

Auction Action Can Teach Much About Draft Horses

When I last left readers, it was a wintry day in February and I was headed for the Great Lakes Draft Horse sale at Michigan State University. I learned a great deal by observing scores of these heavy horses close at hand. As a wise elder horseman once told me, "When it comes to horses, there is no stupid question, if you do not know."

This sale is one of the largest for draft horses in the state. It is held early every year and is in many ways a counterpart to the Michigan Great Lakes International (MGLI) Draft Horse Show and Pull, which is held at MSU's livestock pavilion in the fall. Both attract many draft horse breeders and devotees from Indiana, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Canada.

There are three breeds of drafts which are known as "the heavies" in horse circles. They are the Belgians, Percherons, and Clydesdales. Two of these breeds, the Belgians and the Percherons, can be found in plentitude on Mackinac during the summer season. These horses can weigh more than a small car and can often reach more than seven feet at their shoulder.

The draft horses for sale in February were predominantly Belgians and Percherons. When



An eye-catching horse was #603 (Orndorff's Captain Rocket), a huge red sorrel Belgian stallion with a light mane and tail. Rocket came all the way from T-Road's Belgians in Topeka, Indiana, and is owned by Orla Yoder and Sons. (Photograph courtesy of Regal Graphics)

I asked why there were so few Clydes, I was told it was because the largest herds of Clydes in this area are found in Ontario, and weather, as well as border crossings and gasoline prices, overrode the auction.

Registered breed auctions are informative and fun to attend. They're not the seedy, shifty, smoky affairs many people think of when they hear the words "horse auction." Those are the ones associated with emaciated, broken-down horses, with drooping heads, snotty noses,

split hooves, and wheezing, in dingy, dark pens. A breed auction usually represents many quality animals. At this draft horse auction, the sale horses were stalled in large temporary stalls adjacent to the auction arena at MSU. The bedding was fresh. There were even hot and cold wash stations. MSU's Pavilion has plenty of room to sit, concession stands abound, and so do sales vendors in booths. Even the coffee was good and hot. The draft's pedigrees are posted on all stall cards, and for the most part all of the horses on sale that day were looking their best in spite of some heavy winter coats. Many owners had taken the time to trim, clip, and braid manes, as well as put up tails in the distinctive draft horse rosette bow in back. This "look" helps emphasize the horse's neck and buttocks, important points to consider if you're buying a horse to pull, plow, or breed.

On the Island, pulling is the major consideration. Horses that have good feet, strong necks,



HORSE TALES

by Candice C. Dunnigan

and good hocks are desired for work. The biggest distinction between many of the horses for sale here and those on the Island are their feet. In "showing" a breed, be it dogs, sheep, or horses, certain allowances are made for a ring look, that in no way have anything to do with everyday practicalities or function. With draft horses, the most common, yet most odd of show sets, is the scotch bar foot. You will not see it on Mackinac, but go to a draft show and that's all you will see.

Draft horses' feet tend to naturally widen and spread as they grow. In this case, the foot is allowed and trimmed to take the shape of a very wide "U" with the tips trimmed outward and shod in such a manner. In some cases, the foot is as wide as a frying pan. The result makes for a low broad foot that when it's lifted has to be lifted higher and makes more of a statement when set down. The feet are highly polished, and even if a horse hasn't grown his hooves into such a perfected state, they're still shod with the scotch bar shoe. When I asked why, a breeder shrugged his shoulders and said, "That's the way it's done."

The higher an animal carried its head, the higher the bid on it seemed to be. Buyers were looking at tight joints, well-defined back hocks, a sloping shoulder, and a long neck, all of the points important for a handsome driving draft. Horses were shown in the arena in harness being ground driven, and also pulling a small two-wheeled cart. Horses were also displayed with a handler jogging alongside the horse, and some horses were allowed to move freely themselves in the ring. All of these methods were used to highlight an animal's straight movement.

The horsemen were some of the best large horse handlers I've seen, and most were Amish men. In fact, this auction in the middle of winter drew many Amish families. The horse that really caught my eye was #603 (Orndorff's Captain Rocket), a huge red sorrel Belgian stallion with a light mane and tail. You could see what they meant when they said he was bred to hitch, harness, and drive. In spite of his

mass, he was majestic with a natural grace and flair. Flashy and rooted, all in one package. Rocket came all the way from T-Road's Belgians in Topeka, Indiana, and is owned by Orla Yoder and Sons.

Draft horses tend to have these wonderful common sense names I like, such as: Elmer, Cyclone, Rocket, Rose, Lucy, Molly, Charlie, Matthew, Eli, Chipper, Duke, and Jack. Nothing is too exotic or phantasmal. Of course, I wished somehow I could buy one. That is the "danger" of auctions that always puts my family on edge when I attend one. I peered into the faces of the crowd that day to see if I could recognize an Islander looking for new stock, but I did not. There are other draft auctions in the Great Lakes region that have many grade (non registered) draft horses for sale and certain buyers choose certain ones to attend (they know a breeder, or a horse, or a line they like). But sitting in a sale barn, eyeing animals that one may need to work in a place like Mackinac Island, is something I know few people even think of. It takes a good deal of time and commitment, and luck of the bid. Those criteria must also be coupled with a person who knows horses, what he intends them to be doing, and where they're going to do it. How many have ever considered this when they see a three-horse hitch drop off passengers at the Fort?

Watching people and these kinds of horses at this auction made a new connection for me. Mackinac means many things to many people, a real gamut. But these draft horses can evoke a core in many of us without an agrarian background to connect with this place. Why? Possibly the answer lies in the mythical beauty of the Island, and a time in which hundreds of these gentle giants are coexisting here, too. There is no place quite like it.

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