

Breeding & Selecting the Performance Friesian for Dressage



Elite, left, owned by John Viveiros (Stephanie's father) and the mare Liza, right, owned by Claudia Rayner.

By The Education Committee with Stephanie Raffety-Wilson

Stephanie Raffety-Wilson began training Friesians fourteen years ago, and she has progressed to training a performance Friesian, Teska van G., for her client Jamie Knight. Stephanie recently coached Teska van G. to Grand Prix Champion at the regional championships in Katy, Texas.

Stephanie agrees there is a science and an art to breeding Friesians for performance, and she recommends a breeder should strive for a horse with athleticism; movement conducive to performance, like looseness in the shoulder; an active hind end; and a strong work ethic in mind and heart. Although she loves how strong and beautiful stallions are, Stephanie sees that the mare typically gives more than half her genes to her offspring. To increase the chance of getting athletic, trainable offspring, Stephanie recommends breeding a proven performance mare with a proven performance stallion.

The physical traits of Friesian mares and stallions still “need some work,” but Stephanie finds training an up-hill horse much easier than a croup-high horse. As a result, Stephanie looks for a horse that is level to up-hill and has a loose angled shoulder; active hind end, especially in the canter; and a forward, willing work ethic. Stephanie finds Friesians generally loose in their joints and back, which is favorable in performance as long as their stifles are strong.

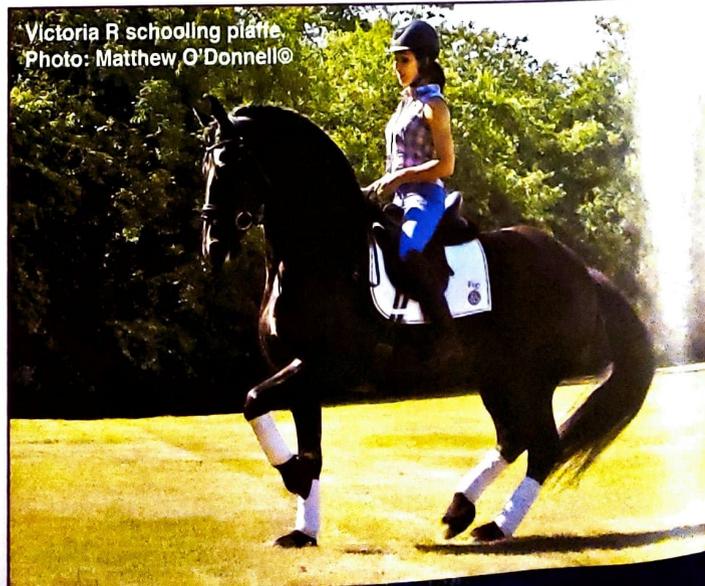
The most important behavioral trait Stephanie looks for in a Friesian horse is heart. A mare or stallion that is willing to work and wants to please can be trained for performance, but the process becomes much more difficult if the horse is uninterested in learning or lethargic. Stephanie reviews a horse's performance records to select a good candidate for training. Stephanie says it takes a special horse of any breed to make it to FEI, so a horse at that level is special and a good candidate.

On the question of whether to breed or buy a future performance Friesian, Stephanie observes that selecting a horse that is old enough to ride enables the potential buyer to ride the horse before buying and get to know the horse. Buying a young Friesian performance candidate or breeding a candidate without knowing the mare's or stallion's suitability for performance training can be a gamble. Nevertheless, Stephanie believes that careful and purposeful breeding can result in offspring consistently successful at the highest performance levels.

When beginning the search for a performance Friesian, Stephanie recommends considering at the outset a price range, your performance goals, your riding level, your access to a good

trainer, your ability to afford performance training, and your interest in participating in competitions yourself. If you have a good trainer and your goal is to compete, it is a good idea to involve your trainer in the process. In selecting a Friesian for dressage specifically, Stephanie looks for certain breed-specific characteristics. In particular, Stephanie looks to be sure the Friesian can reach forward and sideways, not just up in the shoulder. Stephanie also likes to see a horse with a strong canter with good jump in the hind end and the ability to travel light and forward willingly. A young Friesian prospect needs to have good confirmation, a good disposition, movement in all three gaits, balance, self-carriage, and flexibility. Just one or two of these characteristics is not sufficient.

If you are new to performance, Stephanie says it is ALWAYS easier and generally less expensive to buy a schoolmaster at the beginning. If you are experienced up the levels and are up for a challenge, then buying a less experienced horse and bringing the horse along over time has its own rewards. Stephanie can usually assess a prospect within one ride. However, sometimes a really nice prospect has had training or riding that has led them to move in an undesirable way or has prevented them from learning to want to work or taught them to fight. Sometimes, this can require a few months of training to allow the horse to show its real potential, but it's exciting to feel and watch them blossom. Regardless of what horse you select, Stephanie recommends a full pre-purchase exam.



Victoria R schooling piaffe
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