

How buying a horse can take a page from player acquisition in professional team sports

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Most horses competing at WEG in Tryon will change owners at least once throughout their lives. The purchase will have been made with several considerations, such as: competition performance, health status, video analysis, trials under saddle, and expert opinion. These methods of evaluation have been around for decades now, and although the process has become more refined, the amount of available information has remained relatively constant.

Contrast this process with player selection for professional sports teams in North America, where teams are informed by a massive amount of data points. Since the early 2000s, numerous measures have been developed and refined for these sports to provide information regarding the potential of an athlete to make a valuable contribution to their team.

I was listening to an online discussion a few weeks ago describing the NBA draft, and the Director of Player Personnel of Boston Celtics (Austin Ainge) had a very elegant analogy describing the process of choosing a player to add to his team:

“It’s like a documentary movie. You’re acquiring a lot of little slides and you’re trying to get the full video. But you’re never going to get the full picture“.

If we think of every data point as a piece of the documentary, then the more data we get the more complete the athlete’s story becomes.

Similar to a pro sports team looking to add players to the roster, selecting horses for your stable is a very complex process. The truth is that in the world of show jumping, the majority of horses purchased to be a rider’s next top horse do not fully pan out. A likely reason that horses do not always meet or exceed expectations in the show ring is that they are purchased with limited information, or with numerous ‘holes’ in the documentary. If riders knew the ‘full story’ about a horse before the purchase, they would likely go through a different decision-making process. Conversely, horses that other riders passed on (for example Eric Lamaze’s famous stallion Hicksted) may become more valuable if more data on their potential becomes available.

The future:

Although equestrian sports have lagged human-centric sports when it comes to incorporating technology and data into everyday training and management, our world is quickly catching up. The development and incorporation of this technology, and all the new information that comes with it, will have a huge impact on how horses are purchased moving forward. This new technology will supply new data points to help create a more complete picture of the horse.

For example, one of the key barriers to many horses reaching the top of the sport is the health of the musculoskeletal system. Injuries to tendons, ligaments, bone and the joint capsules of the legs can all be key determinants in limiting a horse's ability to jump 1.60 m fences multiple weeks in a year. It is known that chronic stress is a major risk factor contributing to these injuries. Chronic stress induces hormonal changes in the body, which ultimately reduce the body's ability to repair itself after exercise. Over time, the body becomes weaker until a sprain, tear or break occurs. It is incredibly important that a horse purchased with the goal of reaching top sport is not in a state of chronic stress. However, the stress response of horses is not currently measured during the pre-purchase process.

Interestingly, technology may be able to provide insights into the stress levels of horses. For example, extensive work has been done characterizing the heart rate response of horses to different types of exercise. A horse that responds atypically to work may be displaying signs of chronic stress that would not be otherwise detectable. An example of this would be a horse that maintains an elevated heart rate even during periods of rest during a workout (where healthy horses would decrease heart rate at this time).

Another potential application of technology may be assessing the 'resting' activity of the horse. Although often not considered during the buying process, it is well known that periods of rest and relaxation are needed to help the body repair and recharge between bouts of exercise. A horse that doesn't relax in its' stall or in the paddock may be predisposed to developing injury over time. Activity monitors that can be worn 24/7 to track movement represent an interesting avenue, as constant movement throughout the night indicates the horse is not resting at this time.

Using technology already readily available, it is possible to greatly increase the amount of information about a horse you may be looking to buy. Although careful interpretation of the data is needed, it may provide important clues as you hunt for your next superstar.

I will finish this idea by acknowledging that the concept of using technology to help select horses will likely receive fierce opposition from some in the sport. The idea of divulging more information than the norm about a horse you are attempting to sell is not an appealing thought for many horse dealers. Thus, a potential buyer's request to put a heart rate or activity monitor on a horse may be rejected. However, a buyer confident in their horse's health and training would welcome the idea, and the data provided by the sensors would solidify the seller's comments about the horse and improve buyer confidence.