



NFHR Evaluation program 2008
By Phillip Odden

Our Fjord Horses are a product of an evaluation process.

The Norwegian Fjord Horses of North America are largely the product of a selective breeding program of the mother country Norway. Though fjord horses may have been bred for several thousand years, the modern fjord horse is the result of the needs, desires, and environmental factors with regard to animal power relating to the lives of rural people living on Norway's mountainous west coast during the past 150 years. The body size, form, and movement of the fjord horse changed from decade to decade depending on what the horse was to be used for. As the fjord horse changed, Evaluators helped the owners and breeders of Fjord horses in Norway identify the desirable and undesirable qualities of individual animals to further the overall breeding program.

The Fjord is a multipurpose horse. Another way to state this is that the Fjord horse is a versatile breed. That is to say that each individual fjord should be able to function well in a variety of working situations from farm work, to packing gear and goods over mountain trails, to driving light carriages, or for pleasure riding or the show ring. Some horses will excel in one or another of these disciplines due to its body form, yet it is important to preserve the versatility within individuals of the fjord breed.

Other countries have evaluation programs

Fjord horses have been exported to many countries from Norway. Several of these countries have established evaluation programs to help guide breeders, owners, buyers, and handlers. In many countries, stallions are required to be evaluated to obtain a license to breed. Often only offspring from licensed stallions can be registered officially. Restrictions are also placed on mares in many of these registries. There is an umbrella organization of member countries called Fjord Horse International that was established to coordinate issues regarding registration, conformation, and performance issues as well as continued education issues about the Fjord horse.

Conformation and performance

Disposition, character, and willingness to work are desired qualities of the Fjord breed. In this new century more and more horse owners have not grown up in a horse culture. People are attracted to horses that are innately friendly toward people. Disposition and character are best assessed in a horse when it is asked to work with us. Disposition cannot be evaluated in a conformation test.

The NFHR evaluation program is designed to identify desirable and undesirable characteristics regarding the exterior of the fjord horse with the standard conformation test. Through performance tests, the interior qualities such as disposition, character, and the willingness of the horse to do work can be evaluated. These tests, both conformation and performance, are based on a written breed standard. Each individual horse is evaluated as it compares to the breed standard.

The first official NFHR evaluation was done at Libby, Montana in 1994.

Information and education tools

The NFHR evaluation program is voluntary and is designed to be an information and educational tool for owners, breeders, buyers and handlers. Through the evaluation program the NFHR is committed to preserve the five colors of the Fjord horse breed and the diversity in body form, from the heavier body to the lighter framed Fjord. Important qualities that define the essence of the Fjord horse, referred to as *Fjord Type*, are more heavily weighted in the conformation test. This is accomplished by factoring fjord type by 2. These characteristics of Fjord Breed Type, characteristics that make the fjord different than other horse breeds, should not be confused with the diverse body type of the heavier or lighter bodied Fjord horses.

The evaluation process

Horses that are at least three years old in the year they are evaluated are scored for conformation with a nine- part form test based on 100 total points. On this form individual attention is given to the head, neck, body, fore legs, hind legs, movement at the walk, movement at the trot, overall impression, and breed type x 2. Written comments regarding numerical scores by the evaluators is encouraged and expected.

As of year- end 2005 the NFHR offers a young-stock conformation test for animals that have not reached their third birthday in the year they will be evaluated. This test is scored on the same form used for the 3 year and over horses. The Youngstock scores are not permanent and the forms are watermarked with “Youngstock”. A participation ribbon is awarded. Written comments by the evaluators that reflect the number scores are encouraged.

NFHR performance tests reflect horse use traditions in North America. Tests in English and Western riding, driving and draft are established at the introductory and advanced level. These tests are designed to show the evaluators such things as how well behaved the horse is, the quality of the horse’s gaits, impulsion, relaxation, suppleness, attentiveness, obedience, ability to bend, acceptance of the bit, body position and willingness to work.

Two evaluators are used to judge each of the horses for conformation and performance tests. The evaluator’s scores are added and averaged to obtain one final score. The owner receives a copy of the scores from each evaluator along with written comments. A technical delegate is also hired by the NFHR to interpret the written rules and help guide the evaluation program at the venue. There is a process in place to appeal any decisions made by the evaluators or the TD. There is also a written ethics document to guide the evaluators.

As of January 2008 there are 8 official NFHR evaluators. The evaluators have completed a rigorous training program to become NFHR evaluators. Three of the evaluators are also listed as International evaluators.

In the NFHR system a horse that is at least three years old must reach a total score of 70 and have no scores of 4 or less in the conformation test to be able to qualify for a Medallion award. With a score of 70 or above in the introductory test the horse can attempt the advanced performance test in that discipline. Upon completing one or more introductory tests with a score of 70 or more the horse will receive the silver introductory medallion of quality. Upon

completing one or more of the advanced performance tests the horse is eligible for the gold medallion of quality. Both Silver and Gold Medallions can be achieved at the same Evaluation.

Each official score is recorded in an NFHR record book or an official NFHR electronic record that is available to the public. A picture of the horse taken at the evaluation is also included in the record.

A horse can repeat the conformation test or any of the performance tests. Each test is recorded and is official when approved by the NFHR Board of Directors.

How to use evaluation scores

The individual scores and remarks given by each evaluator for each category in the conformation and performance tests represents that evaluator's opinion of what he or she sees in the horse at that point in time. The evaluator can only see what is presented to him or her and can not suppose what might happen if the horse were presented in a different way. So, it is important that the handler effectively shows the horse to the evaluators.

For a horse breeding program the scores and comments for individual categories such as head, neck, fore and hind legs, are helpful guidelines for selecting a mate for the animal. If the head is of poor quality one can look for a mate with a very fine head or look for a mate that has improved the heads on offspring of other horses. If movement is very important, then one can look for a mate that has good movement. Perhaps more important, a mate can be identified that has transmitted good movement to offspring.

Horses that have been evaluated give buyers a better chance of owning horses with good qualities. Since there are no perfect horses, one needs to decide which faults can be tolerated to acquire the desirable aspects of conformation or performance one is looking for. A buyer can consider the professional opinion of the evaluators when deciding which horses to purchase.

The owner can use the official scores and comments of evaluated stock to promote their horses. Any owner or breeder can say anything they want to regarding the quality of their stock. The independent evaluation scores of the NFHR evaluators are a good basis to understand quality, performance, and disposition factors in a horse or a line of horses.