

Reactions to the 2010 70-Day Stallion Test

By Ann Daum Kustar

Voltaire. Sandro Hit. Grannus. Capitol I. Athlet Z. Modern day Warmbloods wouldn't be the same without these super-star sires in their pedigrees. What do they have in common? All either failed or ranked near the bottom of their stallion performance test. And while many top sires ranked high in their 70 or 100-day stallion test, the question remains—does stallion testing really work? And especially, does it work for North America?

The answer depends on what people expect the tests to reveal. Is a 70-day test result the most accurate prediction of which stallion will become a top sire? No. In fact, scores are not given for highly heritable traits such as quality of conformation, or breed and sex type. That's for registries to decide in their licensings. Is a 70-day test the most accurate and timely way to evaluate the performance traits of a sport horse stallion as compared to his peers? Probably.

Does it work here the same way it does in Germany? Well, yes and no—the rules, scoring, judges and staff are the same, but the stallions' ages vary more than in Europe (between 3 and 11 this year), their preparation for the test is more varied here, and the number of participants is, for the most part, smaller.

Thirteen stallions completed the 2010 North American 70-day stallion test at Silver Creek Farms in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. During the finals held November 11th–13th, stallion owners held their breath and spectators around

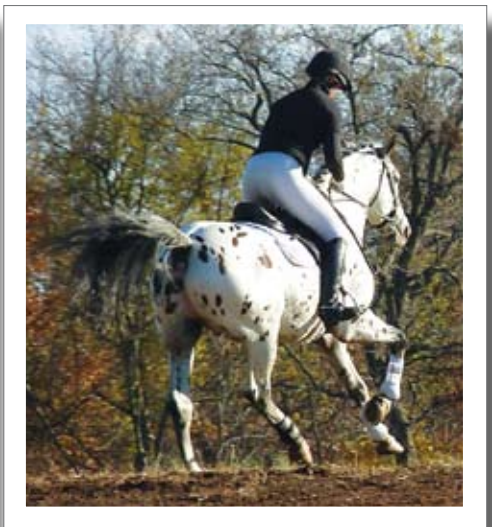
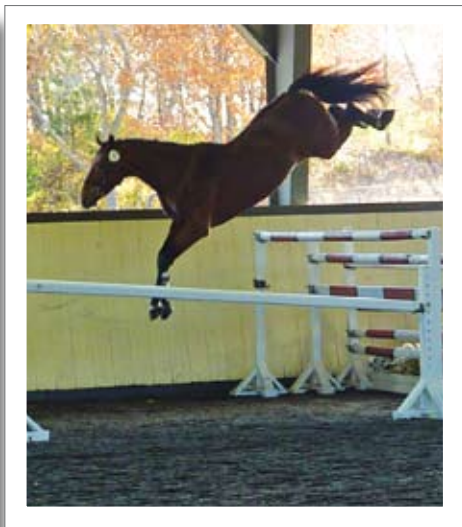
the country watched live online as the stallions showed off their skills of free jumping, dressage, and cross country. But what the online coverage didn't broadcast were weeks of work and evaluation that came beforehand.

In order to provide a level playing field, all stallions live on site and receive the same care and training throughout the 70 days. This means the test hosts a German training director, four test riders, a groom, and a barn manager on staff for the entire 70 days, as well as two judges and four guest riders for the final days of the test.

One thing everyone agreed upon was the excellent standard of care and training given the stallions by Silver Creek Farm and the test staff, including training director Harald Hoffmann. However there was a lot of confusion and frustration about the final rankings and the fairness of the index system and bell-curve used to average the results.

GERMAN SCORING

The system of indexing stallion scores originated in Germany. Half of each stallion's final score comes from the training director, who evaluates the stallions throughout the 70 days, and the other half from outside test riders and judges, who



Top: Local entertainment at Silver Creek. Above (L to R) Contiano BF jumps cross country. Galante HU's amazing big jump. Colorado Skrodstrup galloping cross country Photos by Ann Daum Kustar

evaluate the stallions during the final testing days.

The training director assigns scores between 1 and 10 to each stallion for character, constitution, temperament, willingness to work, rideability, athletic ability, dressage (walk, trot, canter), free jumping and stadium jumping (scope and technique), and cross country (canter, scope, technique). The outside test riders and judges give the stallions scores for gaits (walk, trot, and canter), rideability, and jumping ability.

Individual scores are then multiplied by a weighting factor that varies depending on the category. Rideability, for example, is 'weighted' at 15x (think of the coefficient system on a dressage score sheet). So stallions scoring just one point apart in rideability from both the training director and the test judges can see a difference of 30 points (or more) between their final scores.

Now for the tricky part. Once all the stallions have been assigned individual scores, the final result, or index, is calculated using a fairly complicated (and secret) mathematical formula developed by the German FN (Federation Nationale). Individual scores from all stallions completing the test are entered into the program, and voila! Out pops a number aligning the stallion's results with the index average score of 100, showing how far above or below the norm this stallion performed. Stallions older than five are given a deduction of 5% from the average. In order to 'pass' the test, a stallion must receive an index score of 80 or above, or he may pass with a 70 if his dressage or jumping score is 100 or above. Some registries require an overall score of 90 or above to grant permanent licensing.

This system of indexes has functioned for years in Germany, and on a smaller scale, for North America as well. What critics of the index system are most vocal about on this continent is the accuracy, given the small statistical numbers. While many German testings host between 25–40 stallions, those in North America number in the teens.

Barbara Sikkink, manager of the host venue Silver Creek Farms, points out, however, that there are small test sites in Germany too, and their results conform to the norm as well. "The stallion tests in Germany, as well as here, all follow the same rules. They have to, for the results to be meaningful," says Barbara. "Stallions can earn disappointing indexes in Germany too."

"A stallion can be lower than the average of the other stallions in his group, yet still have a decent individual score," Barbara explains. "Our own stallion Autobahn placed 38th of 39 at his 70-day test in Schlieckau, Germany.



From top: Colorado Skrodstrup (scored 109.75) and pony stallion Belafonte d'Avalon of Avalon Equine. Photos by Angela Pritchard

In a group of stallions scoring 6's, 7's, and 8's, Autobahn would have been solidly in the middle, but put him in a group of stallions scoring 8's, 9's, and 10's, and he was absolutely at the bottom."

And therein lies one of the true challenges of hosting a stallion inspection. Not every stallion will pass causing disappointment to his owners. Sparks flew across forums and chat rooms as well as barn aisles when the results from the testing were announced.

"There's never an easy way to tell a stallion owner that his or her stallion didn't score as well as she would have liked," says Summer Stoffel, owner of Silver Creek Farms. "But this is the nature of the test—this is not a show, not a competition. This is a test. These stallions are being asked questions by the training director, the test riders, the guest riders and judges. How they answer those challenges is what the testing is all about."

CHANGES IN STORE

Adding to the discussion is news that the Germans are changing the rules for 2011, doing away with the smaller testing sites (for reasons of economics), the current index system, as well as the training director's scores. All scores will now be given in intervals by the same visiting judges, and the final index computation will be based on expected breeding values (stallion is compared to his relatives, not to the other stallions participating in his testing). What will this mean for the North American test?

"Our test will mirror what is going on in Germany," Barbara explains. "But we don't know yet exactly what those changes will be. What I do know is there will be pros and cons. The same judges will be scoring stallions here as in Germany. They may come fresh from judging test sites with really top Sandro Hit sons, for example, then see one here who is nice in his company, but not compared to what the judge has just seen in Germany, and this could affect the scores. And it may be cost-prohibitive to fly in the judges for the interval checks and scoring every ten days. So we will have to see. But regardless, the North American 70-day test will go on."

OPINIONS GALORE

Kathy St. Martin and Jos Mottershead of Avalon Equine in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, have sent five stallions through testings. Most recently their German Riding Pony stallion Belafonte D'Avalon completed the 2010 pony test, while Colorado Skodstrup earned the honor of being the first Knabstrupper stallion to complete a 70-day or a 100-day test—and not only finish, but earn 3rd place in dressage and 5th place overall.

"We are big advocates of the testing," Kathy explains. "We've been on both ends of the test. Our stallion Manhattan won the jumping portion of his 100-day test. And we've had the dubious honor of one of our stallions earning one of the lowest scores ever received at a 100-day test—Waterford placed 19th out of 19 with a score of 61 at the 2004 test at Paxton Farm. He is now a gelding."

"What really makes you appreciate the value of this test is when you have a stallion injured," Kathy continues. "Manhattan was competing at Level 8 and ready to debut at Grand Prix when he caught a shoe in a no-climb fence. Right there, his career was over. Thankfully he had passed his 100-day test and had his permanent license."

"We sent our boys to the test this time with the philosophy that we're just happy if they pass! If the scores are low, well that's life. We try to be objective, although we really thought the pony was a rockstar! With the Knabbie, we figured he would end up in the middle of the pack. This breed only requires a 3-day stallion test! So we were pretty tickled when he did so well," Kathy remarks.

"Overall, we believe in the system. Is it perfect? No. Are



From top: Banderas (scored 109.84) and Farscape DSF (scored 114.23) of Dreamscape Farm. Photos by Angela Pritchard

there horses that fail that shouldn't? Probably. Did the online forums devolve into a barracuda-fest? Well... But," she adds, "I don't think the controversy this year was as rabid as it has been at some of the past 100-day tests."

"In a test, some of the test riders are going to push a horse, sometimes very hard, to see how he will respond," Kathy explains. "Whereas in a competition, the rider is focused on getting the very best out of the horse, in order to win. Many people just don't understand the scoring, or the concept that this is a test, not a competition."

"The live streaming video convinced some people watching at home that they knew more about the stallions than the riders, judges and training director," Kathy says. "But the video of the final test is just a snapshot. It's like seeing the highlights of a football game on the news and saying 'the losing team was great, they should have won,' without seeing the rest of the game."

Barbara Sikkink says one change that will happen for sure next year is the end of the live-streaming video. "People should come to the test and watch the stallions

in person," she explains. "The live streaming video was a good idea in of itself, but fails to show the full picture. The live video gives viewers a 'snapshot' of the test. People watching assumed they could judge the stallions themselves from this 'snapshot' and were quite vocal about their opinions on public forums. In the end, this was destructive rather than constructive."

MORE REACTIONS

In fact, the majority of stallion owners agreed that the 70-day test is critically important to the future of sport horse breeding in North America, and down the road many plan to send another stallion.

"If you're going to have a German-approved breeding stallion, you're going to have to follow the German System," says Jennifer Arnoldt, owner of Dreamscape Farm, of Langley, British Columbia. Dreamscape Farm stands 15 stallions—four of those stallions completed the 2010 70-day test—Farscape DSF and Banderas, owned by Dreamscape Farm, and Diamond Stud and Sutherland Song HLF, owned by Highlife Farms.

"I'm a big believer in the European system. After all, we breed horses within their studbooks in North America," Jennifer says. "Do I support the testing process, and format? Absolutely. North America would be much worse off if we lose the 70-day test, and Silver Creek Farm does a very good



From top: Rising Star Farm's Figaro B (scored 87.92) and Cielo B, jumping champion from the 2009 70-Day Test. *Cielo B photo by Reg Corkum and Figaro B photo by Angela Pritchard*

job running it. There is simply no other practical way at the moment to get our stallions permanently approved. The hunters and jumpers, especially, have no other avenue here."

Ronda Stavisky of Rising Star Farm in Georgetown, Texas says she cried for about two minutes when she got her stallion Figaro B's scores. "There I was in the barn aisle with Harald sort of awkwardly patting me on the back. But then I got over it, and realized it was fine. We passed! That's what is important."

"Let me tell you," Ronda continues, "it wasn't pretty in that barn alleyway for a little while. Everyone believes that their stallion is wonderful, as well they should. But not everyone can end up on top."

Ronda has been down the testing path before. Her Belgian Warmblood stallion Cielo B was jumping champion of the 2009 70-day test. Stavisky's stallion Figaro B, who passed the 2010 test, is co-owned by Bobburk Farm.

"I think it's wonderful we have this tool, and I applaud the registries that truly support the testing, because it is critical that we have this test here in America," Ronda continues. "Without it we'll all end up standing teenage stallions. We can't keep up with the rest of the world if we have to wait until our stallions reach Grand Prix for their permanent licensing. We'll have 19-year-old stallions finally with full books of mares, and we'll be hoping to God they don't drop over dead before we find out how they produce."

This question of timing is exactly what makes performance testing valuable to breeders, according to Otto Schalter, stud book director of the RPSI (Rheinland Pfalz-Saar International), and its parent organization, the PRPS verband in Germany. "With every other livestock, as compared to horses, the results come way faster," Otto explains. "The stallion test is simply something a stallion must pass – he doesn't have to win. He then has his breeding license, and a lifetime to prove himself."

"If you wait for breeding licensing to come by way of show-ring success, you would see stallions entering the breeding shed for the first time at ten years old," Otto adds. "Then, you finally know something about that horse as a sire when the first offspring is six years old. This is too long. The stallion testing helps breeders move ahead with their stallions' breeding careers."

BREED ASSOCIATIONS AND THE 70-DAY

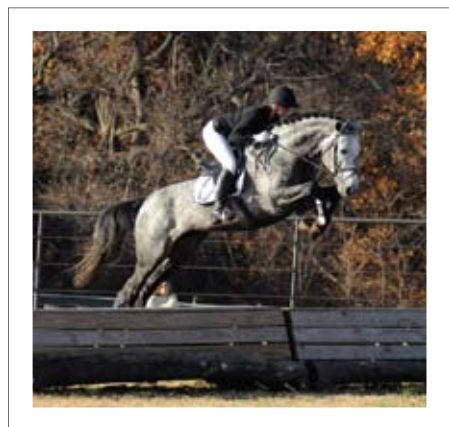
The German Oldenburg Verband's director Holly Simensen has a no-nonsense approach to stallion testing, and she's not shy about laying down the law to stallion owners. "People need to know that this is a required test by all the German breeding associations," Holly says. "This testing is highly regulated, and as operated here at Silver Creek Farms, the stallions are given absolutely exemplary care."

The GOV, along with the other German-parent organizations, must follow the German rules for stallion licensing. This stipulates that a stallion must either complete a 70-day test successfully, or a combination of a 30-day test and performance results, such as qualifying for the Bundeschampionat as a 5 or 6 year old, or earning five placings of 1st -3rd at S-level dressage or 1.4 meter jumpers, in order to become fully licensed. In too many cases horses come to the test not well prepared. This makes it very difficult to fix the problems and guide them forward at the same time," Holly remarks.

The GOV, as well as the RPSI, and the Belgian Stud Book sBs registry, operating for the first time in North America, were the only three registries to attend and license stallions at the testing. The Oldenburg/ISR, while accepting results from the 70-day test, also promotes the option of their 10-day stallion performance test. However this shorter testing option is not acceptable to the European-based registries.

"I was disappointed that more registries didn't take this seriously and show up for the testing," says Ronda Stavisky. "I looked around and said, 'Who's here? These are the registries I'm going to support, as these are the registries supporting me.' It's a two-way street."

"Several of the European-based registries had representatives there," Ronda



Both pictures: Contiano BF of Branscomb Farm, champion of the 2010 70-Day Test scoring 126.86. Photos by Angela Pritchard

reports. "The Belgian sBs sent two of their officials from Belgium, and they watched every stallion, even the video of the stadium jumping held earlier in the test. They were very impressed."

"These days, stallion owners need to get their stallions licensed by multiple registries just to survive," Ronda continues. "My stallion (Figaro B) was all fit, braided, and ready to go. He was accepted by every registry he was presented to after the testing. The registries that weren't there aren't going to get him in their books, since he's a competition stallion and won't necessarily be available for an inspection during the show year."

HIGHS AND LOWS

Kc Kelley of Branscomb Farm of Woodside, California, brought her two young Holsteiner stallions Contiano BF and Calatino B to the 70-day test with high hopes and expectations. She came home with one stallion, Contiano BF, winning the test, and the other not completing the final testing.

"Calatino B did outstandingly well for 67 of the 70 days, earning high scores along the way. But we all felt he could not take the pressure of the final dressage test after 67 days of grueling training and a sore back," Kc reports. "It's intense for a four-year-old stallion, never off the farm," Kc says. "It's like dropping your kindergartener off at college."

"From the beginning, Contiano had this wisdom, this maturity, beyond his age," Kc says of the new champion. "I think this really helped him succeed in the test. My daughter used to play with him in the field as a little girl, throwing her arms up around his neck, and he would take care of her. She named him Friendly, and that's what we called him until he was presented for licensing." Then she adds, "You combine this attitude with his loose, fluid movement and phenomenal jump—and no, I'm not surprised he won."

"I think the test was fair, conducted properly, and the training director was appropriately reserved about allowing owners unlimited access to their horses," Kc continues. "It's a test. They don't allow you to hold your kid's hand when he's taking the SAT either."

"But overall, I think it's a remarkable achievement, what they are doing at Silver Creek Farms. The quality of the horses and training and the level of intensity and expectation is very comparable to what any of these stallion owners would have experienced in Warendorf or Adelheidsdorf," says Kc.

And in the end, that is the true value of the 70-day test: to allow North American breeders to compare and evaluate their stallions against a global standard. It follows in the sometimes painful, always difficult, but ultimately useful tradition laid down by generations of breeders who have been down this road before. 