

Breeding Decisions: To Retire or Keep Racing? The Ladies' Story

Fall is the time of year that the question of retiring racehorses for breeding purposes enters the thoughts of people in the Thoroughbred business. Taking into consideration a variety of factors, horsemen must, on a case-by-case basis, evaluate whether their horses should stay racing or make the transition to breeding. Once the decision is made to retire, there are unique transition concerns, especially for maiden mares.

Overview of factors

So much of the world of Thoroughbred racing is part art, part science. In deciding to move a filly or mare from a racing to a breeding career, horsemen have to look at a variety of factors regarding their pro-

spective broodmare. Some of the decision is affected by the owners' level of involvement in the game (solely for racing or commercial breeding or a combination of both) and their expectations for the future.

Everyone approaches the decision to retire from a slightly different angle. Barry Irwin of Team Valor International near Versailles, Ky., said, "Basically, we operate a racing stable of horses that are owned in the limited liability company format by members that own fractional interests. The purpose of the partnership is to provide members with as many quality racing opportunities as possible. Unlike professional breeders that must maximize the financial aspects of an enterprise, we are more interested in proving our fillies on the racetrack

than fashioning their subsequent careers as broodmares, so we might race a mare longer than commercial breeders."

Irwin continued, "Our members do not decide to participate in a venture based strictly on maximizing their investment, but in consuming the product and selling the asset when it is finished being a productive racehorse. Mostly, the decision for us is based on whether the mare is so old that continuing to race her would jeopardize our partnership from realizing a good return on her. We have raced mares at 6. Rarely, however, have we raced a mare at 7. We poll our members and have votes on whether to continue to race or retire mares of advanced age. Time and time again, our partners opt for racing over breeding, be-



ANNIE M. EBERHARDT

When to retire a female racehorse depends on the owner's long-term goals

cause that is their interest.”

Meg Levy, owner of Bluewater Sales near Lexington, said, “You have to look at each horse as an individual. Then we look at pedigree, age, and physical condition.” For Levy, it is a balancing act. “You look at economics and timing and assess how they look and feel.”

Clifford Barry of Pin Oak Stud near Versailles, Ky., thinks it is all about the horse. “We like to leave them in training. As long as they are happy and healthy, they stay in training.” Barry said. “We look at it from a racing stable perspective, not the commercial value.” “Mrs. Abercrombie (owner of Pin Oak Stud) makes the final decision on all retirements. She knows and understands the game. She is the ultimate horseperson.”

Economics

The recent change in the economy has affected the horse industry and the breeding industry in particular. The law of supply and demand has caused a change in the pressure to retire, so some fillies are staying in competition longer.



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Horse of the Year Rachel Alexandra is a recent retiree

Credit has dried up, and people are not spending on horses as they once did. “Mares used to be a very tradable and liquid asset.” Levy said. “Now you need to look at the pedigree and your proximity to a sale. You balance what they might make on the racetrack versus what they can bring at a sale.”

When horses are retired, Team Valor has had the most success selling a filly or young mare in foal rather than as a broodmare prospect. “We typically use the model of buy, race, breed, and sell. A premium is paid at sale if a filly or mare is in foal,” said Irwin.

Physical

Physical fitness is a big consideration when evaluating a filly for potential retirement. Sometimes an injury makes retirement an easy decision; other times, it is not so cut-and-dried. Racing is a demanding sport and takes its toll on the horses’ joints in particular. Sometimes recurring issues can be enough to force the decision to retire, as the rigors of racing and training begin to affect their mental attitude.



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Mental

Perhaps one of the key factors for fillies and mares, even more than their male counterparts, is the mental attitude toward performance. Levy said, "Mares tend to tell you physically and mentally when they are ready. Fillies are also more susceptible to pain and will remember when they are hurt during performance."

Trainers, grooms and jockeys can be a key resource in identifying this shift in attitude.

In Irwin's experience, "Sprinters tend to get tired of racing earlier than distance runners, who seem to have a better emotional outlook on racing. Many fillies and mares don't peak until 5 or 6 years of age," he said. We have seen remarkable fillies such as Rachel Alexandra (4) and Zenyatta (6) perform at amazing levels past the 3-year-old campaigns, when many are retired. It really depends whether their heart is in it.

Dr. Stuart Brown of Hagyard Equine Medical Center in Lexington, said, "Some fillies begin to show a disinterest in athletic performance after a period of time. They naturally begin to back away." This



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Retiring a filly or mare in time to get her under lights before breeding season is important

can happen just through the process of maturity and having experienced several heat cycles. "Some fillies are also quite untrainable while in heat," he added.

Timing and options

The ideal time of year to retire a filly or mare is definitely a matter of opinion, but the latter part of the year is definitely when thoughts about retiring for breeding come up. Levy said, "The ideal is to retire in the summer and breed in the winter."

According to Irwin, "As for the time of year, we like to be able to race our fillies and mares through the Churchill Downs fall meeting and send them to the farms just prior to Dec. 1, so they can get under artificial lighting," he said.

WinStar waits yet a bit longer. Kieran Lalor, broodmare manager of WinStar Farm near Versailles, Ky., said "Most fillies will stay in training until the end of the year, so we get most of them in January."

Still other owners/breeders wait until spring, just to see if they can get a few extra good races out of the horses before sending them to the breeding shed.

There is no magic formula. Sometimes, you can have a bit of the best of both worlds. Irwin noted, "Occasionally, if we have a mare that is advanced in age and it makes sense to retire her even though she is still sound, we may elect to have her covered in the spring while remaining in training and retire her during the summer. We have raced a few pregnant mares over the years."

Dr. Brown sees a lot of breeding while racing. "Especially at Keeneland during the spring meeting, we will pull the hind shoes and check for readiness, then breed. If they do get pregnant, they will often continue to race for 90-120 days. Some race fillies look and run even better when pregnant," said Brown.

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*H. H. Ross, DVM, MS, MBA, DACVP; Robert C. Shivers, DVM, DACV; Charles K. Carlton, DVM; Philip M. Matthews, DVM, MS, DACV; John D. Acton, DVM, DACV; Linda E. Thomas, DVM; "Effect of adjunctive treatment with Propionibacterium acnes on reproductive performance in mares with persistent endometritis." JAVMA, July 1, 2007; 291(1): 105-113.



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Geography

Where the filly is racing can have an impact on the retirement decision as well. Irwin, whose Team Valor races horses worldwide said, "Europe retires fillies really early." The prevailing attitude there is that fillies are at their reproductive peak young and so should be retired to breeding early.

The level of racing and the racetracks where the filly is stabled can also have an impact. High training costs but a relatively low chance of winning additional black-type races that would improve her value may make retirement a better option.

On the Fence?

Many race teams are up in the air about exactly when to retire. Some will keep racing through the winter season in order to make a bit more money and perhaps pick up some additional black type to finish out a career. Dr. Brown recommended, "If you are even considering retiring for breeding, put the maiden under lights starting in November. That way, you are ahead of the game if you decide to retire in February or March." Since mares are seasonally polyestrous, they are very sensitive to day length.

Decision Made

Once the decision has been made to retire, a new set of factors should be considered when making the move from track to farm. Luckily, most maidens are in the prime breeding years and do not have much of a problem getting pregnant as it is a natural process. According to Lalor most



High-quality feed is important in transitioning from a racehorse to a broodmare

ANNE M. LEHRHARDT

maidens have few to no problems at all.

"By and large, the majority of maiden mares are very straightforward and 90-95% will get in foal," said Brown. There are definitely management techniques that can go a long way to help the success rate of any maiden. For the safety of the farm, a primary tip is to quarantine incoming horses for three to four weeks—with perhaps one other horse as a companion.

"Disease management is a very critical piece to overall farm success," said Lalor.

Transition Time or Let Down

Consensus is strong among the experts consulted here. One of the most important factors in a successful transition from racing to breeding is time. Going from a very structured athletic regimen to the much more relaxed and natural herd environment of the farm is a major change.

Barry of Pin Oak said, "It is a huge transition when they come off the track. It is very important to make the let down gen-

tle. It is amazing how much they change physically and mature during let down. I have seen horses grow a full hand."

Lalor shared that retiring fillies and mares make the transition in stages at WinStar. "We take them from the track to our farm training facility," said Lalor. "Generally, Richard Budge at the training center gets the horses off the racetrack, first for let down and rehabbing any injuries. They will stay there for two or three weeks, and he will start them under lights."

They begin to acclimate to the farm with a less rigorous exercise regimen. When they move into Lalor's area, he makes sure to find them companions and give them incremental amounts of turnout time.

Pin Oak also uses a transitional activity process. Barry noted, "If you have a negative let down, it is often difficult to get them to cycle, especially in the dead of winter." He blankets all his fillies and makes sure to have a high-quality feeding program.

Medical Concerns

Maidens will generally put on a little additional weight as they let down from racing fitness in preparation for breeding. "You want to be careful with maidens, because too much extra weight can shut them down", warned Lalor. "Grass is the best thing for them, but not too much. Maintain good condition, keep them active and watch their weight."

Dr. Brown notes that a medical type of programming can help maidens cycle more regularly, as they often are erratic: "Occasionally, we will have mares that are completely shut down, and we have to program them with 10 days of progesterone and estradiol and a shot of prostaglandin to get them going," Brown said. "They are often in a catabolic state, coming in having dealt with the rigors of a campaign, their protein synthesis is devoted to performance, not the blossoming ideal for breeding."

"Like human runners and sprinters who have troubles cycling at regular intervals, it is not to big a leap to understand that equine athletes are not a lot different," Brown added. "We have a lot that come in hurting or have been training through an issue and their energy reserves are ramped up towards performance." It takes time to heal and acclimate, which is why giving time for let-down is so important.

The most common concern for maidens is that they tend to be erratic in their cycles and often show only subtle signs of heat and a response to teasing. Brown recommends that a maiden especially be watched closely for subtle signs to learn her cycles. Often, shy horses may show to herdmates. Brown recommends checking cycles in the fall so that you

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can get to know the individual cycle and be better equipped to time accurately for breeding in the spring.

Behavioral Issues


Many behavioral issues seen in maiden mares are stress related. Finding ways to reduce the stress level will make the breeding process easier and more successful. Once again, time to let down is probably the most important key. Companionship of other horses and having the patience to allow them to acclimate will solve many issues. Each maiden is different. One might be comfortable immediately and breed almost upon arrival. Others can have a tougher time adjusting and take up to 120 days to settle and regulate. Most like to give at least 60 days for an effective let-down.

At WinStar, Lalor has built a new barn to address some of the behavioral issues he faces. "Companion stalls (stalls that have mesh between them versus cinder block) are very useful," said Lalor. "It is helpful for them to see one another to reduce the stress. For example, we have one mare that is a bad weaver."

Lalor has had some special doors installed that have a key latch drop down, so that the horse can put her head out. The mare stopped her weaving behavior. It really works for stall walkers and weavers both.

Bad habits such as these as well as aggressive tendencies must be worked out. These mares need to settle so that they can be bred. In most cases, maidens must be jumped by a teaser prior to going to the breeding shed. This is done for the safety of the stallion and the handlers alike.

A bit of good news mentioned by both Dr. Brown and Lalor is that farms are seeing a marked difference in mares coming off the track now that anabolic steroids have been banned. Many mares would come in very aggressive and it would take a much longer time for them to acclimate to the farm life and even be approachable enough to breed. It has made life easier on the farm to have less aggressive mares that are easier to transition.

Making the decision to retire is not an easy one. There are benefits to keeping a filly racing, if only for the excitement of seeing her reach full potential. Understanding your filly well enough to recognize when she is mentally done racing and ready to move on is a key skill. Once the decision to retire is made, maidens are generally a straightforward group to deal with, easily getting in foal in most cases. It is important to focus on working out the stresses and giving the maiden time to adjust to her new role with adequate let down time. Patience and astute observation will go a long way in making your broodmare prospect successful, often on her first cover. 

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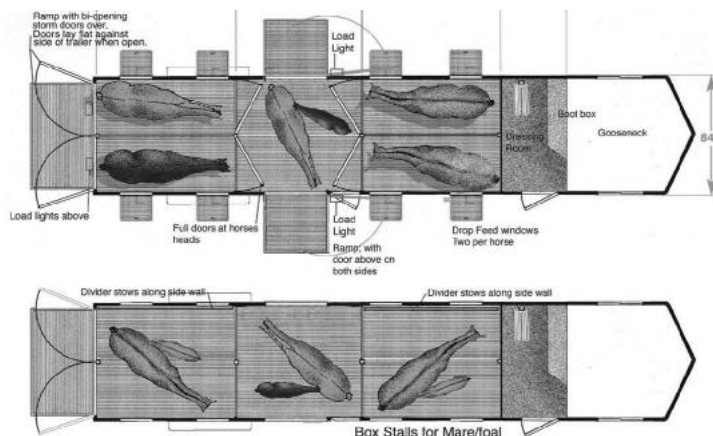


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