



Ashford's teaser, Eoin, will be testing the waters for Triple Crown winner Justify

SECOND FIDDLE

A THANKLESS JOB, BUT SOMEONE'S GOT TO DO IT

BY EMILY SHIELDS

When Triple Crown winner Justify is led forward to breed his first mare this winter, his safety will be paramount. Valued somewhere between \$60 million and priceless, Justify is standing the 2019 season at Ashford Stud in Kentucky for \$150,000 and will breed more than 200 mares.

To keep stallions such as Justify from being kicked, Ashford's teaser Eoin, an Appaloosa, will step in first. Only if a

mare is receptive to the teaser's advances is the actual stallion brought forward. But teasing a mare — finding out if they are ready to be bred — is an intensive combination of using ultrasound technology and having an individual teaser stallion “flirt” with every single mare on the breeding property, virtually every day.

“Teasing is critical for the safety of the stallion,” said Dr. Ghislaine Dujovne, the chief of theriogenology at the University of California, Davis. “It’s more critical in the scenario where you are doing live cover in the Thoroughbred world. You get one good kick from a mare, and the stallion is out of commission for the rest of the season, maybe forever.”

Although daily ultrasounds can display the development of a follicle and thus point to a mare’s being ready for breeding, technology doesn’t always tell the whole story.

“Sometimes the exam of a mare can be ambiguous,” said Dujovne. “Teasing can help you figure out where a mare actually is in her cycle, which is useful for more than just being bred. If you are working a large farm with many mares, you can train the people working the farm to tease all the mares and just bring the ones that are showing signs of heat in for ultrasound.”

Breeding season in California is an intense time, with hundreds of mares being



serviced each month.

“We tease every mare,” said Mike Allen, manager at Tommy Town Thoroughbreds in Santa Ynez. “I don’t know what other people do, but if they aren’t teasing all their mares, then they may miss some. Mares don’t always do stuff by the book; you can ultrasound a mare with a follicle that isn’t actually in heat. If you don’t tease, you’re going to have a hard time.”

Teaser horses, who are typically, but not necessarily, stallions, are valuable tools for their farms.

“Next to your vet, it’s your most important tool that you’ve got for breeding,” Allen said of teasing.

Tommy Town currently only has one teaser, a 22-year-old winning son of Miswaki named Tonga Boy.

“I’d rather have two, but he’s a good one,” Allen said.

What makes a teaser good at his job?

“He’s easy for people to handle, but is aggressive toward the mares,” Allen said. “He’ll nibble or bite at them, and that’s what you want them to do. He makes noise when you’re going around so that the mares know he’s coming.”

Allen does Tommy Town’s teasing himself, watching the mares and writing down observations and comments while someone else handles the stallion. He notes it can take an hour to an hour and a half each day to tease all the open (non-pregnant) mares on the property.

The crew at Ballena Vista Farm in Ramona has a lot of ground to cover each day. The farm has three teasers and four palpation chutes covering three areas.

“All the open mares are teased every day,” said Jeanne Davis, sales and marketing manager at the farm. “Foaling mares are teased every day once they have a foal. We are already teasing every other day this time of year (in December). Having three helps get through the teasing faster. All the information we find goes into a



Teasers are a valuable part of any breeding farm

RENEE BECKWITH



Tommyjoe, an Arabian, is one of the teasers at Woodbridge Farm

SUE GREENE

computer system.”

Davis has experienced plenty on the topic, including working with a pony

teaser for Arabians and a miniature horse stallion that would deal with Thoroughbred mares. One of Ballena Vista Farm’s three teasers is 11-year-old California-bred Otto Von Voom, a five-time winning son of Skimming.

What do farm employees look for when their horse is doing a round of teasing? There are obvious signs that a mare is ready to be bred, which she displays in a process called “breaking down.”

“It varies from mare to mare because some tease easier than others,” Dujovne explained. “But in general they raise their tail and will urinate. They tilt their hip by moving the stifles and flexing the hocks. That is a ‘ready to breed’ position. They will look for the stallion and stay still for him with an arched back.” Lastly, mares display vulvar winking. “A mare that is breaking down is safe to breed,” Dujovne said.

But what happens when a mare appears ready on an ultrasound but isn’t responding to teasing?

“You may have to take extra precautions or measures when you go to breed those mares,” Dujovne said. “It could be that they did not tease because they are shy, or are in a pen with mares who are more dominant. If they already have a foal on their side, they tend not to tease in front of a stallion because they are protecting their baby and not thinking about breeding. It’s not a technique that works 100% of the time.”

Sue Greene, who owns Woodbridge Farm in Oakdale, has two teasers, a gray Arabian named Tommyjoe and a Shetland pony named Sir Richard. Greene said that Tommyjoe is “worth his weight in gold. He does most of the ‘dirty’ work, especially in the breeding shed. He gets to really romance the ladies before we bring (Woodbridge stallion) Tannersmyman into the shed. Tommy is great. He’s loud but very gentle.”

Sir Richard is used for more timid



RENEE BECKWITH

It is not out of the question for a gelding, such as Fortissimo, above, to act as a teaser

mares.

“He helps me with the shy mares, or the ones who don’t like the white Arabian,” Greene said. “He never lets much slip past his careful watch. Teasers are an invaluable segment to any breeding operation.”

Blue Diamond Horseshoe in Aguanaga has an 11-year-old imported German Hanoverian as its teaser. Fortissimo, or Mo for short, gives rides around the farm on trails under a Western saddle when he isn’t working.

“The girls love him,” said manager Renee Beckwith. “We walk him down the aisle every day, and the mares just do their thing. Some horses just have that magic.”

Blue Diamond Horseshoe is a rarity in that its resident stallions, including James Street and Hidden Blessing, can also be used to tease mares.

“They will all behave,” Beckwith said. “None of them jump a mare until you tell them that they can. We tease them in rope halters, then put on a leather halter with a shank when it’s time to breed. That’s when they know it’s time for the real thing.”

Fortissimo is also unique in that he is a gelding. Although it is more difficult to tease mares with a gelding, it isn’t impossible.

“You can use a gelding, especially if the gelding has the acquired behavior,” said Dujovne. “It’s just less common. If the gelding was a stallion before but gelded later in life, they can tease. Some mares



LACEY COLER

Liturgical, a retired racehorse, handles the teasing at Barton Thoroughbreds

with strong estrus will tease to a gelding. You need a horse that shows some interest in the mares, will make stallion noises, and call them in.”

Alternately, a stallion that is too quiet will be difficult to use as a teaser.

“He needs to have a good libido and good sexual interest, while also being easy to handle,” said Dujovne. “If he’s too excited, he may get hurt or mares may get hurt.”

“ (A good teaser) has a good libido but is easy to handle. He will call for mares but respect his human handler. Even though they get excited, they have to know that once their work is done, they need to back up and be able to handle that.”

— Dr. Ghislaine Dujovne

With a strong push toward aftercare for racehorses and finding them second careers, teasing is not a bad option. Barton Thoroughbreds’ teaser is Liturgical, a winning son of Songandaprayer.

The 12-year-old stallion once sold for \$22,000 as a Keeneland September yearling in 2007, then did his early training in England. He failed to sell at €90,000 (\$189,917) during the Goff’s breeze-up sale for juveniles in 2008, ultimately breaking his maiden at Redcar that June.



RENEE BECKWITH

At Blue Diamond Horseshoe, resident stallion Hidden Blessing meets a receptive mare

He returned to the United States for the grade 1 Norfolk Stakes at Santa Anita in September, finishing ninth behind the likes of Street Hero and Midshipman. He was retired after bowing a tendon in 2009.

The former Magali Farms, where Liturgical was on rehab following his injury, took over his ownership in 2010 and made him its resident teaser.

“He has been doing it successfully ever since,” said Barton Thoroughbreds’ Lacey Lambert Coler.

Teasers are invaluable to their breeding operations, but Dujovne noted there is an aspect to the job that can be unpleasant.

“It may be humanizing to think this, but it’s not the best job if they never get to breed,” she noted. “I used to work for a Thoroughbred farm that had a Quarter Horse as a teaser, and I always found him something that he could breed or I collected him. It can seem mean to never let them breed, but again, maybe that is humanizing them. Maybe in nature there would be a more dominant stallion that would kick him out of the way anyway.”

According to Dujovne, a good teaser “has a good libido but is easy to handle. He will call for mares, but respect his human handler. Even though they get excited, they have to know that once their work is done, they need to back up and be able to handle that. As long as he is submissive to the handler, you can train that for the most part.” **CTB**