



Research

Status quo of the personality trait evaluation in horse breeding: Judges' assessment of the situation and strategies for improvement

Uta König von Borstel^{a,*}, Stephanie Pasing^{a,b}, Matthias Gauly^a, Ludwig Christmann^c^a University of Göttingen, Albrecht-Thaer-Weg 3, 37075 Göttingen, Germany^b University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna, Clinic for Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Andrology, Vienna, Austria^c Hannoveraner Verband e.V. Lindhooper Str. 92, Verden/Aller, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 April 2012

Received in revised form 2 April 2013

Accepted 12 April 2013

Available online 23 May 2013

Keywords:

horse breeding

personality

rideability

evaluation guidelines

survey

performance test

ABSTRACT

Recently, concerns about the validity of the evaluation of personality traits in horse breeding have been raised. For that reason, the aim of the present study was to assess the current status of personality trait evaluation in horse breeding. A survey was conducted among all station performance test judges and all test riders officially appointed by the German Equestrian Federation. The survey was designed to obtain the breeding experts' judgment of rideability and personality trait evaluation, to assess the utilization of the current guidelines, and finally to scan the obtained descriptions of traits for specific behavior patterns and their potential use in devising new, more objective guidelines. All breeding experts concurred that personality traits are important (26%) or very important (74%), and most (96%) agreed that these traits should be evaluated during station performance tests but that there are some (26%) or considerable (57%) problems in the present evaluation system. Criticism included the lack of objectivity and of universally accepted guidelines, the lack of consideration of important traits such as learning ability, and difficulties in differentiating between learned and inherent behavior. Just more than half (57%) of the experts stated that they make use of some guidelines, but few (13%) mentioned the official guidelines for personality trait evaluation. When presented with these guidelines' description of a horse's behavior deserving score 7 (and score 4) of 10 for rideability, only 47% (46% in the case of score 4) of the surveyed experts assigned the correct score. The remaining respondents exceeded the correct score by 1 score (score 8 instead of 7) and exceeded (39%) or went below (16%) score 4 by up to 3 scores. These results show that the present evaluation of personality traits in horse breeding lacks objectivity, likely resulting in unreliable personality trait scores, although judges are aware of some of these problems. Changes in the present evaluation strategies, such as devising new mandatory guidelines including the description of concrete behavior patterns and/or objective behavior tests, are required to enable a meaningful, genetic selection for, and thus improvement of personality traits.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The personality traits stated in the breeding goals of various European riding horse breeds most commonly include traits such as temperament, character, handleability, intelligence, and willingness to perform (Koenen et al., 2004). In Germany, all the personality traits are subsumed as "interieur" (i.e., internal or "interior") traits (FN, 2010) emphasizing the special nature of these traits. While the "external" conformation, health, or performance traits are generally considered by breeding experts, riders, and many

scientists to be easily and objectively measurable, there is less agreement or trust in the assessment of "internal" personality traits. However, in recent years, the personality traits received increased attention (c.p. Visser et al., 2001; Seaman et al., 2002; Górecka-Bruzda et al., 2011a,b; König von Borstel et al., 2012a). This increase in attention is likely because of 2 factors: (1) the intrinsic importance of personality traits with regard to horse performance (e.g., a nervous horse that readily shies neither will reliably win a competition nor is it suitable for use as a leisure horse) and (2) there is a divergent development in that the breeding and selection side of the horse industry experiences an increased professionalism (Münch et al., 2009), whereas the general horse industry is characterized by more and more newcomers to the field. These newcomers are predominantly (female) leisure riders (IPSOS, 2001) with the main interest in a companionship interaction with the

* Address for reprint requests and correspondence: Uta König von Borstel, PhD, MSc, BSc, Department of Animal Science, University of Göttingen, Albrecht-Thaer-Weg 3, 37075 Göttingen, Germany, Tel: +49-551-39-101-39; Fax: +49-551-39-5587. E-mail address: koenigvb@gwdg.de (U. König von Borstel).

horse rather than an interest in competitive sports. This divergent development has been noticed in many other countries such as France, too (Couzy and Godet, 2010), and it potentially creates problems because the horses selected for breeding are trained by professional riders. Professional riders make few beginners' mistakes in horse handling and riding, and their training is fast, efficient, and generally based on negative reinforcement (McGreevy, 2007) that at times may be coercive (Cook, 2003). Thus, there is no selection against negative reactions to handling mistakes, and on the other hand, only horses that cope well with this type of fast, professional training will be highly successful in their performance test. And it is specifically these successful horses, and in particular stallions, that are subsequently highly sought after as breeding stock (Bernhard, 2009). At the same time, issues with personality traits rarely lead to culling of horses (König von Borstel, 2013), and indeed, for example, in a German study, not a single warmblood breeding stallion was retired because of dissatisfaction with personality traits (König von Borstel and Bernhard, in press). In contrast, the leisure riders may require entirely different horses as they are not willing or able to use much force in training. Also, riding and handling mistakes are more likely, and their main goal is safe and relaxed hacking and handling (IPSOS, 2001). Accordingly, the horse's personality traits are the most important traits for most riders (Couzy and Godet, 2010; Górecka-Bruzda et al., 2011c; Graf et al., 2013), but current selection takes place under rather different conditions, potentially resulting in breeding of horses unsuitable for the general market. This mismatch is also reflected by different weights breeders and buyers assign to personality traits (Hennessy et al., 2008). Therefore, the objective of the present article was to analyze the status quo of the personality trait evaluation in German horse breeding programs. Based on the findings, strategies for improvement of the current evaluation system can be suggested.

Materials and methods

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to get an overview of the status quo of the personality trait evaluation as assessed by the official experts (breeding judges and test riders), and in particular, to obtain indication of concrete behavior characteristics these breeding officials may use in the evaluation of personality traits. In Germany, the traits labeled "temperament," "character," "willingness to work," and "constitution" are evaluated during riding horse performance tests on station (FN, 2010). With draft horses and other breeds not specifically destined as (sport) riding horses, some of these traits may be called differently and/or summarized into 1 trait (e.g., temperament and character are summarized into "handleability" for some draft horse breeds) (FN, 2010). The written questionnaire was distributed to all station performance test judges ($n = 13$, consisting of 12 male judges and 1 female judge), field performance test judges ($n = 5$) in the case of draft horse breeds, and test riders ($n = 65$) officially registered with the German Equestrian Federation (FN) in 2009.

The questionnaires contained both closed and open questions to obtain—in addition to quantifiable information—unbiased views and opinions on behavior and trait descriptions from the breeding experts. The questionnaire consisted of 4 parts: (A) general information about the respondents, (B) questions regarding horse personality, (C) questions regarding rideability (driveability in the case of draft breeds), and (D) questions regarding the present evaluation guidelines. The questionnaire for the test riders included a total of 38 questions, and the questionnaires for the judges included a total of 50 questions. The greater number of questions for the judges is a

result of additional questions regarding the individual personality traits, which were not asked of the test riders because their task is to evaluate only rideability but no other personality traits. The specific questions and answer options are given in the Appendix.

With the closed questions from the questionnaire, proportions for the different responses were calculated, and the Fisher exact test was used to assess the influence of educational level (university degree vs. no university degree) and use of guidelines on the correctness of assigned scores. Owing to the nature of the study (aiming at describing the situation rather than testing a hypothesis) and the limited sample size coming into consideration for this study, no further statistical analysis was conducted. Similarly, with the open questions, responses were summarized by the common concept of the issue, if possible, but no further analysis was deemed appropriate.

Results

Information on respondents

The overall response rate was 28% ($n = 23$) (test riders 22% [$n = 14$]; judges 50% [$n = 9$]), with 22% ($n = 5$) of the respondents being female and 78% ($n = 18$) male. All judges (100%) and 7% ($n = 1$) of the test riders had an MSc degree in agriculture science, and most test riders (71%; $n = 10$) have had vocational training as equine trainer or groom. All judges had more than 10 years of experience in judging horses and judged on average 86.8 ± 44 horses at mare or stallion station performance tests per year. The test riders judged on average 90 ± 41 horses per year (minimum, 60; maximum, 200) and had between 1 year (7%; $n = 1$), 2–5 years (21%; $n = 3$), 6–10 years (29%; $n = 4$), and more than 10 years (43%; $n = 6$) of experience in judging horses for rideability.

Personality evaluation

All respondents agreed that personality traits are important or very important (26%; $n = 6$ and 74%; $n = 17$, respectively). As reasons for assigning these ratings were given the examples that a horse with perfect movements cannot be worked with or is not enjoyable to work with, if it has an unfavorable personality. It was further stated that to make use of a horse's full performance potential, it was necessary that the horse has the will to work with the rider. However, most respondents agreed that there are major (57%; $n = 13$) or minor problems (26%; $n = 6$) with the current evaluation of personality traits, whereas only 17% ($n = 4$) perceive the present evaluation system as adequate. The problems with the present evaluation of personality traits as listed by the respondents included statements such as (main concept in *italics*) the following:

- *Lack of standardized criteria/catalog of requirements.*
- *Subjectivity* (individual judges use their personal definitions), arbitrariness in assigning scores.
- Assigned scores are usually *too benevolent* (respondents mentioned that assigning of extremely low grades cannot be put into practice because horse owners would stop sending their horses to the performance tests. They further explained that the problem is in part caused by the competition between the different testing stations in Germany. Testing stations require large number of horses to make profit, and horse owners select those testing stations where they expect their horses to score well.
- *Bias*: knowledge of the pedigree may influence the evaluation of individual horses.
- *Missing traits*: some traits such as attitude to work and learning ability or vices and "behavior problems," such as crib-biting

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/2399258>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/2399258>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)