Is There a Relationship Between Stallion Advertisement Pictures and Foot Conformation?

Developing preventive programs for foot problems has significant financial and health benefits to horses and owners alike. In a survey of 50 horses, to set up a model preventive foot care program, it was found that 26 out of 50 horses had mismatched feet. These 50 lower-level athletic horses were thought to be sound by their owners. Sixty-six percent had potential problems that were either not known or not being addressed by their owners, farriers, or primary care veterinarians.[1] The main asset of the preventive foot care program of any veterinary practice or farrier would be to raise awareness to owners, farriers, or veterinarians about the feet of a particular horse or group of horses. For several years, it has interested one author (R.A.M.) that many stallions' pictures in breeding advertisements were taken standing in grass. If a similar picture had been taken of the stallion standing on a firm surface, the feet could have been observed.

The goal of our recent study was to see how stallions are currently being presented in advertising pictures.

A variety of different stallion issues of popular equine magazines were used for this study. Each generally focused on a specific breed and/or discipline and was directed at those equine enthusiasts who would be interested in seeing specific qualities in the stallions shown. Eight different breeding issues were used.[2-9] Any stallion's advertisement containing a photograph of the stallion was classified in 1 of the following categories:

1. Standing in grass, unable to see feet (due to deep sand, boots, etc), or stallion's picture too small to evaluate feet.
2. Stallion shown in action (competition, jumping, racing, etc).
3. Only stallion's head shown.
4. Stallion standing on firm ground so feet can be seen (pavement, slight footing depth, etc).

Further divisions of stallion advertisements were made based upon similarities and differences among disciplines and breeds. These distinctions were made based on 3 different categories:

1. Racing.
2. Hunter, jumper, dressage, and eventing.
3. Other horses such as Arabians, Morgans, and nonracing Quarter Horses.

In a single stallion issue, stallions were further classified by whether or not their feet and/or legs appeared to have been altered by computer-generated programs (ie, feet had been airbrushed). An occasional stallion's advertisement was used and counted more than once owing to the differing nature of their advertisement from issue to issue.

Out of 1852 photograph advertisements of different stallions, 13% (241/1852) of the stallions were photographed standing on firm ground where the feet could be evaluated by the reader. In 87% (1611/1852) of stallion pictures, the stallions' feet could not be readily evaluated. Thirty-nine percent were standing in grass or in some substrate where their feet could not be seen or the picture was too small to evaluate the stallions' feet effectively; 34% of stallions were shown in action competitively or free moving, making feet difficult to see and/or compare; and 14% of stallions' heads alone were shown in the advertisement (Figure 1).

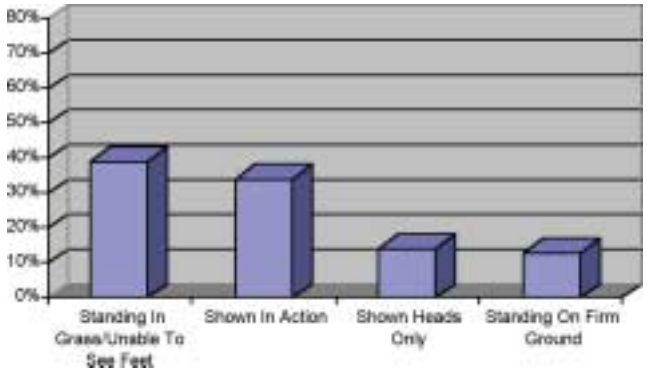

Figure 1. Stallion advertisements from all stallion issues taken from 1852 stallion advertisements.

Results from further dividing horses into the discipline/breed categories previously described yielded results showing that certain discipline or breed mare owners lean toward differing thought processes when selecting a stallion. In the racing category (3,9), 22% of the stallions were pictured on a firm surface where their feet could be compared and evaluated; thus 88% of feet could not be seen. Sixty-nine percent of advertisements showed the stallion standing in grass or some substrate in which their feet could not be seen. No picture was too small to evaluate the stallion any further than possible in grass/substrate. Seven percent of stallions were shown in action, and 2% of stallions' heads alone were shown (Figure 2).

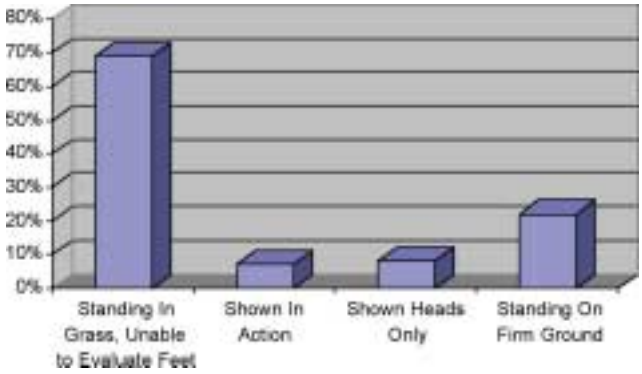

Figure 2. Racing horse advertisement categories taken from 397 stallion advertisements.

In the hunter, jumper, dressage, and eventer category (4,5,6), 8% were shown standing on firm ground; thus, feet could not be evaluated in 92% of the stallions pictured. Twenty-seven percent of stallions were shown standing in grass or some substrate or the picture was too small to evaluate their feet. Fifty-four percent were shown in action, either jumping, dressage, or freely moving, and 11% of stallions' heads alone were photographed and advertised (Figure 3).

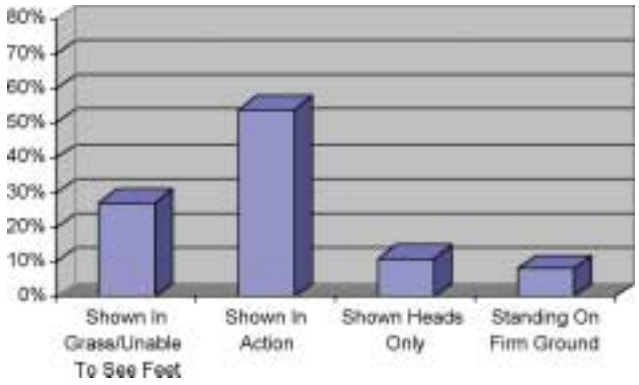

Figure 3. Sport horse stallion advertisements (hunter, jumper, dressage, and eventing) taken from 744 stallion advertisements.

In the other category (2,7,8), which was aimed more at the different breed issues, 13% of stallions were shown standing on firm surface; thus, in 87% of advertising pictures one could not evaluate the feet. Thirty-five percent of stallions were standing in grass or some substrate or the picture was too small, all preventing foot comparison and evaluation; 28% were shown in action; and 24% of stallions' heads were shown (Figure 4).

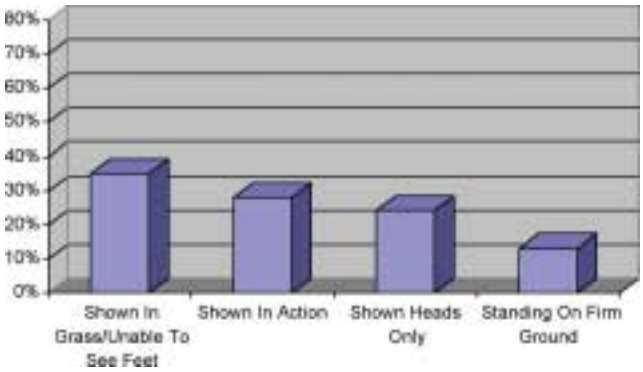

Figure 4. Other stallion advertisements (Arabian, Morgan, Quarter Horse) taken from 689 stallion advertisements.

Results were also taken for 1 of the stallion issues for how many stallions' feet and legs appeared to have been altered with a computer-generated program. Twenty-five percent of stallions advertised in 1 magazine appeared to have had airbrushed feet and/or legs. (2)

Breeding advertisements are often the first introduction of a stallion to a mare owner. The more glitz, the more the mare owner might potentially stop and look at a stallion's picture. Of the 3 stallion categories separated out in this study, all categories had similar percentages of stallions pictured on firm surfaces. Most racing horses had standing conformation pictures not showing feet, with their performance records written in the advertisement. More stallions were shown in competition or action in the 2 non-racing categories than in racing. Overall, there was less emphasis on detailed written performance records in these 2 non-racing categories. Finally, twice as many head pictures were shown in Arabian, Morgan, and non-racing Quarter Horse advertisements than in the other 2 groups. The authors are not implying that in the 87% (1611/1852) of advertisements in which a reader cannot see their feet, the stallions have foot problems; but certainly their feet cannot be evaluated by a potential breeder. The authors are suggesting there might be an advertising psychological bias that may be causing mare

owners to discount stallions' poor foot conformation, which could possibly have a detrimental effect on foot conformation in many future horses.

There is little proof that foot defects and abnormal foot conformation are completely inherited. Other potential factors besides heredity affecting foot conformation are diet, exercise, moist/dry environment, early trimming, and farriery. But inheritance may play a role. If potential mare owners could observe the feet of the breeding stallion, the feet may then enter more prominantly into the mare owner's decision to breed to a particular stallion. If mare owners kept annual data taken by their veterinarians and farriers such as hoof angles, measurements such as the widest part of their mare's feet, pictures of their horse's feet, and potentially a lateral and anteroposterior radiograph from their veterinarian,[1] awareness of foot changes would increase. If stallion owners did the same, mare owners could request the stallion's recorded feet history and compare that data with their mare's feet medical history to make more informed decisions about foot conformation.

Besides data accumulation of mare and stallion foot conformation, an annual examination with the owner's veterinarian and farrier could reveal information about improving or failing foot conformation that could be reacted to in a positive manner. If a horse has poorer foot conformation, a plan could be determined to help trim and support the horse, hopefully to give a longer, sounder life. The annual foot examination could be tied in to a general physical examination, noting many other factors like weight, upper limb problems, and diseases like equine Cushing's disease, all of which can affect foot conformation.[1] There is a computerized program (Metron) to assist in this data collection and storage.

Possibly, improving foot awareness—and thus improving all our future horses' foot conformation, which could lead to less lameness and longer lives—may simply be a matter of changing stallion advertisement pictures. Most horse owners subscribe to the slogan "No hoof, no horse," but few take it seriously. Pictures of stallions standing on a firm surface can have good backgrounds, present a pleasant advertisement, and show conformation including feet, thus giving more information to a potential breeder. If all stallion advertisement pictures were changed to show stallions standing on firm surfaces, and if mare owners requested foot conformation evaluations on breeding stallions before they signed a breeding contract, in 10 years would our horses have better feet?

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