

A graphic with a green-to-white gradient background. The word "Question" is written in large yellow letters, with a red question mark shape integrated into the letter 'Q'. Below "Question" is the text "of the month" in white. In the bottom right corner, it says "sponsored by LANE'S END" with a logo for Lane's End, followed by the phone number (859) 873-7300, the email address lanesend@ix.netcom.com, and the website www.lanesend.com.

Question
of the month

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Q: A recent study in Australia of 80,000 repository X-rays demonstrated that most common bone abnormalities revealed in X-rays of sales yearlings have no effect on subsequent racing performance. As a buyer, how do radiographic findings affect your sales purchases? As a buyer or seller, have you had any good fortune with yearlings you bought or sold which had veterinary issues?

ROB WHITELEY, LIBERATION FARM:

The Australian study is monumental in that it uses 2,700+ horses and 80,000 X-rays, and is the first large research effort to relate sales repository X-ray



findings to later racing success. Let's hope it is the first of many such studies and that we will see a comparable American study in the near future. Furthermore, let's hope that it also inspires our American veterinary clinics to conduct similar research relating corrective limb procedures and other surgical interventions to racing performance.

Meanwhile, I continue to have great compassion for sales vets as they perform their duties. They function somewhat in the dark and between a rock and a hard place. With very limited research data to point to that relates repository findings to later racing success, sales vets are asked to do the impossible.



They are asked to make guesses about the probability that a horse's career may be impaired by certain irregularities, even though they are missing an empirical basis for making prescient or accurately predictive judgments. This unhappy situation puts sales vets in a no-win predicament: If they approve the purchase of a horse that has "issues," and it fails to perform successfully, the big finger of disappointment and blame can point back at them. On the other hand, if they turn down one of the many sales horses with perceived "issues," and it goes on to a stellar career, frustrated buyers who missed out on "the big horse" may also blame the sales vet for the lost opportunity. Either way, sales vets are vulnerable to criticism.

This vulnerability is magnified because, without having significant scientific data as a reference, sales vets are reduced to using their own anecdotal experience or professional inference as the basis for supporting their opinions and predictions. This puts the onus squarely on them and their personal experience, rather than on scientific data. In layman's terms, sales vets, therefore, become personally accountable for their educated guess work. Anyway it's looked at, sales vets are on the hot seat. Being asked to make predictive statements without having reference to empirical data is a little bit like walking through a minefield with only a part of the map. No wonder, therefore, that sales vets often adopt conservative or ultra-conservative positions, and sometimes simply just report a list of findings, without commentary, which often puts buyers off of horses that they otherwise like and want to buy.

And why shouldn't sales vets be conservative, given this scenario? It's a scary and lonely spot to be in, having to make predictive statements that are not grounded in statistical fact. Some cynics say that sales vets are overly conservative in order to "cover their ass;" or that they turn down horses to "create more business for themselves." But this is not fair. Their conservatism is a natural instinct in the face of uncertainty. Operating largely in the realm of guess-work without hard science to back up their guesses and prognostications, sales vets in general are merely being prudent.

Simply put, however, vets will be on firmer ground, and sellers and buyers will benefit, if we have more research data like that in the recent Australian study.

Meanwhile, until more research is conducted, buyers who miss out on good horses because of veterinary issues and input should lighten up on blaming vets. Instead, buyers should empower themselves and take more responsibility for the decision making process. Rather than blame their vet when they miss out on an eventual Derby horse, or another World Cup Champion like Curlin, buyers should instead seek to inform themselves better about the many "normal" irregularities in young horses. They should also avoid being overly picky and try to be more forgiving, while focusing on identifying athletes that can overcome little issues.

Rob Whiteley cont.

It is often self-defeating to go searching for the illusory "perfect" horse. In that regard, reading the CBA booklets on "Scoping," "OCDs," and "Buying Sales Yearlings" (available at consignorsandbreeders.com) would be time well spent.

Another good use of time would be phone calls to vets or clinics to encourage research in America that builds on the Australian effort by correlating X-ray findings and vet procedures to later racing success. Phone calls to the sales companies to encourage their participation in a joint effort would also be a good idea, as they installed the repositories (which now contain a wealth of essential data) and collect entry fees and commissions that could help fund meaningful research, thereby serving the sales scene and their full spectrum of constituents in the best way possible.

A commercial breeder, Rob Whiteley buys and sells horses of all ages. www.liberationfarm.com