there will be very little evidence of *ambition to dominate* if food or security is an issue.
- There are huge differences in the level of the *ambition to dominate* between families, amongst others things related to hormone levels.
- There will be cases where the *ambition to dominate* is more of an acquired habit and not solely a genetic feature.
- A horse showing himself in a herd context, without the prompt of a new member closing-in, is probably not the leader, he is well fed and has ambitions.
- In an established herd, if one horse prances, those that join in are his contemporaries as far as social stature goes.

Therefore it can be concluded that if you witness a group of youngsters playing, the ones showing lots of presence most probably will have the *ambition to dominate* when dropped into a new herd. Those that will not join in are either below or above the prancing horse in stature. That goes for both youngsters and grown horses.

But be well aware that choosing the one with a noticeable affinity to show himself might leave you with a rogue, maybe even an outlaw. When selecting a horse with *an ambition to dominate* be conscious that he might be difficult as they habitually won't subside; they can be nervous, tense, just plain hell bend. They always need extra: extra time, extra attention, extra care, they are **not** the easy-going-never-a-problem horses. They are always ready for confrontation, difficult and stubborn. Do not sell them! A horse with confidence and presence - the natural leaders - are never easy. You have to know what you are doing and where you want him to go. They want to lead not be led. To win them over does take a lot of convincing. If you succeed the rewards are plentiful, they usually have a lot of heart and excel in any competition. They strive to get ahead; they will take you to the top if you can bear with them, whatever the discipline. Boucheron is a case in point, beautiful and gifted with a wild streak that gave him a touch of greatness. Cameo's Spring Cheer became the South African five gaited Grand Champion but it took four years to bring that big fire in her under control. That top South African stallion Spring Fever was her foal. If you know the Spring Fever progeny you will understand. Hi-Wing came to South Africa as a breeding stallion. They could not control that fire in him, Izak Strauss brought that fire under control and showed him. Even today if you see Hi-Wing in a horse's ancestry, you know that horse will most probably have ambition and go.

When you have picked yourself a rogue, make sure that his wildness is not meanness - there has to be a good disposition. Taming the wildness is not the problem if there is a good disposition. It's the heart and ambition of a great horse that distinguishes him. To be great a horse needs heart, ambition and gameness, only then will you get that tremendous drive from behind when he moves. **A great horse has presence, he makes his own shadow and does not come crawling to hide in yours.** Be conscious of the fact that these are not the ingredients of an easy horse, not at first anyway.

If we want to **select-for**, we at first have to **identify-between** the horses with *ambition to dominate* and:

- Tense horses, the real light-sweaty-lunatics. Do not confuse a scared reaction with prancing to dominate.
- Hyperactive horses, they are not prancing, they can't stop running. The day you bury them they will still be running.
- Overly aggressive horses are also dominant but in an aggressive way, mostly with a mean streak. Always biting and kicking at every horse in sight, not withstanding where they are or what you do.

- Abrasive horses (those with a sour disposition): they do not like any human or most horses. Actually they are angry at themselves and do not leave any doubt as to that. Some get to be that way because of circumstances, others are born like that.

Yet there is a paradox with too many instances to be accidental: it has been recorded that it is the non-aggressive mares with a female look that turn out to be the big breeders (these are the ones that breed the champions). In the case of a stallion the opposite is true. A breeder of racehorses once told me "if you have to go on your knees to confirm that a stallion is in fact a stallion and you still use him that is where you will stay – on your knees". According to him a stallion should leave you in no doubt as to the fact that he is one; not in his appearance, not in his behaviour. That is not hard to explain, it could be summarized in one word – hormones. A stallion pumped up with testosterone will behave and look like a stallion should. The key characteristics of testosterone are: dominance, aggression, muscular development and muscle definition. Estrogens to the contrary are responsible for the lack of aggression and dominance in females as well as the lack of muscular development in any of the muscles responsible for athletic ability. Accordingly in mares there are quite a few cases of excellent breeders which never exhibit any ambition to dominate. Jodie Ann would be a case in point. It would be easy then to end this discussion here by saying that a mare should look like a mare and act like one and a stallion should look and act like a stallion as it indicates balanced levels of their respective hormones and that these will take care of the *ambition to dominate* all by themselves.

But the history in racing and showing contradicts the influence of testosterone as a key or mitigating factor in an *ambition to dominate* both in the individual concerned and in his parents. The excellent record that geldings have in both showing and racing add value to this contention. Sea Biscuit was a gelding and became one of the American racing icons. Although he was for a thoroughbred a relatively small horse his jockey related his secret later on: if he could only get a good look at the leading horse, he never failed to find what was needed to out-run him. This implies that although testosterone influences aggression and dominance *per se*, it should not be a selection criterion for *ambition to dominate*. *Ambition to dominate* has to be clearly distinguished from dominance as in aggression. Northern Dancer, one of the most successful sire-of-racehorses, sire-of-sires and sire-of-dams in recent history, did not display any of the dominant testosterone influences. In fact, as a yearling he was rather small and unimpressive. King's Pact was for many years the most successful mare to grace the South African tracks, (in terms of money earned) and she turned out to be as successful a broodmare, yet she had a large head and was far from an excellent example of femininity.

To refine the selection for *an ambition to dominate*, let's first look at the absence thereof: The main reason why Thoroughbreds, Saddle horses, and actually most of the show horse breeds (which include Arabians bred for showing) is failing in endurance contests is precisely this *ambition to dominate*. Mostly unwitting selective breeding has promoted individuals which will experience inflated adrenaline levels as soon as they come into a new herd. In present day endurance you have to select a horse with low adrenaline levels inert to herd pressures which equals low heart beat and a low breathing rate.

To identify a horse with the required low adrenaline levels - that is a low heart beat and breathing rate - we have to identify the key elements in the body form of such a horse. The American Western pleasure discipline evolved around having the horse relaxed (that is low adrenaline levels). Their horses are relaxed, under control and light on the bit (actually off the bit) in all the gaits and in stopping. Their horses look like relaxed horses should: a striking half-moon form they maintain throughout all movements and gaits with tails hanging loose, not swishing.

The half moon - his body forming a perfect half moon from head to tail - is the only form to keep a horse relaxed. It is his grazing form: the only innate long term sustainable body form for a horse. A horse will put his head down to relax as it is how a horse reduces his adrenaline levels; he can slumber like that on his feet. The heartbeat and the rate of breathing are under control of the Cerebellum and Modulla Oblongata, located on top of the spinal cord beneath the brain. The half moon form is the most compact the Cerebellum and Modula Oblongata gets to be. The moment these get stressed, that is when he lifts his neck, more so when he drops his nose, the heartbeat and the rate of breathing increase dramatically. It follows that when a horse lifts his neck and drops his nose, as in prancing, the heartbeat and the rate of breathing increase, which stimulates a rush of adrenaline, preparing the body for prancing or running, amongst other things.

If we have to infer selection criteria for *an ambition to dominate* from the preceding discussions it would be:

- The horse should in an established and secure (herd) environment effectively stay in a relaxed half moon form. At least then he is not hyper active.
- At the premonition of a threat, reacts alert but quickly returns to a half moon form. Now you know he is not a tense horse.
- In reaction to the leader of the herd prancing, immediately acquires a responding prancing form. A young horse prancing with the leader has *an ambition to dominate* and heart.
- The horse that retains that prancing form the longest probably has the biggest zest for being at the top. *Ambition to dominate* is high on his triangle of needs.
- If he seems inquiring about everything new especially horses, your choice is made. If he does that he has got heart, ambition and gameness: the ingredients for a truly great horse.

In 1905, the German born physicist Albert Einstein (1875-1955) published his Special Theory of Relativity which turned the world of science on its head. To add injury to insult he followed that with The General Relativity Theory in 1915, the main contention of which was that space and time is not a constant and that both are distorted by matter. In 1919 an eclipse of the sun allowed scientists to prove the theory. When they ask Albert Einstein if he slept at all that night because Max Planck - also a very well known physicist - stayed awake to await the outcome, he answered; "if he understood the theory he would have slept". You will sometimes find the same awareness of his superior ability in the truly great horse: once he is settled within himself, he can be embarrassingly calm before an event, nearly in meditation, until he is dropped in that new herd and the track opens up before him.....

This is dedicated to Oom Rykie Geldenhuys, my father in law, he was the one who sparked my interest in breeding and racehorses. We lost him on the 17th of November 2009.



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