



# Dutch

## Warmblood selection: the latest developments

*by Izak Hofmeyr*

**If you want to breed horses, either as a breeders' society or as an individual breeder, you first have to make up your mind as to what exactly it is that you want to breed. Only after you have formulated your breeding goal, can you start selecting the animals suitable for this breeding goal.**

This is the sentiment of Jaap Werners, recently retired chairman of the *Koninklike Warmbloed Paardenstamboek Nederland* (KWPN) Stallion Selection Committee. He was in South Africa at the invitation of the South African Warmblood Horse Society to judge the Warmblood section at the recent Horse of the Year Show in Kyalami. He also presented a talk on the latest breeding trends in Dutch Warmbloods.

"Especially when you are breeding specialised types of horses, you need to be very clear about the goal you have in mind," he told the Warmblood breeders. KWPN's breeding goals, he explained, could be divided into three broad categories namely performance goals, constitution goals and conformation goals.

Their performance goals, he said, were simple: "We want our horses to compete at the highest level in the world (Grand Prix) and we want to specialise in two disciplines, namely dressage and jumping.

"Our constitution goals are equally clear-cut and strict, for we want to provide our clients, who are the best riders in the world, with excellent horses that will last for many years. Our horses therefore have to have excellent locomotive systems, excellent respiratory systems and also excellent fertility."

The fertility aspect is especially important when providing stallions to the market. An increasingly important aspect is the ability of semen to be frozen. Those stallions that produce semen that can be frozen successfully should be identified.

"As far as our last criterion for selection is concerned, namely conformation, we had an interesting shift in emphasis over the past 20 years or so. We found, with sporting events growing so fast, that performance is by far a more important trait than conformation. Horses must be able to compete, otherwise you cannot sell them into the market that you have in mind.





Dutch showjumping type

Even the recreational riders demand a horse that does not go lame easily and is always up to the job that is asked of it. A conformation fault may still be excused, but lack of performance is unacceptable.

“So, although the criteria for conformation remained the same, namely functionality (no faults that may hamper performance) and correctness of conformation, these criteria moved down in order of importance. Where previously they were at the top of the list, we now place performance and constitution above conformation.”

A third aspect of conformational criteria, he pointed out, was that horses had to be appealing in the way they look. “Our forefathers always wanted a horse that was good-looking. They worked with horses every day and wanted to be able to look at their horses with pride. Dutch horses today are known for their beauty. The international demand for our horses bears testimony to that.”

In conducting a breeding programme, he pointed out, the quickest progress can be made when you select for one trait only. Selecting for a variety of traits, as the KWPN is doing in their

breeding programme, makes progress much slower.

### Specialisation

One of the most significant developments of recent times in the history of the KWPN, he said, was the decision to specialise in two riding disciplines, namely dressage and jumping. Although only about five years down the line, he said, the effect of this decision on the type of horses they select is already evident.

“We currently have four breeding directions in our society, namely riding horses (jumping), riding horses (dressage), harness horses and Gelderland horses.

“The Gelderland horse is the old farmer’s horse, a versatile animal that can be ridden and also used in harness. Although it is versatile, it is not brilliant in any of the disciplines. It is a good-looking horse aimed at the recreational market. Mostly chestnut with white legs and a white blaze and very easy to handle, these horses are in great demand among recreational riders all over Europe.”

The harness horse type, he explained, were originally derived from the same lines as the

jumping and dressage horses, and yet, within the 25 years since they started selecting for harness horses, there is a distinct difference in the type. This served to illustrate what can be done if selection is conducted with a clear breeding goal in mind.

“The harness horse is essentially a show horse, with brilliantly high movement and a very high neck set. Looking at the movement, with hind-quarter engagement, hock flexibility and huge movement, there is a similarity between the dressage and harness horses. The movement of the harness horse, however, has been developed to such an extent that it has become uncomfortable to ride.”

KWPN has some 30 000 members of which about 10 000 are active breeders. A characteristic of KWPN breeders is that very few of them own more than five mares. In fact, there are only about three or four studs that own more than 20 mares. About 15 000 registered coverings from 250 registered stallions take place annually.

## Data

“We believe that it is important to have as much information of each horse available as possible. To be accepted into the studbook, every mare first has to pass a basic inspection. If the mare is considered better than the average, it receives the predicate “ster”. If it is entered into a performance test and tests above average on conformation, it gets the additional predicate “keur”. If it is X-rayed, and declared sound, it gets the predicate “elite”. A mare that competes at a minimum acceptable level (in Holland it is the Z-level) receives the predicate “sport”.

Further predicates are based on the offspring of the animal. The first is “preferent”, which means that the mare has had three foals that achieved the “ster” predicate. Should the mare have three offspring that compete at the Z-level, she attains the “prestasie” predicate.

In this way distinction is made between mares based on performance potential. Understandably, the mare with more predicates is more valuable than the one without predicates.

**In the next edition of *SA Horseman*, Werners will discuss the selection and performance testing process of mares and stallions in the KWPN. SAH**



Gelderlander



Harness type



Dutch dressage type