

Proving the Product

"Straight Talk" meets with Jack and Susan Waggoner about the best ways to put a young stallion on the road to success

Jack and Susan Waggoner, Bridgeport, Texas, are the leading breeders in the cutting horse industry, and they've got decades of experience to their credit.

On one hand, the Waggoners own High Brow Cat, the No. 2 leading cutting sire of all time, a stallion with offspring that earn millions every season. His stud fee stands at \$22,500, and the book is full every year. But the Waggoners also own a stallion they quit promoting last year. His babies just didn't measure up, and it was time to call it a day on that particular horse. In fact, over the years, there have been six stallions on which the Waggoners threw in the towel.

From one extreme to the other, and a whole lot of promising young stallions in between, the Waggoners have experienced a realm of successes and failures in the breeding business. Right now, they have the assurance of High Brow Cat, plus the possibilities of at least three young stallions. There are even more stallions in the pipeline, ones that have made their way into the show pen but have yet to prove themselves worthy sires.

Whether one is talking about cutting, reining or reined cow horses, the performance horse market is picky, trendy and erratic. Inside this challenging environment, Jack and Susan have learned what does and does not work. And while nothing is ever certain with a stallion, the Waggoners insist there are direct approaches an owner can take to protect his interests and give his young sire the best chance possible.

Believe and then try

As a performer, High Brow Cat was a good performer. He won \$110,102 in NCHA show money. The Waggoners purchased him as a foal in 1988. Bred by Hanes Chatham and Stewart Sewell, High Brow Cat was just 2 weeks old when he and his mother were sold to Jack.

He was pleased with his young stallion, and High Brow Cat was 5 when he was bred for the first time. By that point, Jack had bred five stallions. There was limited success but nothing that would etch a lasting legacy.

"One or two of them were very successful show horses, but people don't breed on money won," Jack said. "Money won doesn't have much to do with it. Often, the greatest show horse is not a good sire or dam. There are a lot of other things that go with it."

"With those five stallions we had before High Brow Cat, I didn't particularly like their babies. So, if I didn't like their babies, I couldn't expect someone else to like their babies."

So what made them think High Brow Cat had the right ingredients to make a sire prospect?

"Cat is built the way I think a cutting horse should be built," Jack answered. "He combined what we thought was the best of his bottom side and his top side. You hear about High Brow Hickory; he was a



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very tough, gritty horse and he persevered. Cat got that from him. He was heavily muscled and Cat got that from him.

"Cat's bottom side was all but perfect. His mother [Smart Little Kitty] was out of what I think was the best Doc Bar daughter there was [Doc's Kitty]. She was very, very strong. Cat, when he was born and as he grew, exhibited the phenotype of his grandmother. He has very short, thick cannon bones, and she did. He has very heavy gaskins, and she did."

"There were just things about him that if you studied breeding, you saw that if he did pass those traits, like he looked like he should, that he could be a breeding horse. The only way you can tell if a breeding horse is a breeding horse, is to try it."

Don't take chances

Luck is part of the breeding equation, but that doesn't mean a stallion owner should rely on good odds. Those won't go far in this competitive market where another dozen promising stallions are only one show season away.

The Waggoners thought perhaps High Brow Cat had what it would take to make a sire, but nothing was definite. They had a stallion who, in 1993, was simply one of many. So, how did the Waggoners convince people to breed to High Brow Cat?

"They didn't," Jack answered plainly. "His first foal crop had six in it. We had all six here. We saw that all six were trained. We saw that all six were shown."

"You've got to believe in your product," Susan added. "You have to train them, you have to get them

out in the show pen and create that market."

There were seven foals in that first 1993 crop of which lived. As 3-year-olds, two of those babies earned \$39,401 and \$27,945, respectively, for a total of \$67,346. In 1997, 12 of his offspring earned \$212,573 – and by then all six of the first crop were money-earners. And up the record went there, to where now, according to AQHA, High Brow Cat has 1,410 registered foals. 871 are of an age where earnings have been made (horses 4 years old and over), and 673 were winners. This equates to a 77 percent success rate. What's more, High Brow Cat is the No. 1 NCHA Futurity horse, with \$4.2 million in earnings to his credit.

Certainly, that kind of success doesn't come every day. Jack maintains there is only one way to put a young stallion into a position where he's in demand.

"Your job is your job, and you have to do it. You're going to sell a product to the public, and you want to know that you believe in it, you trained it, you did it yourself. If you don't, it would be a disaster for those babies to be good," he said.

The reason some capable stallions just don't make it is clear, according to Jack.

"First of all, their owners let somebody else train the 2-year-olds. They won't go get somebody else to train the horses at home. The owners don't know if those 2-year-olds are good. If those horses were trained well or they're not good, then a trainer is going to want them as 3-year-olds. At that point, the stallion owner is already working in the horse market."

"It doesn't take much to figure out why a program didn't work," Susan added. "They are not their own horses. Because they bred them, they think it's a cutting horse."

Jack cannot recall a single 2-year-old that he put out for training.

"We look at those 2-year-olds and we either train them or we don't," he said. "If we like them, we train them. If we don't like them, we don't use that stud. If you send a trainer bad horses that aren't good, ones that you didn't cull out, you didn't like, then he's not going to take them from you."

Susan believes that, plain and simple, training is going to ride what can win.

"If they're good ones, the trainers are going to take them – no matter what they're out of," she said. "I think everybody who is a breeder needs to be responsible for their own program. Make sure the horses you put out there is worthy of being out there."

It's their choice

Stallion owners have to understand that the chances of their foals by a young sire are not going to bring

prices. This is why Jack advises stallion owners to chart a course that allows for the investment of time and plenty of money.

"Really and truly, it costs money in every endeavor we do to be successful at it. Hopefully, you'll be successful enough that you'll make a profit.

"You hear cutters say, 'You've got to have a plan when you go down there and cut.' Breeding is the same way. You've got to have a plan where you prepare those babies. Those first horses, before they're shown, they're not going to be worth a whole lot, but that's just part of it. That's part of the deal."

Part of the Waggoners' plan was to open High Brow Cat's book to everyone. They never set criteria for or turned down mares, insisting that it was important to breed the stallion to a wide spectrum of mares.

"In the breeding horse business, there are mares that no matter who you breed them to, they're going to produce. If you seek out those mares and breed your stallion only to those, your stallion, initially, is going to have good babies. Does that tell us whether he's a good breeding horse or not, I don't think so," Jack said.

"With Cat and the others, I can't say, 'I'm the expert and your mare is not good enough to breed to my stud.' I'm not going to do that and neither is Susan. We're not experts."

The Waggoners admit that time has taught them that Smart Aristocrat, a proven stallion with \$2.4 million in offspring earnings, crosses better on some mares than others.

"If they're bringing something that I know will not make a good cross, I just discourage that breeding," Susan said. "In our business now, it's so expensive on the mare owner. They've got the stallion fee, the mare care, the chute fee and if they're doing an embryo transfer, that's an unbelievable expense. There are so many expenses, so that mare owner has to get a marketable product and I want to make sure they get that."

"But if they want to breed to Smart Aristocrat, even though we may disagree, they can breed to him," Jack added.

"Bottom line, it's their choice," Susan concluded.

The right reasons

Some stallions hit the big time as 3-year-olds and have books that fill the next spring. Some of those breeding trends continue, and some don't. Major winnings, no matter how grand, are no guarantee of a long breeding career.

"If the stud was very successful showing or won the NCHA Futurity, people are willing to jump in and give him a chance. He's got a good four-year run, until the babies go and they're either good or they're not good," Jack said.

Susan explains that while some stallions seem to fall into and out of popularity, the public is pretty basic in its demand. Divorces, lawsuits, controversy and personal grudges, there are many subtle forces at work in the breeding marketplace. But it comes down to the basic principle, people want winners – no matter the circumstances.

"We're pretty close-knit in this industry, and it doesn't take long before everybody knows the truth about what's produced out there," Susan said. "I think if a stallion has gone out of favor, they've gone out for the right reasons. Word gets around."

"There are fads," Jack added. "You take horses that

won the Futurity, won a whole lot in a short amount of time or are a certain color. So everybody jumps in and they breed a lot of horses to him. Then people realize they got 150 in a foal crop, 10 of them were trained and some or all those aren't that great. It takes a couple of years for the public to see that, but when they do, then breeding on that stud falls off. The public is smart enough to know it just didn't work, and they go somewhere else."

Problem is, stallion owners don't always have such clear vision. Emotion gets in the way of objective thinking.

"You love these horses, I don't think you can do this unless you care about horses," Jack said. "But if it doesn't work, it's time to quit. You can't stay in there just hoping to hit a good one. It just doesn't work that way. That doesn't make a good stud."

Susan agreed, saying, "You can't keep it out there, thinking, 'I have all this money invested, advertising, time - it has to work!' By thinking that way, you end up hurting your reputation, your program, your integrity and you're basically just throwing bad money after good."

"Last year, we pulled one. We gear everything for the [NCHA] Futurity as 3-year-olds. His babies become wonderful as 5- and 6-year-olds, but we need them to be strong as 3-year-olds."

Jack added, "I loved this horse to death and he was a great show horse. But a good stallion will produce babies better than he is, and this stallion did not do that. Why would we want to keep promoting a stallion that's not a really good one?"

A fair shot first

High Brow Cat doesn't need advertising. His book fills based on reputation and recording earnings alone. For most stallions, however, advertising is the best way to get the word out. Susan suggests doing it in a way that shows the beauty of the stallion's conformation while highlighting his foals' achievements.

"I think it's important that your ads are intelligent and they report what's happening with the stud," Jack added. "But initially, it's 'This is the stud we own, this is our phone number and this is how you can reach us.' It has to be there available, all the time. If you've got to hunt for an ad and it's a new stud, you're not going to hunt for very long before you run on to a different one and go breed to it."

"But the real kickoff for promoting your stallion is to breed him to your own mares, train your own horses, get your own horses out there. You do the work and don't expect the public to do the work for you."

As for the Waggoners' three junior stallions, how do Jack and Susan set those apart from the dozens of other aspiring cutting sires that have offspring that have anywhere from \$100,000 to \$3 million in earnings?

"You can't set them apart," Jack answered, adding that colorful ads and fancy gimmicks seldom fool the educated performance horse market. "We're in the fray like everyone else. We're just trying to do what we think is right."

Consider Cat T Masterson, a stallion who has \$199,207 in NCHA earnings and two foal crops on the ground. The Waggoners are not advertising him yet, nor are they selling his babies.

"If they want to pay a lot of money for a Cat T Masterson, we will not sell it," Jack confirmed. "We want to get it trained and started right. Once it's



High Brow Cat's stud fee stands at \$22,500.

going and it's with a trainer and a buyer will agree to keep it with that trainer, then we'll sell that horse. We'll sell our best ones, but we want to first make sure that horse has a chance."

That lesson was learned several years ago, when the Waggoners sold an outstanding colt by High Brow Cat.

"Jack priced it really high because we didn't want to sell it because it was one that we knew we needed to take on and train," Susan recalled. "Well, this fellow stepped up and bought it. After spending that kind of money, we thought he would get that horse trained. But we never, ever saw that colt come to town."

"That was a real heartbreak. We shouldn't have done that and so we learned to never make that mistake again. Those babies count. We have to get them out, get them trained and give them a fair shot."

Of course, it can be a little tough to turn down a five- or six-figure price for a 2-year-old, one that might or might not make it through the months of training and progress soundly into the show pen.

"Sure, you're better off selling that horse," Jack admitted. "But if you really believe in your product you're really trying to promote it, trying to make a product where people can make a profit when they breed their mare, then you'll keep that horse and test it yourself. When you've tested that horse and are satisfied it's good, then you can let the public see it."

"We're trying to sell a product that's been tried and proven first. If you do that, I think you can help your mare owner, at least you're sure trying to."

Susan added, "Many of our mare owners are breeding to sell. We have a lot of folks that hang in with our program because they know that we're trying to make a market for their babies. They know we pay up the incentive programs, we're training, showing, advertising and will be here for as long as we can." ■