



LARRI JO STARKEY

# BREED FOR SPEED

*What you need to think about when you want a fast foal.*

**By MaryAnna Clemons**

A fast foal is the goal. How do you achieve one? Some breeders have a few suggestions.

ANYONE IN THE RODEO OR RACING ARENA WANTS A HORSE THAT is fast enough to get the job done but sane enough that they don't get killed. To breed for speed as a responsible breeder, it's fairly unanimous that you have to take bone, conformation and mind into account.

We talked to four breeders from lifelong enthusiasts to beginners in one of the worst equine economies ever, and their major theme was the same: Change with the times and keep the faith.

## Lifelong Breeder

JOHN KNIPLING HAS BEEN BREEDING QUARTER HORSES FOR 47 years, which is the same amount of time he has been married to his wife, Cheryl, his partner in business from the first year of their marriage.

Together, they built a life and a breeding operation on the Crow Reservation in central South Dakota, east of the Missouri River and just seven miles, as the crow flies, from Gann Valley.

John was a rodeo man, having won the bareback titles for the South Dakota Rodeo Association in 1963-64 and the all-around title in 1963. His brother was a breeder of racehorses, and the couple started getting a mare or two from him to start their own operation. In fact, John said, there is nothing else he can imagine having spent his life doing, and he doesn't plan to slow down.

John started out the way most breeders do, with a select number of broodmares and an eye for conformation. Back in the day, he says, horses were the ultimate at multitasking. The same horse you showed in halter was later used for tie-down roping, team roping and then would often go to the pen for barrel racing. There were no horses that could only do one thing. And, he says, in part that's what he has always bred for. He likes horses with speed, but they have to have the bone, the durability and the stamina to also survive in the rodeo arena.

One way that John has been able to breed the speed and the durability into his horses is to let them breed and foal

naturally. He has acres and acres of rolling hills, rocky outcroppings and other geographically challenging places for horses to learn to be horses. Letting the mares have their foals in the open, as opposed to stalls, John said, allows horses to learn to run from the get-go. Their legs are strong, and they fill out better, he thinks, than if he babies them.

"It does a tremendous job of developing these colts," John said, "and their abilities to handle themselves, both physically and mentally. I think it sure has a lot to do with their later soundness and their ability to be surefooted. Lots of obstacles out there, and that helps them develop a natural way of taking care of their feet and perfecting their lead changes. We bring them in later to halter-break them and then put them in the production sale."

The production sale, mentioned modestly, is a 27-year venture that has been quite successful.

The Knippings have relied heavily on pedigree to know what they are breeding and what to buy the few times they've brought outside stallions or mares into their program. One such stallion of theirs that had the speed is Dunits Lean Dream.



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To John and Cheryl Knipping, raising horses in the open is a big part of teaching them to handle their feet.

“Consistency in the get is what we want,” John said. He is moving away from the prospects and working with the older horses, as the market changes. “Three Bars (TB) has had such a big influence on all the horses, and when we were first starting out, he was pretty hot. His get really do well in the roping and bulldogging, and he crossed well with the foundation mares.”

John got hooked on that running blood at the time when Clabber Bars was hot. John had a son of Clabber Bars that he bred to mares of the Bandy and Johnny Dial bloodlines. That’s when John got started with the racing side of breeding.

Today, however, he’s redirecting his efforts toward horses that will work with youth. The speed is there, as the pedigrees show, but John knows that careful breeding will keep the speed and the mind in one piece.

## OUTCROSS POSSIBILITIES

Equine veterinarian, AQHA breeder and former president of the Florida Quarter Horse Racing Association Steve Fisch knows the importance of the outcross in his breeding practices. After scanning and dissecting pedigrees for possible mare/stallion breeding, Steve will go see the horses in person.

“We cull 90-95 percent of possible breedings based on conformation alone,” Steve said. “We are looking down the road for soundness — that mare or stallion (in our program) is going to be producing generations of babies for the track or in the arena and they have to be able to perform for the long haul.”

Steve stands three stallions, and while his main focus is breeding for Quarter Horse racing, his secondary goal is to have good barrel racing horses that come from his stallions.

As a veterinarian, Steve knows more about biology than most and goes as far as talking about slow- and fast-twitch muscles and how those muscles affect the running speed of the offspring. Knowing that outcrosses are essential for the health and well-being of a line of horses is one thing, knowing which horse to cross on which is something else.

“Your first outcross is your best, hybrid vigor foal and is going to be a superior performer in most cases, but they don’t breed as true since they are crossbred,” Steve said. “That is the general rule, but there will be a small percentage that will pass on their genetic makeup, so that a percentage of that second and third generation will have and pass on their performance ability. That is when you get a superior breeding animal.”

It can take years and years of dedicated breeding to even produce one superior animal as a broodmare or stallion, and it can take a minimum of four years and upward of 12 years to see how their get produce and whether they are consistent, Steve said. Not only that, but if you don’t have a good cross, you can very well end up back at the drawing board.

Thoroughbred horses, for one, have a different type of muscle fiber than a foundation-bred Quarter Horse. Slow-twitch type 1 horses work off of aerobic metabolism and that’s how they produce their energy. They are a highly oxidative type of horse, whereas in other breeds you will have type 2 fast-twitch fibers, which are further divided into fast-twitch types 2A and 2B and are low-oxidative fibers.

If you are breeding for speed, but want that hybrid vigor as well, then you could choose your Thoroughbred based on how well he did

“We look for a horse with really good balance and flex to it. He has to have good bone and carry himself well with a nice, but not real high, head carriage,” John said. “I really like to see a horse move out without anyone on him and see how he changes leads and that he looks like a horse you’d like to be on. There are some I’ve seen that when they move out they aren’t tracking right, and that’s something you want to know.”

A consideration that John thinks about on every mating he plans is that the prettiest horses don’t necessarily produce the best. He enjoys taking what he knows about a horse’s past, dissecting the pedigree and then sticking to basics.

“They were speed horses, the early ones: Clabber, Sugar Bars, Bandy, but they were also horses that had bone and body and substance, and their offspring were good ranch horses.



Steve Fisch, his wife, Kelley, and First Down Straw

ANDREA CAUDILL

in sprint races and how far ahead he ran. You’d want a fast, early-speed Thoroughbred to cross on your Quarter Horse so that you end up with early speed and hybrid vigor from outcrossing.

Clearly, this is a simplistic explanation of a complicated process, and Steve said it’s even possible that while trying to produce a speedier Quarter Horse, you could end up slowing him down through the breeding process. So it’s imperative to know the full ins and outs of breeding before producing more horses.

“There is some science to it,” Steve said. “When you are looking to produce the whole package, start with a pedigree of fast horses, not just one generation that produced a superstar. What you want is a long line of generation after generation producing speed horses. And if you are looking to have the soundness in there, you have to look for great conformation, bone makeup, strength, size of their feet — the whole body phenotype that can not only produce speed, but a horse in which the body stays together.”

Steve hasn’t let the economy slow him down, either. He knows there is always a market for a higher quality animal. While not every animal can sell at the highest dollar, consistency is rewarded. His business plan hasn’t changed, and he thinks that high-performing horses, the ones with the phenotype to do the job they are bred to do, are still in demand.

“When you are breeding for the best,” Steve said, “the economy is not a factor. You’ll have fewer of the lower end mares calling and wanting to book to him. It doesn’t hurt the business plan, just cuts off the bottom end. A horse market correction if you will.”

**John Knippling said  
it best, “The first  
outcross is the best.”**

They proved themselves in the arena, on the ranch and at the racetrack,” John said. “I don’t want to reinvent the wheel. What works for someone else is good enough for me. Three Bars wasn’t the greatest long-distance horse, but he crossed well on foundation horses. There are some short horses that can really run fast and aren’t rated at 100 yards, and there are horses that are short that will probably never be AAA but could beat a AAA at 20-30 yards. They get out there quick and settle down and can be calm. That’s what we are looking for.”

## Just Starting Out

THE ECONOMY HAS NOT HURT JOHN AS MUCH AS IT HAS MADE him fine-tune his program, cull what isn’t working and make some changes in where his horses are going and at what age. He transitioned from breeding for the racetrack into breeding for rodeos, which he still does. Now, he’s also branching into the youth market with started horses. The speed is still there, he said, but his older horses have the minds to get along with youth in the arena and not at 12 either, but rather, as younger horses, 7-9.

Meanwhile, Jay Ralston, the ranch manager for the Cloverleaf Ranch and his business partner, Kathy DeRamus, are taking advantage of a down economy to get started in the breeding industry. Kathy had about 10 horses when they met, but she was starting them and selling them as prospects, as opposed to breeding anything. The market took a downturn and left her holding horses she couldn’t sell.

They could have taken a loss, or they could make a plan. Together, they decided that now was the time to get into something that others were trying to get out of: breeding for speed.

Kathy, as practically a life-long barrel racer, knew the lines with speed, and she knew a good horse. Jay, a previous rodeo competitor and all-around ranch hand, had the knack for picking out horses with good temperaments and brains. He likes an intelligent horse that knows how to think for itself. Otherwise, he said, the speed is just an accident waiting to happen. Together, the duo put together a small band of horses and named their new endeavor.

“We’re going to breed the horses we had as kids. Today, most people can’t afford a single-event horse, and they are looking for those versatile horses again,” Jay said. “The kind with good bone, a good disposition, strong joints, a good calm and willing mind, and an attitude that can go from 0 to 60 and 60 to 0 in a good amount of time.”

Jay, who used to buy into the macho cowboy image, now enjoys a more holistic approach to his horsemanship. While he realizes that not every day will be a love fest with a young horse, he’s no longer dominating the horses but working with them to get the best out of them. And he has taken to barrel racing with a passion he didn’t realize he was capable of.

“I never thought I would love to compete in barrel racing, but I do. That’s what we are looking to produce, is good winning barrel horses and rodeo horses. With the economy the way it is, we can afford to go out there and be just as picky as we can be,” Jay said. “We aren’t settling for anything less than perfection.”

Jay takes the breeding matches on a 50-50 basis and gives just as much credit to each horse and what it brings to the match. At a time like this, he says, why settle for anything less?

In the same breath, Jay points out that even full brothers or sisters can be very different creatures. While he might have a good idea based on past performances, pedigrees and visual attributes, he knows that breeding can only go so far in creating a perfect animal.

Dean Brenner and his wife, Michelle, have been in the breeding business for 11 years and have an accounting business as well. They have three children together and call McCloud, Oklahoma, home. With 45 acres and a complete breeding set-up, their business is still doing well, despite a slow economy. Where they used to breed for cutting and reining, now they are looking toward including racing and barrel horses.

“We saw a niche market in the speed industry to breed for color,” Brenner said. “Especially palominos and buckskins that are purely race-bred with speed indexes pretty much throughout their pedigree. There weren’t many out there when we made the switch and really there still aren’t that many.”

The Brennens also culled their band of mares down to the best of the best that would fit the characteristics of the stallion they have. Their band of mares numbers 20, with two appendix broodmares and one palomino stallion that is an own son of Oklahoma Fuel.

In their mares, they are looking for the black-type producer to see whether the speed is consistent on the pedigree, not just a one-shot freak, but with good speed indexes throughout. However, Brenner said, he’s not looking for the fastest horse

out there. In fact, he’d rather have one in the 80s or 90s that has a good mind than a horse with a 100 speed index that can’t keep it together enough to be a barrel horse or fit well with a younger rider.

Conformation is at the top of Dean’s list of musts. Crooked legs of any kind are culled.

“The economy is a double-edged sword right now,” Dean said. “You have much better quality to pick from, as the owners can’t afford to carry them; but on the other side, if you buy them, now you have to carry them.”

Another opportunity that Dean has seen is to purchase a good mare inexpensively, get her in foal to his stallion if they are a good fit and then sell her as a bred mare. Where a buyer might not be able to afford to carry a mare and pay her mare care cost and stud fee, some find buying a bred mare more affordable.

“The average person is getting a deal because they don’t have the cost and upkeep of the stallion. A person can buy this well-bred mare, already in foal, for a reasonable amount and start his own herd,” Dean said. “And I have another market to sell to.”

In all, the economy hasn’t changed what the speed breeders are doing as much it has allowed them to fine-tune what they already have. And that can only be a good thing when horses are abundant. ■



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In these economic conditions, you can be picky about mares you purchase and even about their color.

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