

# SELECTING THE PERFORMANCE FRIESIAN

## An Interview with Suzy Stafford

By Angie DePuydt

We have all seen them together in the show ring. That perfectly put together Friesian that is a combination of grace, beauty and athleticism, complimented by a rider or driver who exudes enthusiasm and confidence in his charge. The ease of the pair's movements together as one is palpable and conveys depth of trust and experience one can only discover in a true partnership. This type of relationship and ability to performance seamlessly with a Friesian is something almost all of us have dreamed of, or sought, at one time or another. Many of us are lucky enough to have our true connection in the barn. Friesians are known for their desire to develop deep bonds with their owners. But how do we find such a perfect match for the performance arena? What traits make for a good performance Friesian and how does conformation translate to performance?

In this series brought to you by the FHANA Education and Health Committee, *Selecting the Performance Friesian*, we'll explore how one might go about breeding or purchasing their once in a lifetime partner for dressage or driving. First, we sit down and interview world champion driver and trainer Suzy Stafford for her take on what makes for a good driving Friesian and how to select one.

### MEET THE TRAINER

Suzy Stafford's interest in horses began at a young age. She rose through the ranks of United States Pony Club in her early years, where she excelled in combined training. In 1998, she completed American Riding Instructors Program certification in dressage and combined training. After a leg injury ended her riding career, she channeled her competitive drive towards a new equine sport: carriage driving.

In 2001, Suzy began working with seven-time United States National Pair Combined Driving Champion Lisa Singer and took every opportunity to work with many different breeds in both pleasure showing and combined driving. Stafford soon became Singer's assistant trainer and honed her skills to become a noted trainer, instructor, and clinician. Suzy now competes on the national and international stage in the breed show ring as well as open riding and driving venues across the country. Year after year, Suzy continues to add many championship performances and medal finishes to an already impressive list of accomplishments.

Staying at the top of one's game means working with the best, and Suzy has trained with many world champion drivers. Setting a solid foundation of basic skills for students is a priority for Stafford, who helps them gain confidence and proficiency. Teaching at her two training locations, Ocala, FL and Chesapeake City, MD, as well as traveling to clinics and giving seminars, enables her to share her knowledge with other driving enthusiasts and competitive drivers.

Suzy's first introduction to the Friesian breed came in 2010 when a client and FHANA member came to her for help with her Friesian mare. Since then, Suzy has successfully trained and produced IBOP scores above 77 points for five Friesians and she has trained and driven three Friesian mares to achieving their Driving Sport Predicate. Friesians trained in her barn have gone on to become some of the most successful Friesian driving horses in all of North America.

We have asked Suzy to comment on some important points that need to be considered as one searches for their next performance Friesian prospect and have outlined these for you in the following paragraphs:



### STARTING THE SEARCH PROCESS

First thing's first - get familiar with the breed, if you are not already. Decide what your goal is for your next equine partner. Decide what your timeline is to fulfill your performance goal, this will help you evaluate the age range you will be searching in. Your performance goals will also come into play when you set your budget. A youngster not yet started in the performance arena will take longer to develop and be less expensive. A proven performance horse will be more expensive but ready to perform as needed, based on your goals and timeline. Look into bloodlines that have been or are currently successful in the area of performance you would like to be involved in.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFORMATION

No matter what your performance goals are, you should always be looking for a correct horse. Look for solid, correct conformation that lends itself well to your intended use. Straight legs and good feet are a must and apply across the board in all areas of performance.

### ENLIST PROFESSIONALS HELP

If you have a trainer, ask for their assistance. They are professionals and can help make a successful match. If you work closely with your trainer, he or she knows what type of

horse will fit your personality, driving style and level of time you can commit to training and performance. They also know how to help you reach your goals and will guide you to the appropriate type of Friesian. Go see the horses in person.

### FRIESIAN PERFORMANCE CHARACTERISTICS

The Friesian characteristics that translate to good performance are similar to those of other breeds. What sets the characteristics list apart is the level or goal you are aspiring to complete. For example, if you are not aspiring to ride Grand Prix then you can be more flexible on certain traits when selecting a Friesian.

### DO YOU NEED A SCHOOLMASTER?

In my experience this is usually based on the buyer's budget. A schoolmaster is a quicker path to success in the performance arena but the goal of the buyer and their budget are the primary deciding factors.

### DESIREABLE TRAITS

Any horse used for performance should have a basic, correct conformation. Look for clean, straight legs and strong, correct feet. Those traits will be very important for the long-term soundness of any performance horse. Depending on your discipline or goals, you may have a personal preference for



Suzy Stafford holding the reins of Ivanka Nicola (Sipke 450 x Folkert 353) owned by Crystal Burr.



some traits. I focus on dressage, carriage and sport types. In a prospect, I look for a naturally long, round neck that is carried uphill but not upright and a clean throat latch. I prefer an uphill build (front legs longer than back). I like a medium length back. If the back is too long it is weak, but more supple than a short back. A short back is usually very strong but tends to not have as much suppleness. I like a low set hock for power. The walk and canter are important to me, as they are gaits that I can least influence through training. The horse must have a natural rhythm, suppleness and natural power to the walk and canter. The trot must be good as well, but shortcomings with the trot can be greatly improved through training. Character is a huge deciding factor for me. A performance horse must have a certain spark - a little something special.

## TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

I think it is important to meet the horse in person in order to get a sense of their character and tendencies. The time it takes to assess the horse's current level of talent and future potential is based on your experience doing so. If you are new to the performance horse, you may want to bring a professional set of eyes with you. I encourage buyers to look at many horses for comparison. I do feel that you must get that "fuzzy feeling" on the first visit but I suggest driving and handling the horse at least two or three times before making a decision.

## PRE-PURCHASE EXAMS

A correct, healthy horse is key, and this should be decided by your veterinarian. I always do base front feet and hock radiographs on all purchases.

## UP NEXT

In the next installment in this series we turn our focus to selecting a Friesian for performance in the dressage arena with expert advice from FEI rider and instructor, Julio Mendoza. Stay tuned!

Learn more about Suzy Stafford and the services Stafford Carriage Driving offers by going to their website: <http://www.staffordcarriagedriving.com/>

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