

# Broodmare for Sale



Whether you plan to downsize or increase your herd, these lessons from successful breeders will come in handy.

By Juli S. Thorson

**C**onsider two scenarios. In the first, you conclude that you simply must cut your broodmare numbers. You're out of room, out of hay, out of energy and out of the time it takes to get all your mares bred and their foals halter-broke and gentled. The trouble is, you hardly know

where to start in deciding which mares to sell. You worked hard to assemble them, and each mare has her merits.

In the second scenario, you decide that now's the time to pick up a nice broodmare or two. You have a specific breeding goal in mind and with the number of breeders cutting back these days, you're

sure some good deals are out there. But how do you know that those "broodmare for sale" ads aren't just come-ons to someone else's cull? Why would a mare even be for sale if there weren't something wrong with her in the first place?

For answers to these and other questions, *WH* turned to three breeding oper-



The decision to sell a broodmare is often heavily influenced by a breeding program's management approach. For example, horse operations that run herds in open country often sell older mares that might require less stressful environments in order to thrive.



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ations with years of experience and many successes behind them. Read what they have to say and gain take-away lessons for yourself.

## Breeder Facts of Life

Recognized by the American Quarter Horse Association last year as one of its 50-year breeders, the horse operation of Wilkerson Ranches, Kennewick, Washington, is run by Larry Wilkerson, his wife, Lori, and their son and daughter-

in-law, Eric and Brenda Wilkerson. With two stallions of its own and the occasional outside breeding, the ranch produces halter and performance horses from a broodmare band that numbers between 25 and 30 head. The number fluctuates annually as the Wilkersons sell some mares and add new ones.

With many years of experience behind him, Larry has no trouble explaining how he decides which broodmares to sell.

"First of all," he says, "it's just a fact of life that not every mare crosses well with the stallion or stallions a breeder has. We're always trying to improve, so if we've tried a mare on our studs and aren't getting the improvement we look for, we make her available for someone else's program, where she might work better. We sold a mare last year that fit into that category. She was by a great halter sire but just didn't cross as well with our halter stallion as we hoped she would."

A broodmare's age, Larry continues, is another factor.

"Once a mare gets into her middle teens, we look pretty hard at selling her," he says. "There are a couple of reasons for that. For one thing, a mare's fertility tends to decline after about the age of 15 or 16, and it might take more management to get her in foal. And if she's been a good cross for us, we might have one of her daughters to use in her place.

"But the biggest thing for us is the fact that we run our mares and foals out on range land, where they have to make their own living. The older mares eventually reach a point where that's too hard on them — the younger mares move up in the pecking order and get the best of the grass. A lot of times, these older mares are just better off in a different situation, where they can get the additional TLC it takes to keep them in foal every year."

Larry says he also considers such matters as a broodmare's attitude — whether she's easy, or a challenge, to handle — and the ease or difficulty of getting her in foal.

"We're a family operation with a lot of horses to deal with," he explains, "and it's just not very efficient for us to hang

onto a mare that's hard to catch, aggressive or tough on the person trying to handle her foal. Those might not be issues for someone else, but they are for us. I think you have to recognize what works in your situation and go from there."

Once he's determined the broodmares to sell, Larry puts a time-tested plan to work.

"There's a lot of timing involved in selling a broodmare," he explains. "We draw up our list of mares to sell a year before we actually sell them, for one simple reason. They'll sell sometime between late fall and early spring, and we want to be sure they're in foal. This shows that they're breedable — an open mare is scary to buyers. This way, a buyer's assured of getting at least one foal for his money."

According to Larry, the mares are available for sale from the ranch until late in the year. If they haven't sold by then, they're consigned to the annual February catalog sale in nearby Hermiston, Oregon. This is another element of the plan-ahead process; due to timing of the sale, Larry breeds these mares for a March foaling date rather than one that'd fall earlier.

Does he worry about getting too low a price for mares consigned to an auction?

"No," he insists. "When I consign horses to a sale, I take them there to sell. I've never regretted selling a horse for the last bid offered, but I have regretted bringing one home."

## Individual Circumstances

Kim and Dave Utke, Sheldon, North Dakota, have supported themselves by breeding and selling Appaloosas since the 1960s. In a typical year, their Sheldak Ranch includes 40 or more broodmares that are bred to one of four Sheldak stallions. Most would say that this level of production puts the Utkes into the "big breeder" category.

Nevertheless, when Kim discusses the subject of determining which broodmares to sell, her experience holds value for breeders of any scale. According to this successful horsewoman, an operation's individual circumstances necessarily must play a large role in the "keep or sell" equation. ☞





Even mares with the bloodlines, performance history and overall quality to be good producers don't always cross well with their owners' choices of stallions. Such mares become good sale candidates, creating opportunities for other breeders.

"Mares are never sold from our ranch 'because there is something wrong with them,'" she insists. "(They're sold) for reasons most buyers will never encounter. It's generally a result of what our pasture-breeding situation dictates, or because one of our great matrons has reached her senior years and will benefit from having a new home in a less-severe climate. Many of our greatest mares produced national and world champions after they were sold, and were never sold because they were 'culls.'"

Kim provides details on how Sheldak's pasture-breeding setup determines whether a broodmare is kept or sold.

"Nonacceptance by the stallion is one reason," she says. "If the stallion she's to be crossed on doesn't accept her, we have to offer her for sale. Another reason occurs when a mare is overly protective in a pasture situation. Some mares have such overwhelming mothering instincts that if they have no foals to protect, they'll protect other mares in the pasture from the stallion. Since the stallion is at the bottom of the pecking order in a pasture-breeding situation, those mares won't get bred, and the protective mare might not get bred either."

The Utkes also find that timid mares often end up on the "for sale" list.

"These are the mares that cost us the most time in a day," Kim explains. "Generally, these are the purchased show mares that never learned to eat in a group. In winter, when the mares are fed from bunks, we must stay out in the field and protect the last bunk so a timid mare can get her share of feed. This spills over to summer pasture, when we feed the mares

that broodmares in foal sell better than those that are open. However, Sheldak Ranch harnesses Internet, rather than auction, power as its means of selling.

"Our present-day sales of mares are via our Web site, [www.sheldakranch.com](http://www.sheldakranch.com), where we describe each mare and provide photos of both the mare and her offspring," Kim outlines. "Occasionally, we

pasture cubes daily. If these timid mares can't adjust in a few years, we give up and offer them for sale."

A mare that won't stand for pasture breeding will be offered for sale, as well.

"This is rare, but it does happen," Kim says. "We had to sell one of our top mares in 2005 for that reason. To get her in foal, we had to breed her to an outside stallion using artificial insemination. Knowing that this was likely to continue, we faced the inevitable and sold her."

Kim agrees with Larry Wilkerson's assessment

## Broodmare Sales

As both a seller and buyer of performance-bred broodmares, Stan Weaver, of Montana's Weaver Ranch, shares what he sees as trends in that area of the horse market.

"The buying public is smarter than it was 10 years ago, or even five years ago," he observes. "People pay much more attention to bloodlines now and want proven ability on both sides of a mare's pedigree. They also want mares that have either won money in competition or whose offspring have proven themselves that way."

In general, Stan has observed, the horse-buying public has become more discriminating.

"That's really not such a big surprise, because there are a lot more mares out there to pick from than there used to be," he says. "What we've seen is that while the overall broodmare market has gone down some in the last couple of years, the good mares still sell fast and for good money. A few years ago, there wasn't as big a spread in prices as we're seeing now. The cream always rises to the top, and those are the mares that buyers want."

The market's favored "colored" horses in recent years – roans, buckskins and palominos, for instance – but Stan cautions breeders against buying or breeding for color ahead of pedigree and proven performance.

"All other things being equal, it's true that a buckskin or a roan will outsell a sorrel. That's just the way it is," he says. "But even so, color isn't our first priority. To keep your market strong, we believe firmly that you have to breed for pedigree and ability first, with color as a bonus if you can get it. This is just as true for ranch horses as it is for show horses."



might place a supplemental ad with an online site, [www.AgDirect.com](http://www.AgDirect.com), linking to our own site. Prior to our plunge into the world of the Internet, any mares offered were incorporated in our *Appaloosa Journal* foal ads, which have run in each October issue since 1969.”

Kim, an accomplished photographer, puts her camera skills to good use in her online advertising. Quality photographs help any horse sale, but are especially key to attracting broodmare buyers, who usually view conformation with a critical eye.

## Focus on Upgrading

From their Weaver Ranch ([www.weaverhorses.com](http://www.weaverhorses.com)) near Big Sandy, Montana, Stan and Nancy Weaver produce cow-horse-bred Quarter Horses from their herd of 110 mares. They’re the fourth generation to use the AX brand, recorded in Montana by the Weaver family in 1888. Their annual September production sale, staged in Great Falls, Montana, draws buyers from all over North America and includes a selection of about 20 of the ranch’s broodmares.

“Why is she in the sale? We get that question a lot,” says Stan. “People tend to assume that because a mare’s in the sale, she must be a ‘bad’ mare, when that’s not the case at all. In fact, I always try to include one or two of our really good mares in the sale, as a draw. When you’re serious about being in the horse business, you need the public to know that you’ll make your best mares available. That helps you build a good reputation.”

As he eyes the ranch’s broodmares for the balance of its annual sale selection, ease of keeping, age and upgrading come into play.

“We run all our mares out,” Stan explains, “and sometimes we buy a mare and she just doesn’t adjust. We also sell mares that have reached the ages of 12 to 14, because those older mares usually need to be in situations where they don’t have to work quite as hard to get feed. And, of course, we’re always trying to upgrade in the areas of pedigree and production ability, which means we have to sell some mares to make way for the new ones we’ve acquired.”

This last reason for selling, he insists, doesn’t mean a mare is junk.

“From program to program, everything is relative,” Stan states. “Everybody has to start somewhere, and a \$1,500 mare that might be a seller’s low-end broodmare might be a top-end broodmare for someone with only \$1,500 to spend.”

In that vein, Stan offers the following advice to broodmare buyers and sellers.

“Buy the best-bred mare you can find for the money you have to spend,” he asserts. “If you’re only going to buy one, wait a while and save your money instead of jumping in to buy a mare just because she’s cheap. If you’re selling, and all other aspects are equal, cut the mare or mares that don’t have the best pedigrees. If everyone followed this program, the whole horse business would be better off.”