

Stallion Strategies & Lessons Learned

By Cliff Kelsey, Starcastle Shire Horses

With dreams of Shire foals, enthusiastic new Shire horse breeders acquire a mare or two. Questions soon arise. Decisions regarding stallions are critical to the success of all horse breeding operations. The path to success is paved with well-informed decisions.

Lessons learned from 43 years as a Shire horse breeder and 7 prior years as a Pinto horse breeder, permit me to share some experienced opinions about stallion strategies:

1. **Safety First:** 1,800 to 2,200 pounds of testosterone charged equine muscle should not be taken lightly. Shire stallions can be friendly docile family pets and seemingly “child safe”. However, they can suddenly become excited and extremely dangerous when thinking they may have opportunity to breed a mare, or if another stallion is near. With no intention or desire to harm humans, they can do so instantly. Even the very experienced handlers must remain aware of the potential dangers.

2. **Stallion Control:** For safety and better control, we always use an open bridle, straight 6” snaffle and a long lunge line with a chain attached to the bit every time a mature stallion is brought out of his corral. An additional communication device in the form of a stick or whip is recommended. That is not to suggest any harsh or cruel treatment, but rather to touch, communicate and re-gain their attention, when necessary. Stallions naturally have one thing on their mind, and the stallion handler needs to know when to re-gain their attention and secure control of the stallion. No matter how calm, quiet and easy-to-handle you think an individual stallion may be, danger and injury are always an instant away. Please remember, “Safety First”. You cannot care for your horses if you are in a Hospital.

3. **Not for Everyone:** Most horse-lovers are not well-suited to handling a mature stallion of any size, and especially a big powerful draft horse stallion. Handlers of draft horse stallions must have a naturally confident talent, physical ability, courage, and a fearless take-charge assertive demeanour. Stallions absolutely must understand that the handler is the “Boss”. Stallions know immediately if their handler lacks confidence and ability.

Horse-lovers who are inexperienced, timid, unsure, or lack the physical ability and the demeanour to safely handle an excited draft horse stallion should not attempt to manage or handle one. The risks of serious injury to themselves and others are simply too high.

4. **Facilities:** All stallions must be kept in strong secure facilities. That is most critical for draft breeds. All fences, gates and other facilities must be of heavy-duty construction. Heavy-duty steel panel fencing will withstand the stress, is much more cost-efficient, and require less maintenance than wooden fencing.

Some Shire breeders have contained their stallions with only a single strand of electric fence. However, it is impossible

to keep the electricity functioning 24 hours per day for 365 days per year. Stallions know within minutes if the electricity is off, and then their adventurous escape becomes a certainty.

Ideally, heavy duty steel panels and gates for stallion containment should be 6 feet (1.8 m.) height. However, due to limited commercial availability, our Shire stallions have remained contained in steel panel fences of 5'3" (1.6 m) height. However, that might not suffice for all stallions. Some jurisdictions have a legislated 6' minimum height for stallion fencing.

Pasture fencing for stallions must be well made and well maintained.

Do not place a mature stallion in a pasture adjacent to mares, fillies or geldings.

5. Young Stallions: Shires mature slower than most breeds. They will continue to grow in height and mass until they are 6 to 8 years old. Reproductive maturity also occurs more slowly in Shire stallions. Some Shire stallions may not have developed the sexual maturity to mount and cover mares as a 3-year-old. In rare cases, they may not breed until 4 or 5 years of age. However, I have also owned yearling Shire colts that are eager to breed.

Most Shire colts will be eager to breed at 2 years old. However, due to their slow-to-mature trait, 2-year-old Shire semen may not create pregnancies. Nonetheless, many Shire breeders have successfully impregnated their mares with a 2-year-old Shire. Since they are still growing and lack mental maturity, I prefer

to not use my 2-year-olds for breeding. Young Shires can damage their hocks when mounting mares. Pasture breeding is particularly risky for a 2-year-old Shire.

You will often hear that there is nothing better than turning a young stallion in with a group of older mares, who will "tune up on him" and "turn him into a gentleman". In many cases that will work successfully. However, there is risk that your young stallion could get seriously injured. There is also risk that the young stallion will become so traumatized and fearful that he will stop attempting to breed mares, and will adopt the demeanor of a gelding. If you have invested highly in a stallion prospect, you may want to refrain from turning your 2 or 3 year old stallion with a group of mature mares. If you really want to pasture breed, a less risky scenario is to turn him out on pasture with 1 or 2 maiden 3-year-old mares.

Hand breeding your stallion is a less risky, provided that the handler is experienced. Securing double Scotch Hobbles onto the mare is a good means to reduce the risk to the stallion.

6. Aged Stallions: Most Shire stallions will remain productive breeders until they are about 20 years old. A few are known to impregnate mares at 27 years old or older, but that is very rare. The wear and tear of many years of breeding can take a toll on a stallion's body. Some may develop pain in their back or hind legs when they are 17 or older and become less eager to breed.

Some aged stallions may struggle to maintain body weight. In addition to

having their teeth and general health checked by a Veterinarian, they may need a specialized diet to retain weight.

Some horse owners use equine acupuncture, massage or other specialized techniques, but we have not yet ventured into those methods.

A veterinarian diagnosed back pain in one of our aged Shire stallions, and prescribed pain medicine. It had a positive effect, and that stallion resumed mounting mares. However, being reluctant to administer pain medication over long periods of time to any horse, we retired him from breeding.

7. Cohabitation: We do not keep our mature stallions together in a corral. Some Shire breeders do keep a couple of mature stallions together. In those cases, it is important that they are put together as youngsters and kept together. Once separated for a period of time, and then re-united, most stallion pairs will viciously fight. A young stallion placed in with a more mature stallion will likely get injured.

On the other hand, some draft horse breeders have kept several stallions together in a large corral or pasture. One Shire breeder in Illinois kept dozens of mature stallions in a large corral. Apparently, those stallions would fight for a day or two, but then grow weary of fighting and stop. Keeping multiple stallions together always increases the risk of injury.

8. Hand-Breeding vs. Pasture

Breeding:

We have used both hand-breeding and pasture breeding methods over 5 decades. Both methods have merits.

The general consensus amongst seasoned horse breeders matches my opinion, that pasture breeding will, in the long term, result in a higher percentage of pregnancies.

As stallions gain pasture breeding experience, they get better at determining when a mare is in the peak of estrus. They will refrain from pestering them, except when the time is optimum for getting the mare pregnant.

Younger stallions will tend to get kicked by mares more frequently than an experienced older stallion.

If you acquire a mature stallion that has previously only hand-bred mares, it is best to turn him out with several mares and not just one. Multiple mares will minimize the risk that the stallion will focus his mature but naïve aggressiveness on only one mare.

A mature stallion that has never pasture-bred may run around a great deal during the first day. So, it is best to monitor the situation and be able to remove the stallion, to force him to rest and catch his breath for a while. They do learn by the second day to conserve their energy better.

9. How Many Stallions?:

For pasture-breeding, it is generally accepted that one stallion can successfully handle 15 to perhaps 20 mares in a typical breeding season. However, we have never placed more than 10 mares in pasture with a Shire stallion for the season.

Unless you have at least 3 mares, owning a stallion may not be practical depending upon your individual situations. Hopefully there is a suitable Shire stallion standing at stud in your area.

If you have only 1 or 2 mares, evaluating artificial insemination may suit you best.

10. How many years?: Most breeders who wish to improve the quality of their herd will always select the best available stallion. By picking the best stallion for your mares, each generation of fillies should be at least a bit better in quality than their dams. Then assuming the best of the fillies are kept, you will need a new stallion to cover the daughters of the first stallion. In that process, you will likely need to acquire a new stallion every 4 to 5 years. If your herd is larger, with perhaps 6 to 10 mares, you may find it best to keep a senior stallion and a junior stallion and sell the senior stallion to make room for a new junior stallion every 4 or 5 years. With larger herds of 15 to 25 head, you may find that 3 breeding stallions work best, where the most senior stallion is sold and replaced by a young stallion every 4 to 5 years.

Naturally, if there is a suitable Shire standing at stud in your area, you can own a fewer number of stallions.

The best breeders never stop attempting to improve the quality of their herd. Breeders who keep the same stallion in their herd for 8 to 10 years or more are missing an opportunity to accelerate the rate at which they improve their herd. Please remember that herd improvement is not a passive endeavor.

11. Foals with Stallions: It is my experience that over decades of pasture-breeding mares with foals at their side, that most stallions will not intentionally harm any foal. It is more likely that if a foal gets injured in that it is due to a mare kicking at or charging at another mare or the stallion. Even when the mares, stallions and foals come into a corral for water, where they are more crowded, my observation that stallions are normally quite aware of where the foals are and they are quite careful around the foals. Some stallions will be carefully playful with foals, like a father saying "I'm gonna catch you..." to a child, and the stallion/foal chase begins. Quite a joy to watch!

12. Artificial Insemination: In 43 years of Shire breeding, we have not yet ventured into the realm of artificially inseminating (AI) our mares or collecting our stallion's semen for sale. I am by not an expert on AI, but have investigated the potential of diving into AI, as a mare owner purchasing semen. The topic of AI is complex and requires a great deal of explanation to the unexperienced. As such that is a topic to be discussed in a separate Article. Stay tuned for that one.

13. **When to Acquire Your First Stallion?**

New breeders might buy one mare and one stallion and commence to raise and sell foals. There is nothing wrong with that, except the cost efficiency is poor. Each breeder needs to perform their own estimate of costs and then determine financial performance of their breeding operation.

In most cases, breeders with only 1 or 2 mares will find it most cost effective to breed their mares to an acceptable Shire Stallion, if there is one within reasonable driving distance.

Artificial insemination is another option that can be evaluated. However, the cost of semen shipping and the cost of insemination by a Veterinarian can drive the cost up past the point of feasibility.

Importing stallion semen, especially from overseas is very challenging due to government import regulations. Typically, a Broker is a necessary part of the process. When considering the purchase of semen from another county it is imperative that you become very familiar with the importation regulations and confirm that the semen seller and his agents have met all of those requirements. Semen shipping is large proportion of the costs. Doing your homework to determine a complete estimate of the costs is critically important. The high cost of AI, with imported semen can be shocking!

14. **How Long to Keep a Stallion:** Some breeders will acquire a colt and use him as a breeding stallion until he is too old to breed. That is fine, if that breeder's objective is to produce foals for sale and

herd improvement is not a priority. Since breeding a mare with her sire is not recommended, breeders focused on herd improvement and growth will typically keep a stallion for 4 to 6 years.

There are advantages to having multiple stallions because certain mares may not want to accept certain stallions and having one or two alternative stallions is very helpful.

15. **Masculine Mares:** Although not common, despite being in a strong heat some mares will adopt a rather aggressive masculine posture and demeanor when a certain mature stallion approaches for pasture breeding or hand breeding. These "Masculine Mares" usually are the more dominant mares in their herd. If your mare acts in that manner, do not be surprised if the stallion forgets about breeding the mare, but instead attempts to attack the mare as if she were a mature stallion. Interestingly, in one such case, we took the first stallion away, and brought a different mature stallion to the mare for hand-breeding. The mare acted much more feminine and accepted the second stallion for breeding.

16. **"I hate you too":** In rare cases, you may encounter individual stallions and mares that just seem to hate each other, and we have yet to find a solution to that problem.

Perhaps, if a Veterinarian were present, a mild sedative may help the mare to become more receptive, but we have not tried that.

17. **Reluctant Mares:** Occasionally, you will know from experience that a mare is in a strong heat and should breed, but she is unwilling to let the stallion mount and will kick viciously when he gets near. We have achieved successful covers and pregnancy on reluctant mares by using double scotch hobbles on the mare so that she is unable to kick the stallion. All that you need is 2 lengths of long soft heavy-duty rope. I will likely elaborate on Scotch Hobbles in a subsequent article.

One of our mares was an extremely reluctant breeder. Veterinary examinations provided no insights. Fortunately, on her 3rd breeding season she became very fond of stallions and a normal breeding mare in the years since. The cause of her change in attitude to stallions remains a mystery. In time you will come to realize that mares do not always follow the text book.

18. **Selecting a Stallion:** The best breeders will always acquire the highest quality of stallion available. Before attempting to select a stallion for breeding purposes, it is vital that you educate yourself on equine anatomy, proper conformation, correct motion at the walk and trot, the many faults that may be encountered, and the optimal body proportions or “balance” for the breed. All of those considerations are much more important than height and color.

Having a high-headed commanding appearance with an impressive front-end is worthless, if the bottom-end and hind-end are poor.

The best breeders are color-blind. However, in the Shire breed, roan and

white patches above the line between a line drawn between the elbow and the stifle must be avoided. If your primary search criteria is “tall and black with 4 white socks”, your breeding program is destined for mediocrity or worse.

Before selecting a stallion, for the good of yourself and the Shire breed, please educate yourself and seek advice from well seasoned draft horse breeders with 20 years of experience or more.

Always seek to acquire the best available stallion. Sometimes the best stallion for your mare herd is not available when you hope to buy him. In those cases, patience and persistence can be your best ally. I have succeeded in purchasing a few stallions that were “not for sale” when I first enquired. Increasing the offer price until the seller surrendered, is not a strategy that I recommend. However, if your bank balance is abundant, have fun!

19. **Geldings and Stallions:** Some mature stallions will cohabit quite well in a corral or pasture with geldings. However, one of our mature Shire stallions hated geldings and would attack them viciously if he had the opportunity. That stallion escaped from his pasture, broke into the gelding pasture, attacked them causing scrapes and cuts on both geldings.

20. **Stallion Value:** If you remain as a breeder long enough, you will realize that “the true value of a stallion lies only in the quality and consistency of his offspring.” For the best and most conscientious breeders, the market sale value of a stallion is largely irrelevant. Of paramount importance is the quality and consistency of his foals. That is all that really matters.

Some stallions may look magnificent, appearing to be a top example of the breed. However, if that stallion does not consistently produce good foals, his value to your breeding program and the breed as a whole is not good.

Some magnificent show champions have produced few good foals. On the other hand, some lesser known stallions prove themselves to be outstanding sires. So, if you are thinking about acquiring a mature stallion, do as much due diligence as possible, which includes investigating the quality and consistency of his foals. Investigate also the mares that produced those foals.

20. **Stallion Consistency:** The best stallions will produce consistently good foals, even when some of the mares may be rather ordinary. Other stallions may only produce good foals when bred to better quality foals.

Some stallions will “really put a stamp on their foals”, which means the foals tend to have a consistently good and similar appearance. Other stallions may sire foals that are inconsistent in appearance, which tends to be determined by the appearance of the mare. The mare and the stallion both determine the appearance and quality of the foal. However, since most stallions breed many mares in a season, the consistency of the stallion is of relatively bigger importance to your herd than any individual mare. The best stallions will tend to “put a stamp on their foals”

This discussion of consistency reinforces the advice that if you are thinking about

acquiring a mature stallion, do as much due diligence as possible, which includes investigating the quality and consistency of his foals. Some advice is worthy of repetition.

21: **Buy the Best:** Never settle for a mediocre stallion out of convenience or because the price is too low to resist. Always purchase and breed your mares to the best available stallion.

The term “best” in this context means the stallion best suited for your mares and your aspirations as a breeder. You need to perform your due-diligence and evaluate what is best for you and your breeding program.

Sadly, I have witnessed some very good Shire breeding operations slip downhill significantly after using a mediocre stallion for a few years.

If you find the best stallion for your herd, you may need to pay more than you had hoped. However, keep in mind that if you keep that stallion 4 to 6 years, his purchase price can be divided by many foals. Also a good stallion can pay for his keep with stud feed collected on a few mares each year.

If you buy a top stallion and do not keep him too long and sell him when he still has at least 4 to 6 breeding years left, his market value will remain high.

Owning good mares is essential, but your strategies and decisions regarding stallions will to a large degree determine the level of success of your breeding program.