Annual Cream Meeting Hosts Dr. Phil Sponenberg

by Carol Pshigoda, Vice President

Is the American Cream Draft Horse just a color breed? According to Dr. Phil Sponenberg, our speaker at our 1997 annual meeting, the color is a champagne variant, and “I stress variant.” Phil gave those present a very informative talk, and was impressed, maybe infected, with our enthusiasm for our horses.

The stud book is going to be a great tool for us, Phil believes, and shows some interesting influences in our breed. Those of you not present need to go over the info sheets on influences.

To be useful, a breed must have a predictable generic package. This predictability is what separates a purebred form a crossbred animal. So as we look at breeding programs the key point we must reach is type, type, type. Type is important in all breeds. Regardless of color we should be able to take five horses of the same color, and on conformation alone be able to identify the breed. Although I must admit I personally have had a hard time distinguishing between my friends’ black Clydes and his Black Shires.

A key point brought out by the stud book is that 32% of the background, the highest contributor to the gene pool, is undocumented. Phil feels this group most likely is made up of Midwest heavy and medium draft animals, and has had the most influence on our breed.

So, to get back to the original question. Are we just a color breed? Blood typing has confirmed the American Cream Draft Horse as a unique breed among drafts, color aside. It is definitely more than a color variant offshoot of some other established breed.

It is up to us as breeders to establish the directing philosophy of our breed. Type needs to be defined. Nice heads, refined ears, short coupled, well muscled, large bodied, full shoulders and well muscled hindquarters, with a height of 15'2" to 16'2", although I see we have raised the height to 17'. I feel we should not exclude our taller horses, but maybe not breed up to the hitch horses that all the other draft breeds have done. Maybe we should stay the true farm draft breed. Many people are drawn to Creams due to their beautiful color and style. It would be nice to not get our breed lost in the “hitch horse” driven breeding of the other drafts.

Open vs. closed, the registry question was addressed. Phil’s consensus was that keeping the registry open for now would allow us to not lose those Creams that could be a genetic asset to us, but as yet are not registered. The key, I believe, is in being careful in what we register. We don’t need to register everything that looks Cream that comes down the pike. Again, we come back to TYPE. We need to be very careful, that while we are establishing credibility for this breed, we do not rush out and register anything, and therefore lose what we have gained just to get our numbers up. We may have horses come into the association from the outside, but they must have only draft horse background and be of the type we are looking for.

In closing, Phil could not stress TYPE enough. TYPE, TYPE, TYPE!!! We must define and redefine and then refine again. Then, as conscientious breeders, breed those horses that are most likely to define and throw TYPE. This way we can make the American Cream Draft Horse prosper while saving a valuable part of our American farm heritage. What a wonderful adventure to be a part of.

Thank you very much, Phil. Your talk was educational, inspiring, and very useful.
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