

Managing the Stallion Athlete
an interview with Doug Spink

Dr. Christine King

This issue I want to discuss stallion care from a different angle: the stallion in athletic training and competition (or, for want of a better phrase, the stallion athlete). I can think of no better instructor on this topic than Doug Spink, the managing partner of Exitpoint Stallions (www.stallions.net). Doug is the trainer of several successful sporthorse stallions, including Capone I, an international-level showjumper.

CK: Doug, would you please tell us a little about yourself.

DS: I tend to think of myself as a teacher/coach to the stallions in my life, rather than “trainer.” Marc Bekoff, an ethologist whom I respect greatly, deprecates the concept of “training” by rightly pointing out that we “train” other beings to do simple, repetitive tricks but we teach them generalizable skills and concepts, and we coach them in achieving their own full potential. To me, it's a powerful distinction – lots of folks train horses to do certain simple behaviors, but it's a different thing to enter into a teacher/coach/mentor relationship with them.

Anyway, I've been a coach to Capone since his youth, as well as overseeing the mental, physical, and emotional recovery of Cantour – a direct Cantus son bred by Maas Hell, injured at age 4 and pronounced permanently handicapped. He came into my family at age 7, by age 9 I was riding him a bit, and by age 11 he completed his first Grand Prix with me in the saddle – no jumping faults.

I grew up riding in the hunter ring, and was Small Pony Hunter champion of Pennsylvania two years in a row before I turned 12. As an adult, I've worked with many breeds – from a half-Arabian gelding that was pronounced unrideable (and left my barn to go to a wonderful amateur dressage competitor) to a stallion I purchased in Germany when he caught my eye late in an auction at which I'd not intended to buy and is now one of the top hunter competitors in North America (Challenge), to my beloved Percheron friend, Pennwood's Prince Joe Laet, and a smattering of draft crosses, purebred Arabians, and off-the-track Thoroughbreds. They've all taught me important lessons, and I thank all of them for the time and patience they've shown whilst we were working as a team – whether that was just one day, or a decade together.

To walk into Doug's barn is quite a mind-altering experience. Despite being inhabited by several large stallions, there is a sense of peace and equanimity that I found both surprising and delightful. There was even a sense of camaraderie and fun. I have absolutely no qualms about stepping into the stall with any of Doug's stallions, because regardless of their early histories (some of which are quite traumatic) and strong presence, each stallion knows he is expected to behave like a gentleman.

I've been tremendously impressed with Doug's approach to the care and training of the stallions under his care, so I thought we should hear directly from him.

CK: Doug, what drew you to working with stallions?

DS: Growing up in the horse world, and riding since age 2, I was warned quite often as a child to “be careful of the stallions” whenever one was nearby. While I am sure the warnings were well-intentioned, they had the effect of turning my curiosity firmly onto these mythologically dangerous, mysterious creatures. I'd walk by their stalls and peak in, expecting to see something really frightening – but they looked like other horses (only with lots more bars and locks on their stalls).

Being the risk-lover that I most certainly am, I soon was sneaking into the stalls with the stallions to see what all the fuss was about. Fortunately for me, they were all quite careful with me and I never felt any real danger in their presence. Eventually I was caught in my adventures, and warned sternly by my father that I had to “watch the plumbing” when working with a horse – stallions are dangerous! The cognitive dissonance between these well-intentioned warnings and the curious, playful, engaging stallions I'd managed to meet at that young age drew me to it like an unsolved puzzle.

Without much more than that experience to go on, I just assumed that stallions were like other horses – nice if one is nice to them, not so nice if treated unfairly. Of course, there's also that extra spark that a stallion can carry: the Germans I know will point out a particularly charismatic, confident, or perhaps even a bit “cheeky” stallion and sum it all up in one word: sexy! Of course, in North America that's a blasphemous word to use, but it's got truth behind it. Stallions carry their hearts on their sleeves, far more than mares or geldings (on average).

When I was young, I was fortunate to have much success in working with mares that others found “difficult” or unpredictable. So, for me, it's not that mares are too “moody” for my tastes – quite the reverse. I enjoy working with people who have quirks and character and individuality – whether those “people” are hairless two-leggers, hooved four-leggers, or members of the *Canis* family.

Today, I focus my work with horses almost exclusively on stallions. As is true of the dogs with whom I share my life, the stallions in my life aren't economic assets or means to some other end: they are family, first and foremost. I resonate with them on the deepest of levels, and I always have: while all horses matter to me, stallions are central to my world – truly, my entire life is organized around their happiness and well-being.

CK: Many people consider stallions as somewhat dangerous, or at least needing a firmer hand than most geldings or mares. What has been your experience, and how does that influence how you manage your stallions?

DS: While this may be true, on a practical level, for many stallions that one might bump into at most barns in this country, it's not true by definition or in a general sense. What I mean to say is that, in general, stallions are no more dangerous or reliant on hard handling to integrate safely into a mixed equine/primate environment.

What is true is that, given the manner in which we breed horses nowadays and the way in which we raise them as youngsters, the outcome tends towards intact male horses who by age 4 or 5 are quite a challenge to manage by the “normal” horsman or horsewoman. More than with mares or castrated males, a colt who grows up with not so much structure and social boundaries is going to become an unruly and difficult “teenager” by the time he is 3 or 4. This feeds on itself, and soon one can have a real challenge – but it's not that this is intrinsic to the creature, but rather that the program through which he is raised results in this outcome. What might be good young horse handling for a more self-contained mare or a de-tuned gelding isn't ideal for the typical young stallion.

More fundamentally, we've inadvertently bred towards non-castrated male horses that are (in some breeds) more difficult to manage. When live cover was still predominant, there was an economic incentive to invest time and promotional effort in stallions that could service many mares successfully in one season. A more “normal” stallion in an evolutionary sense would cover a herd of 6-8 mares during the breeding season, servicing them until they were all settled. In contrast, a live-covered racehorse is expected to breed one or more different mares, every day, for the duration of a six-month breeding season. . . and perhaps them travel to the other hemisphere to do it all again!

This may sound “fun” in theory, but in practice it puts heavy selection favor on stallions that are unusually high in libido and focus on reproduction. Since our standard practice here is still routine castration of young male horses, we don't see the “cost” of these high-libido selection pressures in most of the males in our barns – and the males left intact are often locked away and not expected to integrate well into everyday life. This cycle feeds on itself, and folks see difficult stallions and think “I don't want to deal with that.” Rather than *seeking bloodlines that don't produce difficult intact males*, they look to the scalpel to amputate their way to manageability. This seems backwards to me – we should breed animals that smoothly integrate into our environment by default, not through required amputation of organs. It would be similar to buying cars but – in half the cars made – one had to cut out several cylinders to make them driveable around town – wouldn't it be better just to make the cars driveable off the assembly line?

So, in sum, while there are some breeds that have veered towards selecting males that are unusually driven sexually – with attendant personality traits in other areas – this is far from universal and even in more extreme cases is effectively managed if proper structure is provided during the colts' younger years.

Raised properly and from good bloodlines, a happy and confident stallion is far easier to manage than a mare or gelding, far more predictable, and (in my opinion) far less likely to cause accidental injury to his human friend even in difficult or dangerous situations.

CK: You once mentioned to me that stallions are much more social than most people think. How does that factor in to the way you manage your stallions at home? And how do you accommodate their social needs when they're on the show circuit?

DS: Compared to mares, stallions are (on average) very extroverted, and very social on all levels. They're the kid in school who couldn't stop talking, who didn't pay attention to the teacher but always knew what everyone else was up to within 20 square miles of school! They are absolute social butterflies, as fascinated with any newcomer as they are devoted to their longtime friends, play buddies, and good-natured barn “rivals.”

The act of socially isolating stallions – as is so common in many stallion barns – is, in a word, abusive. They are so dependent on that daily interaction with other creatures – be they horses, humans, dogs, or whatever – that sticking them in solitary confinement with bars on the windows is an absolute horror. That might not be intended as abuse – after all, “conventional wisdom” in our country is that this is the only “safe” way to house stallions – but to the stallion, it is a nightmare worse than death. It is no wonder, then, that many stallions kept in these isolation-cell lockdowns sooner or later go completely mad.

By far, the easiest and most important tool for developing a calm, centered, comfortable-in-his-own-skin stallion is to include him in as much social activity as possible, all day, every day. In our barn, the boys all live in stalls with open stall fronts and between-stall barriers no more than 4 feet high. Neighbors can (and do) nip and nuzzle and play kissy-mouth with each other. . . they share hay back and forth, preform mutual grooming, and generally “hang out.” They can touch and talk to people and dogs walking down the barn aisle, and they are visually in contact with everything going on, both in the barn and outside.

No, I don't turn them all out in one herd – that's a bit much, even for me – but short of that they're in constant contact with each other, and with me and the rest of my family, as is possible. It's the core of our “program” - though I really dislike that word, it's so militaristic. Really, they're simply part of our family here – involved in what goes on, as much as possible.

As to life on the show circuit, well most of the boys love it as they get to “meet” all sorts of new horses and people, every day. It's a grand adventure for them! I've not yet met a truly introverted stallion, so the

shows are exciting for them. I worry, more, that they'll exhaust themselves with their constant “hey how you doing, what's your name?” stream of consciousness interactions – at night, I try to get them some time to rest by putting sheets on their stalls for quietude.

CK: Are there other factors involved in the care and training of stallion athletes that are more-or-less unique to stallions or more important in stallions than in geldings or mares? For example, are stallions more prone to injury? Are they more difficult to treat or lay up when injured?

DS: Stallions injure less often than mares or geldings, at least in terms of soft/connective tissue issues. (I don't have studies to back this up, but I do plan to do those studies to support my strong firsthand experience in this area.) And no wonder! Stallions produce their own testosterone, and testosterone is banned when administered to geldings or mares – it is a performance-enhancing drug and dramatically decreases the time needed for muscle and soft tissue recover. Plus, they carry more fast-twitch muscle which takes stress off the joints, again decreasing risk of joint injury. It's a one-two punch.

I get almost dismissive of the risk of injuries with the stallions, to be honest. So many times, I've rescued or helped to rehabilitate a stallion that was pronounced permanently disabled due to a severe injury early in life (an accident, usually). Given time, rest, and good nutrition. . . sooner or later his body heals itself up and he's ready to go. Of course, testosterone is no guarantee against injury or in favor of good recovery – I need to remember that, as I tend to just expect that they'll always be able to heal themselves.

When they do come down with an injury (usually from playing too hard) I don't have troubles with stall rest. Again, my “stalls” are more like small rooms with half-walls between them, so the boys are active and interacting 24/7. Whether they are out in the turnout areas or not, they've got lots of interaction and activity.

CK: How does one get the best out of a stallion, in behavior and athletic performance?

DS: One receives exceptional performance from a stallion (or any horse – any friend, really) by **giving** the best that one has to him, first. That's it. One gives before one expects to receive. One earns a stallion's trust and respect and friendship and, eventually, love by being a trustworthy, respectful, friendly, loving person.

Of course, part of being a good friend and partner to anybody else is to consider their needs and desires and wishes when making decisions, and to integrate that matrix into one's personal goals to develop *team* goals. While I may want a particular stallion to excel in, say, showjumping I will respect him and if he'd prefer to do something else I will not try to force him to participate in a sport he doesn't love. This was the case with Challenge. He is a very talented jumper, but his heart isn't in the big fences even if his body can do the job. So I never considered forcing him to be a jumper – I just asked him what he wanted to do, and soon he found his nice has a spectacular hunter and three-day eventer. It's not complex, is it?

One of my boys here, Sigi, came to me as a rescue. For years, people asked me what I was “going to do with him.” I always felt he'd tell me what he wanted to do, himself, as he grew up. In time, he's done just that and today he's perhaps the best foxhunting horse I've met in my entire life.

Leadership and/or partnership is about setting example through one's own behavior. Further than that, friendship is about caring for the other person – not just formulating one's personal desires and then attempting to use others to achieve them.

CK: Your stallions are also used for breeding. Do they have any trouble shifting between their roles as athletes and breeding animals?

DS: Often, I am asked that question by men and I tend to respond to it with a question for them. As a male, do they find it hard not to breed with the females they meet on a daily basis? Isn't it confusing that, sometimes, it's ok to make sexual advances on females but sometimes it's not? They usually laugh at this – of course it's not hard! One knows when such things are appropriate, and when they're not. Well, as teenagers perhaps we didn't know quite so well but when we grow up such judgment becomes as ingrained as language or riding a bike.

The same is true with stallions. The only stallions “confused” as to the distinction between breeding and other areas of life are those who have not been raised in a way to allow such knowledge to naturally develop. For a well-adjusted stallion, it's a self-limiting problem. If he thinks that under-saddle work is correlated with breeding but, in reality, he never actually breeds while under saddle. . . well, that negative correlation is very easy to spot! He'd have to be truly dense to miss the (lack of) connection, wouldn't he? Most stallions aren't stupid.

Conversely, for a stallion in an evolutionarily-typical herd environment, breeding was an activity that took up a few minutes of the day, a few months of the year. It's seamlessly interwoven with the rest of his life in the herd. As humans, we tend to think of breeding as the absolute centre of the emotional universe – everything else is just rounding error! But this is not really true for stallions. Yes, breeding is exciting and important but for a well-balanced stallion it's only a small (albeit intense) part of his whole day. It's no more disruptive or out of place in daily life than is eating lunch or taking a nap.

CK: I have a client (Cathy) who has a stallion (Leo) whom she showjumps. He's a very talented but sensitive horse, and he can get quite “wound up” when the pressure is on. After making some changes to how they relate, Leo is now well behaved on the ground. However, he is still quite a handful under saddle. By her own admission, Leo is “too much horse” for Cathy. Her trainer and her primary-care vet are urging her to have Leo gelded. I don't believe castration will solve this problem. I know I've given you very few details to go on, but could you comment on this situation?

DS: For nearly twenty years of my life, rock climbing has been a passion of mine. As a small child, I was always off climbing trees and scaling crumbling hillsides. That evolved into full-scale obsession through my teens and 20s, though eventually over-use injuries slowed down my climbing considerably. In climbing, we have the issue of chipping. Is it ethically “right” to chip holds on a given rock face, so as to make it climbable?

The overwhelming consensus amongst climbers around the world is that chipping is totally unacceptable. We say that it is “dumbing down” the rock, bringing the climb to our level instead of bringing ourselves to the level of the climb. It also robs others of the experience of seeing the rock in its natural state, and perhaps rising to that challenge - and experiencing something profound in the process.

I see a parallel issue in horses. Yes, some stallions are “too much” for a given rider. The same is true of some mares, and some geldings. I believe that it shows considerably more respect for the world around us – and the beings with whom we share that world – to ask ourselves to *rise* to that level. Barring that, we owe it to others (and to our equine partners) to find the challenging horse an environment where their unique skills and personality are a good match. That's our responsibility, period.

I do not see that deploying the surgeon's scalpel to “fix” the challenge is a positive path, in general. If this is acceptable to us, do we also accept other surgical modifications to make our horses “easier?” If they are

real troublemakers, do we remove their eyes so they can't cause as much mischief? Do we remove their tails if they tend to hit us in the face while we groom them? If they are very sensitive to sounds, do we perforate their eardrums in order to lessen their hearing? If we do not do these things, why do we find it acceptable to “fix” male horses by amputating their testicles? We do not perform hysterectomies on “difficult” mares – we learn to manage, respect, and work with them instead.

My boys have taught me many subtle wisdoms in our time shared together. Not all of these lessons have been easy – some days are downright awful; one takes the good and the bad. However, were I to seek shortcuts to “cut away” the difficult parts, I'd also lose all that wisdom along the way – just as a climber who “climbs” a hard route by chipping it never actually experiences that rock in a genuine sense.

I can tell you with absolute certainty that ten or fifteen years ago, I looked at certain stretches of rock and I would have told you that nobody - ever - would climb them “free” (that is, without using mechanical aids). I had seen that rock, looked at the “holds” that barely existed. I'd touched them, hung from them, reached between them. I climbed at a fairly high level at the time: not the top of the sport, but not that far away. We all agreed that these routes would never, ever, ever be climbed.

Today, some of those routes have not only been climbed, but are now considered to be “moderate” by a new generation of climbers. It is beyond my understanding. It is beautiful. I am awed by the intersection of the possible and the real. Had they been chipped, they would be just another “easy route” among many. Instead they are unique, and powerful, and important.

Similarly, I could “make” the stallions in my barn easier by castrating them. I could also drug them, feed them only enough food to survive, or otherwise incapacitate them in order to take away any tendency they might have to go against my selfish wishes. I choose not to do this. Instead, I choose to meet them as a partner and as a peer – if not equal in all things, then very much equal in fundamental worth. They challenge me and stretch my boundaries – and when I, in turn, challenge them and ask them to stretch *their* own boundaries (say, in high-level competition), I am only asking of them what they ask of me. It is fair, reciprocal – reciprocity translates across the species, all the more so within the group of social mammals.

Perhaps not everyone is ready or able to handle a “difficult” stallion (or gelding, or mare, or dog, or human friend) in their life at a particular time. That is not bad. Realistically, I was not able to even begin to succeed on some of those climbing “super routes” of a decade ago. I left them for others with more talent and drive, and I stayed with routes I could reasonably address. For me, these routes are more than hard enough! I am ok with others who are able to climb far above my level – I feel no need to chip their routes, and make them easy enough so that I can climb them.

The same is true of horses. If a stallion is too challenging for a given rider, that rider has a responsibility to either improve his horse skills enough to make a good partner with the stallion, or to find him a new home. “Dumbing down” the stallion through surgery is not the path to genuine grown, respect, empathy, and partnership.

CK: Thanks so much, Doug. Any parting words?

DS: Like any friend, a stallion is a mirror of our own selves. Those with peace, equanimity, and harmony in their heart tend to generate the same feelings in the stallions who share their lives. In that vein, we can all work to create positive environments around us so that our horses can benefit from those environments, and in turn echo back those gifts to us, creating a virtuous cycle of friendship and love. Not everyone is going to share their life with stallions as I do – for me, they are family, friends, and partners

combined. But we can all open ourselves to our equine associates in a way that expands our human worldview into the equine space, even as we ask them to expand their equine worldview just a little bit into the land of the primates. It is a wondrous journey, to cross the species barrier and see the world through alien eyes: to feel the world through non-human senses. Perhaps, in their intensity and (occasional) focus, stallions are the epitome of such transformative experiences – truly, sharing deep intimacy with a stallion is a big step away from the human world.

Vive la difference!

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