

Clayton Strohmeier illustration

A Horse of a Different Color

Coat preferences are based on fact and fancy

BY ARDITH CARLTON

In a world of horse breeds with flashy, splashy hides, Standardbreds are known for their plain brown wrappers.

And the plainer and browner those wrappers are, the better most horsemen seem to like it.

The yearlings that parade through the sales rings this fall will vary in hue, from gleaming black to chocolate brown to shades of bay ranging from dark to coppery bright. Once in a while a ruddy chestnut will be seen, and fewer still are the greys and roans.

Without a crystal ball to divine their future speed, prospective buyers rely on their eyes in evaluating youngsters. They can read the pedigree page, they can examine the yearling's conformation, and they certainly can't miss the color of the coat. Depending on their color preferences, though, that coat may color the rest of their view.

It's just hair, isn't it? Or is it?



Ed Keys

Favoring the dark horse

Many horsemen prefer dark horses, and D.R. Ackerman, trainer/driver son of Hall of Famer Doug Ackerman, has reasons more than skin-deep for his preference.

"I love a really dark, rich bay horse, essentially almost a black," he said. "I've always thought they come with a fuller barrel, and they're a sturdier, hardier horse than the lighter bays. They seem to be able to take the rigors of racing better."

Dark, durable stars like Dygert Memorial winner Primrose Lane 5,1:57.2f (\$242,061), a son of Meadow Road, have helped support his belief. So has one of the Ackerman broodmares, Fella's Finale, a Most Happy Fella daughter bred exclusively to On The Road Again.

"She's a light bay, and her foals were all light bay," he recalled. "All were nice racehorses, all raced well, but they were just nice horses."

"Then she had Vacationing [p.6,1:52.4f (\$596,448)]. He was the only dark one—the darkest, richest bay, almost black. He was a total invitational pacer, and he's

From his home at Almahurst Farm in Kentucky, Adios son Shadow Wave transmitted his chestnut hue and white markings to the breed. The champion sophomore pacer of 1958 passed away at age 17, but in the generations since, liberal white markings can be found on many of his descendants.

been four seconds better than all the rest [of his dam's foals]."

In *The New Care & Training of the Trotter & Pacer*, the elder Ackerman wrote, "I do not particularly like a light bay yearling; that real light bay, almost yellowish in color. Yet Speedy Crown is a light bay and he sires a lot of the same color, and that hasn't stopped him from being a great sire. However, I won't buy a horse with light-colored, yellowish hair in his flanks."

One light bay who worked out well for the Ackerman Stable, though, was the Speedy Crown son Crowning Point 3,1:54 (\$343,662). Winner of the 1984 Review Stake over Baltic Speed, he went on to sire Hambletonian winner Harmonious and 1997 World Trotting Derby winner Lord Stormont before being

exported to Italy.

"Crowning Point disproved all our theories. It's just a preference thing, and you can't totally live by that," admitted the younger Ackerman. When a yearling's pedigree is appealing but the sire produces light-colored offspring, he added, "that should in no way stop you from selecting that horse to buy; that's the way they come."

Howard Beissinger trained and guided the "soft-colored" Speedy Crown, as well as several of that champion's top performers, but his taste also runs toward dark hues.

"I like a black horse, and I like what I call a liver-color horse, too—a rich, healthy-looking color," he explained. "I'd just as leave not have any white [markings] on them. A white foot is a little softer and weaker than a dark foot."

"Color has nothing to do with his ability or his heart, but I like between a dark brown and a black horse," said longtime conditioner Gene Riegle. "I think they have less white on them when you get a dark brown horse than you do any other

"People seem to knock chestnuts, but I always say it's because there are so few of them; the percentages aren't on their side."

— Albert "Ab" Adams

color.”

Black horses are far less prevalent than bays and browns, although the breed has enjoyed some great black sires in the past, such as Scotland and Tar Heel.

Among the trotting stars registered as black are 1997 Horse of the Year Continentalvictory 3,1:52.1 (\$1,611,170), Kentucky Futurity winner Flak Bait 3,1:55.2 (\$880,546), Hambletonian co-winner Park Avenue Joe 3,1:55.3 (\$666,311), Peace Corps' nemesis Park Avenue Kathy 3,1:56.4 (\$553,3521 in North America), and 1989 champion freshman filly Cayster 4,1:55 (\$530,451 in North America).

Some top black pacers of recent years have been Lotta Soul p,5,1:50.2 (\$1,052,015), Broadway Jate p,6,1:51.2 (\$912,976), Prince Ebony p,8,1:50.3 (\$909,774), Shadow Dance p,6,1:49.4 (\$689,473), Nuclear Legacy p,3,1:52 (\$556,122) and Staff Director p,3,1:55f (\$530,191).

White's the worst

When it comes to color preference, many horsemen would prefer any color at all to having white markings, resulting in white feet. As an old horse-traders' rhyme—preserved in the book *Secretariat*, by Raymond G. Woolfe—recommends:

“One white foot, run him for his life;

Two white feet, keep him for your wife;

Three white feet, keep him for your man;

Four white feet, sell him if you can;

Four white feet and a stripe on the nose,

Knock him in the head and feed him to the crows.”

Avoiding white feet “is just on account of soundness,” said Riegle, speaking of both gaits. “It’s really a tough game out there today, and it’s just harder to keep good feet, especially in front. I don’t want the white in front; it generally falls apart on a horse. I’d rather have it behind.”

Despite his own preference for dark horses, horseman Bruce Nickells couldn’t resist buying a “Clydesdale-color” son of No Nukes and Valentina for \$12,000 while “tire-kicking” at Harrisburg last fall. Nickells had raced Dapper Baron p,3,T1:57.3—a horse with any hundred Standardbreds’ share of white markings—in the mid-’70s [“When White Goes

Wild,” June 1995], and is putting that experience to use with his white-legged freshman, named Nuclear Invasion.

“If you’ve got a light-footed, light-colored horse, the feet are more sensitive, more brittle,” he said.

“If the right groom takes care of them, I believe they’ll be all right, but you’ve got to take steps to protect them. I’ve got the right shoes and a rim pad on him, with a little silicone under the pad. A little piece of the rim pad goes across the heel so he doesn’t get the start of a bruise.”

The blaze-faced bay was the best-training youngster in his barn this spring, Nickells reported.

Conditioner Doug McIntosh would simply rather stay away from light-colored feet.

“They’ve tended to be a little frail in their soundness; the structure of their body seems to be a little weak and they haven’t held up well under the rigors of training. It makes everybody a little scared.”

“People seem to knock chestnuts, but I always say it’s because there are so few of them; the percentages aren’t on their side,” asserted Albert “Ab” Adams. As general manager of Almahurst Farm in the 1970s Adams was well acquainted with the Kentucky farm’s founder-prone chestnut stallion Shadow Wave, the 1958 sophomore pacer of the year.

“Joe O’Brien thought Shadow Wave was an awfully good horse,” he recalled of the brawny, tall-stockinged horse, whose feet were notoriously poor. “He foundered as a 2-year-old, and it was kind



USTA archives



Ed Keys

Albert “Ab” Adams gathered as many grey matrons as he could for his broodmare band, and here he shows off, from left, Windustrious, Contessa Goldie, Hurricane Wave, Competent, Coin Silver and Tinsel. Tinsel produced Laag (below), a top colt performer for Dick Farrington. Laag has been a popular stallion, breeding an average of 170 mares a year.

“The color of the horse has no bearing on how fast he’s going to go,” he said. “But if you have a horse with a white foot, that foot is less rugged, and you’re going to have more foot problems.”

“I think this is why people don’t like chestnuts. They think chestnuts have poor feet.”

Seeing red or seeing gold?

“My dad loves chestnuts and so do I, but those good horses have been few and far between,” observed Ackerman.

of a progressive thing; any change in routine and he’d founder. Even if you wormed him he would founder, so we used to worm him with chewing tobacco!

“The founder was what eventually got him, and he died at 17. He was really just gaining the recognition a horse can get when we lost him. Had he lived, he could have been the leading broodmare sire.”

A son of the bay Adios, for whom nearly one foal in five was chestnut, Shadow Wave transmitted his color to nearly one-third of his 524 foals.



Dean A. Hoffman

“Shadow Wave threw quite a bit of white [markings],” recalled McIntosh. “[Breeders] respected him so much, they went with him anyway.”

“But as the time went on, the Meadow Skippers became so predominant that we kind of got away from chestnut.”

Of his 1,267 foals, Meadow Skipper sired one chestnut, while his sons Albattross sired none and Most Happy Fella sired three. Grandson Cam Fella has sired one.

However, Meadow Skipper’s bright bay son Nero sired chestnuts by the dozens. One was the 1982 2-Year-Old Pacing Filly of the Year, Bardot Lobell p,2,1:54.4 (\$300,906), who was trained and driven by Howard Beissinger.

“I don’t care for chestnuts—there have

Son of a roan mare who was bred to pace but preferred to trot, the great trotting gelding Red Rhone won fame on the tracks of North America and Europe. His color goes back to White Mountain Boy, the roan Volomite horse who was a pacing star in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s.

been very few good ones—but Bardot Lobell was kind of in between a chestnut and a bay,” observed Beissinger. “It didn’t hurt her any.”

The most recent chestnut pacer to win year-end championship honors was liver-hued On The Road Again p,4,1:51.4. With just a touch of white on his right hind coronet band, the Happy Motoring son was voted 1984 Pacer of the Year after wins in the Meadowlands Pace and

Cane Pace, and Aged Pacing Horse of the Year in 1985 after taking 22 of 30 starts at racing’s uppermost level.

In his three-year career, On The Road Again became one of the sport’s two chestnut millionaire pacers—the other being Redskin p,2,1:55 (\$1,865,702), by Storm Damage—and was once the richest pacer in history. He retired with a bankroll of \$2,819,102.

On The Road Again is now in his 13th year at stud at Blue Chip Farms of New York. One in five of his more than 1,060 offspring have been chestnut, and that segment includes 30 1:55 performers and 23 winners of \$100,000 or more. They are led by Semalu Magnific p,4,1:53.3f (\$310,161), Red Road p,4,1:53.3f (\$285,541) and former world champion gelding Boston Blue Chip p,3,1:51.1 (\$257,444)—each with no white.

On The Road Again’s color was never a concern for Blue Chip. “When you have a phenomenal horse like him, color doesn’t matter,” said Jean Brown, the farm’s administrative manager. “I don’t think it’s been that much of a factor. His crucial first crops sold very well. Now he’s known as a sire of stayers, and people look at that when they think about On The Road Again.”

There have been seven chestnut Little Brown Jug victors: Ensign Hanover, Dudley Hanover, Shadow Wave, Romeo Hanover, Ambro Omaha, and two sired by Bret Hanover, Strike Out and Melvin’s Woe.

A bay like his sire, Adios, Bret Hanover sired chestnuts to the tune of 11 percent. Four of his 10 highest money-winning offspring are chestnut, with 1987 Woodrow Wilson winner Even Odds p,2,1:53.4 (\$976,683) and 1981 3-Year-Old Pacing Colt of the Year Seahawk Hanover p,3,1:55.2 (\$675,122) his richest and third-richest sons, respectively.

Even Odds, a solid chestnut without a spot of white, was a \$28,000 yearling purchase by Arlene Traub, who earlier had owned the rugged chestnut performer Red Colt p,7,1:54.1 (\$736,246). Traub said she “never really paid attention” to a yearling’s hue.

“If my trainers don’t like it, someone else will train them. And when they become good enough horses, everybody wants to train them!” she said with a laugh.

While there have been seven chestnut Jug winners, only one Hambletonian winner has been chestnut: Blaze Hanover,

who won the 1960 race in four heats.

However, the ratio of chestnut trotters to pacers may be evening up in recent decades, especially with leading sires Balanced Image and Speedy Crown having contributed nearly 250 to the pool.

Of those two stallions' chestnut offspring trained by McIntosh, he prefers those with dark or striped hooves who are a liver or "redder" chestnut.

"With a Speedy Crown you get more of the yellow-orange color, but with Balanced Image, if he throws a chestnut it'll be a darker, more liver color," he said. "They look better. They sparkle."

They can certainly gleam in the stakes spotlight, too, as his Breeders Crown-winning Canadian champion Imageofa Clear Day 3,1:55.2 (\$384,578) and world champion Woodman 3,1:55f (\$422,220) have shown.

"Imageofa Clear Day was pretty well solid chestnut," he said of the Balanced Image lass. "She had a little bit of white along the hair line on one foot. And she had good feet."

Solid chestnut Woodman, a Balanced Image gelding out of a full sister to the dam of Pine Chip, was a \$36,000 yearling purchase in 1992. "I think he would have sold for more money if he wasn't chestnut," said McIntosh.

"I can't say I stay clear of chestnuts," said Riegler. "I've had some good ones." Among the best was the Speedy Somolli daughter Worldly Woman 4,1:54.3 (\$459,543), winner of the 1992 Hambletonian Oaks.

"She didn't have an awful lot of white; two socks behind," he said. "This mare had a lot of trot early and a very easy way of going."

Grey revival

Seen even less frequently than chestnuts are grey Standardbreds.

While Greyhound is probably the trotter Americans know best, the color grey is close to giving up the ghost among square-gaiters on these shores.

Dress for Success

HORSEMEN'S COLOR preferences sometimes seem to be a blend of experience, aesthetics, and a bit of superstition.

However, can coat color really improve a horse's chances for success?

Dr. D. Phillip Sponenberg, co-author of *Horse Color: A Complete Guide To Horse Coat Colors*, and one of the world's foremost experts on equine color genetics, doesn't dispute the possibility—but not because there's any sort of magic to a certain color.

"There's a lot of old wives' tales about different colors doing different things," explained Sponenberg, a professor of veterinary pathology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. "And those beliefs are so widely held and so widespread, you've got to wonder if there might be something to them.

"But some may actually have something to do with different bloodlines [that a color occurs in]. In one breed, people said that buckskins were all mean. It turned out that these buckskin horses were all descended from one horse that was a real stinker. So that can confuse the issue."

As far as actual physical properties that colors might indicate, "there's some Polish [research] work using mostly racing Arabians that suggests that chestnuts mature quicker but bays last longer," he said. "But much further than that, nobody's really studied it."—A.C.



In contrast to one chestnut Hambletonian winner, there have been seven chestnut Little Brown Jug winners, and one was Strike Out. Shown with Keith Waples prior to his dead-heat win in the 1972 Adios, Strike Out was the first of two consecutive chestnut sons of Bret Hanover to win the Jug; Melvin's Woe followed in 1973.

The Follow Up matron Gray Sky added some color to pacing stakes in the '70s with grey babies that included Smog p,3,1:58.4 (\$234,536) and Storm p,3,1:59.2 (\$64,628)—Meadow Skipper sons who sired the winners of over \$13.3 million and \$2.3 million, respectively—and the Henry T. Adios filly Sprinkle p,2,2:01 (\$65,243).

As a Stoner Creek broodmare, Sprinkle in turn produced top greys like Meadow Skipper filly Watering Can p,3,1:54.2 (\$219,757), winner of the '81 Jugette and herself the dam of the grey bearcats Shippo Schnoops p,3,1:51.4f (\$658,123)—now at stud in Quebec—and Ryan's Miracle p,3,1:50.4 (\$268,935).

And the number of grey pacers is definitely on the rise.

Adams, who says he has always had a

The number of grey trotters, never large to begin with, has nearly dwindled away, with the most recent sires of note being Florican son Palm Aire, whose last foals were born in 1983, and the Heyday horse Hey Grey Day, who currently stands in Ohio. Their third and fourth dam, respectively, is Greyhound's full sister Miss Greyhound.

Lotto S Collins 4,1:55.4q (\$371,963), a perennial top performer in upstate New York, is one of the few grey trotters in competition today. Now 8, the Sir Taurus gelding gets his color from dam Joan T Collins, whose second dam was by Storm Cloud, a grey son of Scotland.

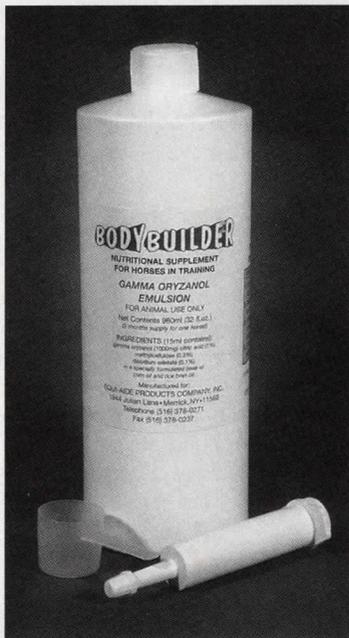
"I've had maybe 10 roans in my career, but I find them a breed apart, distinctive and tough, and generally a sounder breed of horse."

—Bill Wellwood

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love for grey horses, has been instrumental in rekindling the grey Standardbred population—not only through his band of grey broodmares at Winterwood Farm in Ohio, but also as breeder and part-owner of former world champion Laag p,3,1:51.2 (\$642,995).

A son of Adams' grey Meadow Skipper mare Tinsel—the first mare in history to produce two 1:54 2-year-olds, with Laag and his bay half-brother Trim The Tree p,2,1:53.3—Laag grabbed the public's attention in the sophomore wars of 1987. The grey son of Abercrombie won his eliminations for the Meadowlands Pace and Prix d'Ete and then dead-heated with Jaguar Spur in the epic Tattersalls Pace final.



Dean A. Hoffman

Bardot Lobell, the champion freshman pacing filly of 1982, was one of dozens of chestnuts sired by the bright bay Nero. Among the others were the \$500,000 winners Trutone Lobell and Apollo's Way.

At stud for the past decade, Laag has bred an average of 170 mares a year. Half of his foals are registered as grey or roan, led by Jet Laag p,5,1:50.4z-'98 (\$643,376) and divisional champion Chippie's Ruler p,3,1:53.4 (\$441,686).

"I think there's something about that grey gene that makes a very tough horse," Adams said. "No question, Laag was absolutely the toughest racehorse to set foot on the racetrack; he was always passing horses coming for the wire, and only twice in his life was he beat in the stretch. His offspring are that way, too."

Finally, there are roans. The color has always been in short supply, but the sport's only millionaire roan pacer, Big Townner son Broadway Express p,4,1:56.1h (\$1,141,726), is keeping Illinois well stocked by siring more than 50 percent roans among his nearly 500 foals. His 17

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roan 1:55 performers include Broadway Moriah p,5,1:54.1s (\$310,247) and Bingo Johnnie p,4,1:52.2s (\$310,070).

Breezing Speed 3,2:04.3 (\$16,886), a roan son of Speedster, is in his 16th year at stud in Michigan, the state that also yielded the famed roan Pat Taylor gelding Red Rhone 5,1:57.1f (\$291,299).

The roan trotting gelding Panifesto 4,1:55.3 (\$545,500), by Rule The Wind, scored a world-record 1:56.1h win in the 1995 Breeders Crown Aged Trot. His color goes back to his second dam's sire, Masquerade, a half-brother to Merrie Annabelle, the legendary roan who trotted the first 2:00 race mile by a freshman filly and tragically died the same season.

The national stakes spotlight hasn't seen many roans, but Bill Wellwood hopes to liven up this year's scene with the Western Hanover sophomore Take Down The Flag p,2,1:55f (\$159,619).

"He's a light bay horse with quite a lot of grey hairs and a grey tail—a strawberry roan," Wellwood said of his \$47,000 yearling purchase. "He's got two white stockings behind, but I never even looked at that.

"I've had maybe 10 roans in my career, but I find them a breed apart, distinctive and tough, and generally a sounder breed of horse. Their grit and determination I attribute to the roanness."

Wellwood became a fan of roan horses at age 15, when he groomed "the toughest sucker yet I've had anything to do with," the roan Dillon Mc pacer Part Dillon p,2:07 (\$36,715). "I was just a kid then, but I never, ever did forget him," he recalled with admiration.

A few years later in his career, he had the blue roan gelding Shadow Stone p,2:04h (\$37,883), "about as fast a horse as I had in that era," he said. "He was a totally different personality, a mild individual, but very gritty and tough on the racetrack.

"You develop thoughts on breeds and thoughts on colors at an early age, and I think they follow you through your career. I picked up on the roan. I don't have any qualms whatsoever about buying a roan horse. I love them, and if they're good, it's a bonus!"

Regardless of horse men's color preferences, that old saying can't be denied: "A good horse is always a good color."

Or, as McIntosh pointed out, "When they make a Cadillac car, the last thing they do is paint it—and it's still a Cadillac." HB



Looking Ahead

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