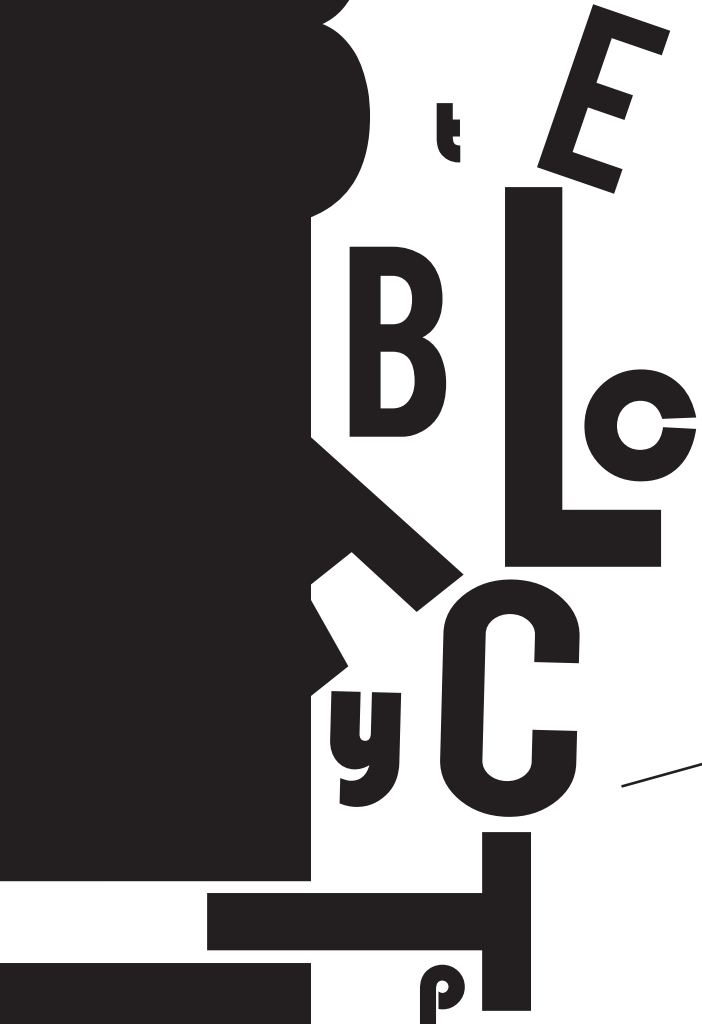


DATA
OUTLINED



Is black type keeping buyers in the dark?

Story by **Melissa Keith**

The USTA's original 1968 edition of *Care & Training of the Trotter & Pacer* is a fascinating read in 2009. Really.

In its pages, you can find ample evidence of the standardbred's rapid evolution as a breed, in the words of some of the sport's finest-ever horsemen. But the *Bloodlines and Breeding* chapter, penned by James C. Harrison, sums up the problem well. "I think we would all agree that the ideal broodmare would be able to go in 1:55," it reads, "and would have a pedigree made up of names that had nothing but 2:00 credits for all sires and dams in the first three generations at least. Unfortunately, there are no mares like this and if there were, you and I could not afford them" (p. 59).

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Harrison certainly knew about the availability of top mares, as he was Hanover Shoe Farms' Assistant to the President from 1958-65, and played a key role in the breeding side of the operation.

The perspective from Hanover Shoe, a North American breeding establishment, has changed considerably since Harrison's time. Current Hanover President and CEO Jim Simpson says he and Public Relations Director Murray Brown have long been pushing for re-evaluation of qualifying criteria for black type. "Black type as it is served a great purpose for decades, but now it's pretty irrelevant," Simpson insists. "To win a race in 2:00 and get black type... that's slower than [current] qualifying standards at some tracks!"

When The Meadowlands, Woodbine and other larger tracks opened, he adds, the clock became an antiquated measure of horses' ability. "Time doesn't mean anything. It's who you beat that's important."

Yet caliber of competition is glaringly absent from consideration in assigning black type. Standards are the same now as they were decades ago in Canada and the United States. Any trotter or pacer who can win in 2:00, on any size track, earns it. So does any horse who earns \$100,000 or more in purses over their racing career. And then there's the disproportionate value of winning certain races. "Winning the Pennsylvania Sires Stakes \$3,000 fair stake is the same as winning the Hambletonian, as far as black type goes," Simpson sighs.

who shattered old baselines for high achievement in the sport, even if it means cutting back the overall number of horses attaining black type status. Statistics themselves speak volumes about their present (and misleading) overabundance. "In 1975, there were 714 miles in 2:00 or faster," says David Carr, USTA Director of Information and Research. "In 2008, there were 57,736."

In other words, the 1:55 broodmare of James C. Harrison's dreams can now be yours for a few thousand dollars, because the 2:00 mile has lost its meaning. (Carr affirms that race times have rapidly become the predominant means of earning black type.)

Norman Hall, well-known for his Pedigree Matching theory/software and annual Pedigree Camp, is based in Prince Edward Island. He wants to dispel the notion that smaller markets benefit from older standards. Despite his proximity to sales and racetracks with far fewer black type performers, Hall agrees the criteria needs revision. "Anything can go in 2:00!" he exclaims. "The \$1,500 claimers at Charlottetown go in 2:00. It makes absolutely no sense [to keep the current standards]. Change is long overdue, but nobody will take up the issue and move it ahead."

Hall calls maintaining the status quo "deceptive," adding that "there's a general reluctance in the breeding industry to reduce the appeal of any of their yearlings by stripping out unnecessary black type." He cites the case of a horse moving from low-level claiming races into the PEI Colt Stakes, drawing

indicators of quality. "It makes no sense to black type something with \$100,000 [in earnings]," says Hall in reference to the present earnings standard. "\$100,000 is nothing now. I'd say half a million should be the minimum."

Simpson likes the idea of graded stakes, already the talent barometer in thoroughbred racing, and mentions another option that emerged during industry sessions about re-assessing black type. "We agreed on a standard where if you were in the top five percent of your class, [such as] two-year old trotting fillies, for a given year, those three or four fillies would earn black type based on money earnings, not on time. It's the small group that would be on the cover of the magazines -- they would get black type, at the end of the year of course, based on money earnings."

Measures like those put forward by Simpson and Hall could help clarify what constitutes today's exceptional racehorse, preventing black type from fading into worthlessness. Yet Simpson reflects he's only heard "massive amounts of silence" about potential amendments for some time, although he and Murray Brown had been active in past USTA-coordinated discussions about pedigree concerns. "Although there were several issues on the [original 1997] agenda, the criteria for black type received the most attention and led to follow-up meetings in 1998 and 1999," recalls David Carr. "Proposed new criteria that came out of the meetings were later rejected by the sales companies as being too complex."

Nonetheless, the subject wouldn't go away. "At the suggestion of a couple of the [sales] companies," explains Carr, "the [black type] committee was reformed in 2002, now consisting of representatives of USTA, Standardbred Canada, major sales companies, and the Hambletonian Society." More meetings took place in 2002-03, but Carr says some elements espoused by the committee didn't sit well with regional racetracks.

Time doesn't mean anything. It's who you beat that's important.

But does his perspective favour major breeders and sales companies?

Not so, he argues. Simpson claims adopting more stringent criteria would benefit the whole industry, particularly buyers. "All sales catalogues would lose a lot of black type, but the black type remaining would be relevant. Truth in advertising is our ultimate goal."

Truth would mean highlighting performers like Somebeachsomewhere and Snow White,

into an easy division, winning in a time five seconds slower than the fastest division, and automatically earning black type standing. "That's the sort of foolishness that goes on!"

But what should be the contemporary criteria for black type? Both Hall and Simpson agree that time is essentially irrelevant ("unless you're in jail" quips Hall). They consider figures of 1:55 for trotters and 1:53 for pacers to be baselines, but prioritize earnings as in-

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SC Sales Manager Heather Reid was involved in those black type committees. She calls existing rules “very outdated,” noting that they’ve been in place the entire 38 years she’s been doing pedigrees. Reid remembers one main reason why talks didn’t produce changes at the time: the contentious issue of how to assign grades to graded stakes. “A lot of these smaller tracks have traditional stakes races that have lost their monies but are still prestigious races,” says Reid. “In the meetings, sometimes the Americans would say, ‘this should be a Grade II’, but to me, it would be a Grade I because we’re in Canada.”

With thoroughbreds, the national Graded Stakes Committee evaluates Canadian races (as Grade I, II or III, based on caliber of entries and usually purse); there are only four Canadian races this year that made the cut for Grade I designation. Reid contends that such a system could be confusing in sales catalogues, in addition to diminishing some Canadian races with limited purse money but great tradition, like Charlottetown’s Gold Cup & Saucer. Slot revenues add further complexity, notes Reid. “That’s why we couldn’t come to a consensus.”

For Hall, that closer look means learning how to read beyond the black type (or its absence) on the page of the catalogue, and disregarding the opinions of self-proclaimed experts. Hall suggests a yearling’s potential isn’t necessarily even based on the racing success of their immediate family.

His advice? “If you look at all the top individuals in the sport over the years, they’re strongly outcrossed, and that’s exactly what Somebeach-somewhere is.”

Hybrid vigor could be the name of the game when it comes to selecting future champions, but perhaps raising the bar for black type will help breathe new life into an old adage nonetheless.

How does it go?

Oh yes.

Breed the best to the best and hope for the best. ■

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Years have now passed, the black type piles up in the sales catalogues, and Simpson considers the situation exasperating. “We had several meetings, and I thought it was a go. I didn’t hear any real dissent [about making changes].”

Although there are some who benefit from black type as it stands, who may oppose upgrading the standard, it’s questionable whether the breed, the industry or the potential racehorse owner is well served by pedigrees that essentially live in the past. In the words of Hall: top individuals who should stand out on the page get buried in amongst all the riff-raff, to the ultimate detriment of the yearling buyer. Amid the frustrations, is there light at the end of the long-standing black type tunnel?

Reid says she’s hopeful that this October’s Breeders Crown weekend at Woodbine may prove a turning point for resolving the issue. “It should be an honour to get black type in your pedigree, but now when you look at a pedigree, everyone’s got it. There’s a need for this to be initiated and acted upon. We’re hoping to have a breeders’ forum up here in Ontario this year, in conjunction with the USTA. You’d have all the major breeders there,” she explains. “I am going to have our CEO put it on the agenda.” Reid thinks the time is right, because there’s finally a general consensus on the need for revisions. “It’s not rocket science. We all have to be on the same page, because we’re all in the business and it’s basically a very small business.”

While black type criteria revisions sound tantalizingly possible again, Hall offers a word of caution in his Pedigree Camp literature. “Clearly it is very easy to be blinded by the black type at first glance,” writes PEI’s pedigree guru. “A closer look can reveal the true value of the horse in question.”

