

CANADIAN *Thoroughbred*

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Ready, Set, Sell



PHOTO BY DAVID LANCHEFF

Making a handsome, saleable yearling starts well before 60 days before the sale.

by Karen Briggs

Yearling sales: for breeders, they're the biggest events of the year. Everything you've worked towards comes down to a handful of days in September, when the produce of your farm gets primped, polished, and presented for the admiration (and more importantly, the bids) of the racing community. Buyers want to see a fit, healthy, shiny, athletic young horse, bursting with racing potential. But getting a yearling to that point is a delicate balance indeed, and the preparation begins many months beforehand.

Gail Wood, whose ability to produce exceptional yearlings is legendary, has an established routine for preparing youngsters which she has honed over a quarter of a century. "Buyers want a much better horse now than they did 25 years ago," she observes. "Above all, they want the appearance of maturity. The yearlings we present have to look like racehorses, and they have to act like they have the mental maturity to be racehorses, too."

Exercise and Alchemy

At Woodlands Farm in Hillsburgh, Ontario, the process which takes young horses from wild and woolly "yaklings" to sleek, athletic stakes-winners-in-waiting is the product of equal parts art and science.

"We don't really consider it sales prep," Wood says. "Only



PHOTOS BY SHERLEY GILL

From the Hill 'N' Dale consignment of 2006, this beautifully turned-out colt by Dixieland Band-Eureka Lass (by Lucky North), which eventually sold for \$50,000, is being shown to prospective buyers in front of their sales barn.

about half of our (yearlings) go to the sales, so up until the last six weeks they all get treated the same. In February, we separate the boys and the girls, but they continue to live outside, in fields with run-in sheds, because I really believe you can't raise a racehorse in a stall. Mine are pretty, but they're tough! At this stage, of course, they're really hairy, so we start weighing them once a week with a weight-tape. The hair can sometimes hide the fact that a horse isn't gaining weight as he should, so it's important to use the tape.

"All of ours get second-cut hay, and a special grain mix

which is formulated by our local feed mill to complement the nutrients that are, and aren't, in that hay, based on a lab analysis. In the winter, I add three ounces of oil to each youngster's feed, but I stop giving that once the spring grass comes in, so they don't get diarrhea.

"We also worm the yearlings once a month, rotating the products, and their feet are done once a month from the age of six weeks, on. Every 60 days, we pull blood, and treat each horse according to the results. And we also vaccinate pretty heavily," says Wood. "The sales are very tough on their immune systems, and we also take into account that their lives change dramatically from then on, because they go straight into training - so I believe they need that protection."

Controlled exercise is also an important part of the process of transforming a gangly baby into a well-muscled racing prospect. In the final six weeks leading up to the sale, Wood introduces her yearlings to the Equiciser, a contraption which allows each horse to exercise in a 70 foot circle, safely sandwiched between an inner and outer fence and slowly rotating panels. "We work them up to about an hour a day of walking on the Equiciser," she says.

An Equiciser is also instrumental in the conditioning of yearlings at Glenn Sikura's Hill 'N' Dale Farm, in Aurora, Ontario. Farm manager Fred Stuckless starts the farm's yearling consignment on a controlled exercise program each May. "They only do four or five minutes a day to start, but we build them up to 25 or 30 minutes depending on the animal ... and by September they're going at a fast walk, just to the point where they have to break into a trot. Honestly, it's the greatest thing ever invented — so much better than a hotwalker because their heads aren't tied, they have some freedom of movement, and there are more speed settings. The colts just love that walking machine ... the fillies are a little more finicky, but they come around.

"What I'm aiming for is a horse who's muscled up and not showing any ribs, just showing good definition in the shoulders and the quarters. I try not to get them TOO fit, because they'll get to hurting themselves, especially the colts — and they'll also be too much of a handful at the sale. Sometimes it's a fine line between fit enough, and too fit to show, so we try to peak them a little early and then back off if we need to in the final couple of weeks.

"The Equiciser is probably the most important part of our sales prep. These days, the horses have to look the part. They've got to look like racehorses. And a fit horse just carries himself well, he looks confident and bold and attractive to the buyer."

An exercise routine is all the more crucial in the weeks leading up to the sale because most consignors start to restrict



Thorough preparation and a spectacular pedigree brought top dollars for Gail Wood, who consigned Hip No. 34 in the 2006 CTHS Selected Yearling. The charming chestnut colt by Hold That Tiger, out of the Forty Niner mare, Brittan Lee, was purchased by Winsong Farms for \$250,000.

"The one thing I find disturbing is that I don't think you should try to sell your horse like you were a used car salesman. All it does is annoy the client when there's a lot of babble and hype. I try not to insult a buyer's intelligence. I find the best thing to do is let the horse do the talking." - Gail Wood

turn-out for yearlings at that time. It's important to keep a youngster's coat from bleaching in the mid-summer sun, and it's equally important that each horse learns to deal with confinement in a stall, and being handled daily. At Hill 'N' Dale, the yearlings are turned out only under the light of the moon: fillies as a group, and the rough-and-tumble colts, in individual paddocks. Nighttime turnout is also the rule at Woodlands Farm. "We bring them in every morning, and they eat their breakfast and lunch inside, then turn them out and they eat their supper outside," explains Wood.

Inside time is also time to learn how to lead politely, stand for buyers to observe their conformation, and enjoy being brushed and handled. Wood finds after exercise to be the perfect time to groom and handle her yearlings, as they're more attentive when the edge has been taken off. "We groom them daily, lay their manes over with a wet brush, and bathe them once a week. If they've gotten sunburnt, we sometimes give them a leave-in oil conditioning treatment. It stays in the coat for a day — really gets filthy with all the dirt it attracts, but it does wonders for the coat when you rinse it out."

Wood's staff uses Chifney bits on their yearlings as necessary



Hill 'N' Dale farm manager, Fred Stuckless, takes a break with his crew during the 2006 CTHS Selected Yearling Sale.

"I think the biggest mistake some of the smaller breeders make is not putting enough emphasis on that first impression. Not only aren't their horses groomed properly, but their people are there in jeans and workboots, their stable area isn't kept clean, and they don't know how to show the horse well. As a result their horses just don't bring the prices." - Fred Stuckless

— some colts, in particular, need the attention-getting control afforded by a Chifney, while others do not. Stuckless, however, prefers to get each and every yearling used to the feel of a Chifney in the mouth. "We introduce it in the stall at first, and progress to each horse wearing a Chifney when being led to the paddock and back, but actually being led by the halter. Soon they don't go anywhere without a Chifney. But we don't attach the lead to the Chifney till the bit has become second nature to them," he says.

Likewise, Hill 'N' Dale's yearlings are all outfitted with flat steel plates on their front hooves before they go to the sale, because Stuckless finds it makes for an attractive, polished presentation. But Wood prefers to shoe only when necessary. "I'll put front shoes on if it's been a dry summer and the feet are looking a bit cracked," she says. "Some horses need it, some don't."

Show Time

Though the power of an impeccable pedigree is undeniable at a yearling sale, neither Wood nor Stuckless is willing to underestimate the importance of a polished, professional turnout for sheer curb appeal.

"I want my yearlings to be just a little bit fat going into the sale," Stuckless says, "because they're going to get stressed out at the sale and some of that weight will just melt off. Some of these horses will show 40 or 50 times before they go into the sales ring over those three or four days, so it's stressful for them — they almost don't have time to eat, even if they wanted to! You've got to have that foundation, so by the time they go into the ring they still look good."

Says Wood, "I've heard people say that if the pedigree is good enough, you could show up with

the horse covered in mud and it would still fetch the right price — but my experience tells me that's not true. Turnout is definitely important. You can have a beautiful woman sitting in a bar, and she's still more likely to get picked up if she's well-dressed and made up, than if she's sitting there in sweats with no lipstick on!"

Some people, she adds, get hung up on blemishes — the minor lumps and bumps young horses often acquire in the course of growing up, which have no effect on their future soundness. "Let's face it, no-one NEEDS a racehorse," she says. "Racehorses are a luxury product, not a dented-can product. No-one wants a scratched luxury product."

But Stuckless finds "the more experienced trainers will overlook the blemishes — they know the difference between that and an actual soundness problem. They put much more emphasis on the x-rays. They'll study those films and read what the veterinarian has written, so we try very hard to use vets who phrase things so as not to give a worse impression than necessary! We don't want to hide anything — that just reflects badly on us. But some vets will make everything sound gloom and doom; we just want to represent each horse fairly."

Turnout isn't just about a gleaming coat, a neatly tamed mane, and handsomely trimmed feet, however. You never get a second chance to make a first impression — and Stuckless believes that extends to the vibe left by the handlers and the horse's surroundings. "I think the biggest mistake some of the smaller breeders make is not putting enough emphasis on that first impression," he says. "Not only aren't their horses

Growth by Injection?

With the current emphasis on fast-maturing, strapping, well-muscled yearlings in today's Thoroughbred industry, it seems there's less and less room for the late-developing individuals. Saddled with a yearling who's undersized or still at that awkward, teenaged stage as sale time nears, one can understand the temptation to resort to artificial means to catch that youngster up with his peers. But the use of growth hormone appeals to neither Wood nor Stuckless.

"I come from the cattle industry originally," says Wood, "and it's used routinely to put weight on show cattle. But that's all it really does, and it's not even that effective. I'm sure there are people who use it (on horses), but you're not going to make a big, stout yearling out of a poor, backward one with it."

Stuckless agrees, "(Growth hormone use) is out there, but how much it's used, I don't know. I personally would never use the stuff. I figure it will show up, because those horses (who've been on it) will crash after the buyer takes them home, and the reputation you get by doing that will come back to haunt you!"

Says Wood, "I think if you're going to breed horses you have to be prepared that not every one of them will necessarily be a great yearling sale prospect. You have to be willing to race some of them yourself."

groomed properly, but their people are there in jeans and workboots, their stable area isn't kept clean, and they don't know how to show the horse well. As a result their horses just don't bring the prices. We bring staff up from the States especially for the yearling sales, because they're professionals and really know how to show a horse. We dress everyone the same, everyone neat and tidy, shoes clean, shirts tucked in, the aisle swept and the stalls kept picked, and we dress our area with flowers and really make an effort.

"You have to act professional to be taken seriously."

Being professional also extends to your sales pitch, says Wood. "The one thing I find disturbing is that I don't think you should try to sell your horse like you were a used car salesman," she says. "All it does is annoy the client when there's a lot of babble and hype. I try not to insult a buyer's intelligence. I find the best thing to do is let the horse do the talking."

Stuckless notes that many of the same buyers return to view Hill 'N' Dale's stock year after year, "so we must be doing something right."

"We're the leading consignor at the CTHS sale at Woodbine most years," he says. "In 2006 we had the second-highest horse in the sale, a Cherokee Run/Noble Strike colt who went for \$200,000." Notable graduates of the Hill 'N' Dale program include Jambalaya, A Bit O Gold, One for Rose, Steady Ruckus, and Blondeinamotel.

At the core of a successful consignment, however, is the pedigree, the x-rays, and endoscope results — the things that cannot be faked. "The prep is just the icing on the cupcake," Wood says. "It's still got to be a good cupcake."

"That said, the reality is that with the radiographs and the scoping, we're trying to make guarantees on an animal, and that's really impossible to do. You can't determine what's in a horse's soul and heart that way, and that's more important than all the other factors."

It's those intangibles which will always make buying a yearling a shot in the dark — a gamble which may, or may not, pay off the following year. **CT**