

Defining a SPORT HORSE

Kristy Limon and 14-year-old Thoroughbred gelding Excel, competing in the CCI at the Kentucky Horse Park.*



Photo: XPress Photo

Find out what really makes a horse a sport horse.

By Kandace York

Sport horse conformation. Sport horse breeding. Sport horse potential.

Looking through horse sales ads, you're likely to see these phrases and more. But what does the term "sport horse" really mean?

This month, Scott Hassler, Kristy Limon and Lisa Singer share their insight into what really makes a sport horse – whether it involves competition down a center line, over fences or between shafts.

FEI Disciplines

The Federation Equestre International (FEI) recognizes eight disciplines: dressage, eventing, show jumping, driving, endurance, vaulting, reining and para equestrian. Of these competitions, three – eventing, dressage and show jumping – are Olympic disciplines closely linked with the sport horse title. But the phrase is catching on among the other FEI disciplines as well, broadening the discussion of what a sport horse really is.

The Eventing Sport Horse

The eventing sport horse is three

different athletes in one: dressage, cross-country jumper and show jumper. Each phase demands its own skill set, earning a reputation as the most demanding of all equestrian sports. The multi-day competition often starts with dressage.

The Dressage Sport Horse

Dressage has been called "ballet on horseback," with the horse demonstrating flawless precision, submission and balance in every step.

While the requirements of dressage movements are clear, the requirements of the sport horse performing those movements are less clear.

"The term 'sport horse' is so vague," Scott Hassler says. "There is no clear definition of it."

Although traditionally it has referred to horses that compete in Olympic disciplines, Hassler says, "each group has its own definition of the ideal sport horse."

Hassler is the National Young Horse Dressage Coach for the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF). He spoke with *Equine Journal* during the 2008 National Young Horse Dressage Championships in Lexington, Kentucky. When he's not at the championships, he offers training and instruction at Hassler Dressage in Chesapeake City, Maryland.

In a dressage athlete, Hassler says, he looks for animation in movement, a sound work ethic and good self-carriage. However, the conformation that enables a horse to move well and perform well may vary according to the breed, type and individual. It is important, he says, to judge a horse more by how he works and less by how he looks.

"Dressage breeding shows currently favor a certain type of conformation, breeding and movement. Often that is 'typical' warmblood conformation," he says. "But we need to be careful not to discriminate against other breeds in the process."

Hassler cites the baroque breeds as examples of sport horses that may not fit the traditional "mold" of a sport horse but which are often well qualified. "Lusitanos, Andalusians and Friesians, for example, can all be good sport horses," he says. "I really think it's more individual than one breed or one type."

Critical to this factor, he says, is recognizing the role that amateur riders play in the horse industry. "A major part of the market is amateurs. Even though a horse may look impressive, we need to ask, is this horse useful? Can I bend this horse? Can I do lateral work? Does the horse carry that movement in a nice way?"

Hassler says it's important to maintain balance between a horse's athletic ability and rideability. "I think sometimes we



Photo: Reini Photography

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over-emphasize athleticism," he says. "Rideability really needs to be stressed. People get caught up in looking at big movement, because it looks so impressive, but the real question is, can you ride it?"

The Cross-Country Sport Horse

Cross country courses test a horse and rider's stamina, fitness and athleticism. The course, often several acres, includes up to 40 outdoor fences that may include water, drops and combinations. The competitor who has the fastest or closest-to-optimum time, with the fewest number of faults, wins.

Kristy Limon, of Magnolia, Texas, competes in at the intermediate-level three-day events throughout the country. She also serves of the Board of Governors for the United States Eventing Association (USEA).

Limon says her choice for cross-country work is Thoroughbreds or Thoroughbred crosses.

"Thoroughbreds were bred to run," she says. "That makes it easy for them, so it's easy for me, too."

Known for their long, lean musculing, Thoroughbreds also take naturally to the conditioning that cross-country work demands, Limon says. "It doesn't take much conditioning to get a Thoroughbred into shape," she says, "That makes it easier on their joints and legs. I gallop my horses only about every other week, where a heavier horse would take more work to reach the

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same fitness level."

When looking for a sport horse, Limon says she focuses on two aspects: athleticism and temperament. "I look for athletic ability first, and then 'a good brain' with a good disposition ... I don't get hung up on a particular breed. It really comes down to the individual horse."

Cross-country work, Limon says, demands a horse that can stay sound with basic supportive work. "When these horses work, they work very hard," she says. "They need to be incredibly sound, because we're very limited in what [medications] we can give them at a competition."

Limon says her horses tend to prefer the cross-country phase of eventing to the phase that often follows: show jumping.

The Show Jumping Sport Horse

Show jumping tests a horse and rider's technical jumping skills in an arena setting. Horse and rider jump up to 20 fences; the competitor who has the fastest time and fewest faults wins.

"Show jumping is very different from cross-country work," Kristy Limon says.



Photo: Rein Photography

Show jumping tests a horse and rider's technical jumping skills in an arena setting.

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"In cross-country work, it's really all about the galloping. Show jumping is all about the jumping, and in a lot smaller area. The turns are tighter and there's a lot less space between the jumps."

A good sport horse, Limon says, approaches a show jumping course differently than he would approach a cross-country course. "With show jumping, the horse really needs to be careful; that is definitely a trait I look for," she says. "And that's where I like a horse that's maybe a little more sensitive than most."

Why a sensitive horse? "Often a sensitive horse is more careful than other horses, because he tends to 'feel' it more if he hits a rail," Limon says. "Because of that, he often only hits a rail once."

Good sport horses also need to know how to relax. "I make sure my horses get two breaks every year – in June and July, and again in December and January," Limon says. "They need that time off to just 'be a horse,' but then they need to be able to come back into training and get right to work. I really appreciate a horse that gets back into shape and becomes fit without much work."

Also important, Limon says, is soundness. "Sport horses need to be incredibly sound. They need to stay sound – and healthy and happy, too."

The Driving Sport Horse

What is the link between eventing, driving and sport horses?

Competitive driving events, or CDEs, have been called "the three-day eventing of driving." Next to the three Olympic disciplines, CDEs have held FEI recognition the longest – since



Lisa Singer with her Morgans at the 2004 Gladstone Combined Driving Event.

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