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RAISING RUNNERS

Foals at Meg Levy's Bluewater Farm are used to human contact, all part of the sales-prep process designed to raise weanlings to be racehorses

Developing precocious weanlings

Meg Levy of Bluewater Sales discusses her approach to marketing young racing prospects

by Cynthia McFarland

IT TAKES a savvy buyer to look at a weanling and see a future racehorse in that young animal. It also takes a savvy consignor to know which young prospects have a chance of succeeding in the auction ring.

Bluewater Sales certainly has had its share of success in the weanling market, which totaled \$86.8-million last year, ranking among the year's top ten leading weanling consignors. In 2007, Bluewater sold 27 of 36 weanlings for \$3,168,200.

Meg Levy, the principal of Bluewater Sales and owner of Bluewater Farm in Lexington, said the agency consigns an average of 40 weanlings per year, the vast majority of which are client horses. Those weanlings sell at the Fasig-Tipton Kentucky November selected mixed sale and the Keeneland November breeding stock sale.

Levy, who previously worked for Eaton Sales, has been involved in sales prep for nearly 15 years. When selecting foals to sell, she looks for a "pretty precocious" individual that is a good physical specimen and by a commercial sire.

Depending on the foal, she will wean anywhere between 3½ to five months of age.

"You can wean as early as three months, but when you're trying to get ready for a sale, you have to con-

sider the weather," Levy said. "You don't want to wean in 100° days if you can avoid it. The old wisdom used to be to wean right before the sale because they usually look great as long as they're on mother's milk. Then after weaning, they can go through a period of looking potbellied."

Levy says feeding those young horses is a careful balancing act because, while you want the suckling foal to start eating a ration designed

for growing horses, you do not want it to eat so much that it grows too quickly and runs into developmental issues. Bone development is a main concern. Because of that, she is concerned about keeping the horse's growth rate consistent.

As long as a foal does not have any growth issues, it is allowed access to its dam's grain while nursing. Levy does not begin feeding foals separately until they are weaned. She believes they are eating enough while sharing their dams' grain, and she does not want them

putting on too much weight. She has found that the faster a baby grows, the more likely it is to develop growth problems.

Sweet feed

Once weaned, foals are fed a 14% protein sweet feed with beet pulp and added fat, specifically designed for young, growing horses. Levy does not like to feed high-protein products and finds that the beet pulp helps put weight on a young horse without additional protein.

"We supplement with silicone, as


well as calcium and phosphorus; we do this from the time the babies are in utero until after weaning," said Levy, who favors approaches that help to build a stronger athlete and reduce skeletal problems.

"We use a lot of rice bran oil and Succeed, a product for their gut," she said. "In some cases, we may go to Gastrogard if a baby shows signs of ulcers. I think those digestive products are always good, and there are a lot of great products out there."

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"You don't want a really fat, overly muscled weanling. You don't want something looking like a halter cow. We are just trying to walk that fine line between raising them to be athletes and helping them to look good for the sale. They need to be outside developing bone and they need concussion to develop that bone, and they need other horses to play with."

—Meg Levy
Bluewater Sales




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Levy likes to see a hint of rib in a weanling and much prefers this to an overfed weanling.

"You can see what they're going to be without covering all the muscle with fat, and it's not good to overload their limbs, either," she said. "Over the years, I've seen [bone-development issues] develop with horses you push at the wrong time. By the time a yearling is in sales prep, they are ten months to over a year old, so you can push the feed to them. They put on the muscle, and their skeleton is more solid."

Bluewater typically will start prepping a weanling 60 to 90 days before the sale. Babies are curried and vacuumed every day. Once the weather starts dropping below the 50° mark, weanlings will have a sheet or blanket put on to keep them from developing a winter coat. Blanketing not only keeps a thick coat from developing, but it keeps weanlings cleaner and brings up the oil in their hair. This reduces the need for frequent bathing, something that is not always possible when the temperature drops.

"We don't like [body] clipping," Levy said. "I don't think clipping is good for the horse when it's cold outside. Even if you blanket them, they get longer hair, but it's flat and shiny. We want them to have enough hair on them so that the person who buys them can turn them out to be a horse again."

Foals at the farm have been handled from birth and taught to lead separately from their mothers. Once a weanling begins prepping for a sale, however, it needs to learn to walk out properly. Levy wants to see a young horse "move like an accordion with a big stride."

The horse must learn to walk beside the handler's shoulder, not behind. To encourage this, Levy said the handler sometimes will carry a dressage whip in the left hand to touch the weanling's rump to prompt him to move up.

Careful with bits

Although weanlings are introduced to a Chifney bit during their grooming sessions about 60 days prior to a sale, Levy is very cautious about overuse of bits. A weanling's mouth can get sore, and it can hurt itself by

pulling against the bit. Pulling or jerking on a horse's mouth to direct it is an absolute "no."

"I was a showman for Eaton for a long time, so I like to use body language more than my hand," said Levy. "I try to teach my help that a horse responds to body language. He learns this in the field from his mother at a very early age, and this is how they communicate with each other."

"Instead of pulling on a baby's mouth in order to stop him, I would be walking beside him and then turn and start walking backwards so he realizes I'm going to stop," she said. "I'd look him in the eye and say, 'Whoa,' instead of jerking him to stop. You have to let a horse move his head; if you're hanging on his face, that's when they get nervous."

Beyond turnout, the only controlled exercise weanlings get is hand-walking for 20 to 30 minutes per day to help them get fit for the sale. If their feet get tender, a bit of Venice turpentine will help toughen up the soles, Levy said.

Blacksmith work is essential for correcting a young horse, but Levy has found that you do not want them to be completely straight and correct too early.

"Correcting a baby while a weanling is like training a tree to grow straight a little bit at a time," she said. "As a weanling grows and his chest broadens out, his legs will come in a little, so you want them to toe out a little bit, depending on their age and development, and also on their bloodlines. Some sires produce a bulky, fast-looking horse that develops quicker than, say, an Empire Maker with a long, lean look."

In addition to a normal schedule of vaccines, Levy often gives a series of an immune stimulant, such



Photos by Z

TEAM EFFORT

Members of the staff at Bluewater Sales, including Bluewater Farm owner Meg Levy (holding horse), reaped rewards in 2007 as one of the leading sellers of weanlings

as Equistem Immunostimulant or Equimune IV, which are designed to boost the horse's immune system and treat upper respiratory infections.

Levy said over the past years she has seen a trend toward horsemen buying weanlings that have not been hotheaded or over-prepped.

"People buying these weanlings are very sharp on their physical condition and development," she said. "A good weanling is a good weanling. I have seen people having success without going overboard on the prepping. Some people have taken to not blanketing them and not putting the extra weight on them because they're trying to do the best for the horse. Obviously, the best thing for the horse is to allow him to grow on his natural growth curve."

Levy noted that while she does blanket and tries to pick up a weanling's condition and work on its walk, her main concern is raising a future racehorse.

"I think people are wanting an athlete first and foremost, and aren't as concerned about the major condition and prep," she said. "You don't want a really fat, overly muscled weanling. You don't want something looking like a halter cow. We are just trying to walk that fine line between raising them to be athletes and helping them to look good for the sale. They need to be outside developing bone, and they need concussion to develop that bone, and they need other horses to play with."

"I want to raise racehorses. It all goes back to racing," Levy said. "We're not raising show horses; we're raising racehorses." 🐾



MUSICAL MOTION

Meg Levy, principal of Bluewater Sales and owner of Bluewater Farm in Lexington, says weanlings need to learn to walk properly and should "move like an accordion with a big stride"



Cynthia McFarland is a freelance writer based in Fairfield, Florida.

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