

# THE INS AND OUTS OF SALES PREP

*Veteran horseman Al Pike shares his wisdom about the process of getting a horse to the auction ring*

**BY DENIS BLAKE**



Every industry has its own set of unique terminology, and horse racing is no exception. You'll hear handicappers talk about superfectas and overlays, and breeders will discuss nicks and outcrosses. At an

auction, you'll hear about pinhookers and the repository. An outsider might have no idea what those terms mean, but "sales prep"—the process of preparing a horse for an auction—seems pretty simple,

right? Well, as any auction consignors will tell you, it's anything but simple.

As part of an effort to provide its members with information to help them succeed in the industry, the

Louisiana Thoroughbred Breeders Association presented a free webinar in July featuring Al Pike, one of the most experienced and successful horsemen on the auction scene. Pike, who runs Pike Racing with his wife, Salley, and son, Colt, sat down with LTBA past president and current board member Jake Delhomme and offered his advice and insight on several auction-related topics, from the steps involved to the preparation timeline to auction day.

Due to technical issues, only a portion of the webinar is available online through louisianabred.com, and Pike provided additional information to share with Louisiana Horse readers.

Pike, who was formerly based at Copper Crowne Training Center in Opelousas, Louisiana, recently relocated to Highlander Training Center in Sulphur Springs, Texas. A noted pinhooker, Pike has found great success in buying yearlings to resell for a profit as 2-year-olds. He's had multiple horses hit the \$1 million mark in the sales ring, and he sold the \$300,000 sale topper at this year's Texas 2-Year-Olds in Training Sale. And several Pike Racing consignments have found success on the track as well, such as Louisiana-bred millionaire Vicar's in Trouble, who sold for \$80,000 at the 2013 Fasig-Tipton Midlantic 2-Year-Olds in Training Sale and went on to win the Louisiana Derby (G2) and start in the Kentucky Derby (G1).

### **Timing is Everything**

Many variables can alter the timeline of getting a horse ready for auction, but in general it's about a 90-day process for yearlings. Weanlings, which are less common at sales, can be prepped in about 60

days. The longest timeframe—six months or more—is for a 2-year-old sale, because horses need to be broken and achieve a level of fitness to work at least an eighth of a mile at the under-tack show (and gallop out another quarter-mile). For a 2-year-old sale, which is generally held from late March until June, Pike likes to start with a yearling in September.

“In our program, we spend the first 30 days getting them broke, getting them used to the track and building up to a good gallop, the second 30 days is to put some miles on them and then the third 30 days we start doing two-minute licks.

“At the end of the 90 days, depending on the age and maturity and what they are showing you, then you start looking at what sale you might go for,” he continued. “We try to put them in the sale where they will bring the most money.”

After that first 90-day period, the horse might be turned out for a break, and then Pike said it's about another 90 days to get the horse ready to perform in the under-tack show, which is usually held at least two days prior to the auction.

For a yearling sale, it's all about getting a horse to look its best for potential buyers. You'll hear buyers and consignors talk about a horse being “dappled out.” But how is that achieved?

“Good horsemanship, good feed, good worming program and good grooms rubbing them,” said Pike about the approximately 90-day process for yearling sale prep. “If a horse is dappled it just means they are good and healthy and happy and things aren't bothering them, and that's what you like to see.”

### **Picking a Horse to Pinhook**

The term “pinhook” might be foreign to a newcomer to the auction game, but it can be one of the most lucrative scores. To put it simply, pinhooking is the process of buying a yearling with the intent of re-selling it as a 2-year-old, for a profit of course.

Pike specializes in pinhooking and offered some general advice for those looking to give it a try.

“You want an athlete, obviously, and something that looks like it will go quick,” he said about selecting a yearling to pinhook. “I gravitate to horses by young sires, because everyone wants to see what horses by those young sires look like, so that's half the battle right there because people will want to see those horses.

“With the proven sires, those are going to be expensive,” he added. “It's hard to buy yearlings by Tapit, Into Mischief and Gun Runner. To have a shot to make money, you have to sacrifice something, maybe with conformation or pedigree. Normally I have a lot of first-year sires because you are going to get people to come see them.”

### **The Costs Involved**

It can be a challenge to turn a profit in horse racing, and that's true whether you are a breeder, trainer or owner. It also applies to selling a horse at auction. Regardless of if you are looking to sell a yearling that you bred or are thinking about pinhooking, knowing the costs involved is the first step in formulating a plan. Of course, costs can vary depending on the consignor, and, generally speaking, expenses are less when prepping for a sale in Louisiana compared to Kentucky, Florida or New York.

“There’s a day rate, and I would allow at least 90 days,” Pike said about sales prep for a yearling. “It’s so important how they look at the sale, it’s kind of like a beauty contest. Trying to save a dime or two by sending them in late will bite you in the end because your horse won’t look as good as the competition.”

In addition to the day rate, which varies by consignor and region, there are other potential expenses, such as X-rays, shoeing and veterinary work to name just a few. The sale company will generally take a five-percent commission (and an entry fee), and the consignor also usually takes five-percent.

That can all add up to a significant expense, but sometimes it’s the little things that can make a big difference, like how a horse is presented at the sale. Established consignors like Pike might have dozens of horses at an auction, so the responsibility of showing the horse to potential buyers is handled by the consignor’s staff.

“My wife and I are fortunate enough to have a group of top-class people to help us at the sales,” said

Pike. “People at the sale are going through there trying to look at as many horses as they can, so you’ve got to make a good impression. If you’ve got some bozo holding your horse and not presenting him properly or setting him up, then they might not come back to look at your horse again. But if he sets him up and presents him well, maybe that horse gets on the buyer’s short list.”

### **Advice for Newcomers**

If you are thinking of sending a horse to the track to race, you’d probably take the time to interview a few trainers before deciding which one to trust with your equine investment. Pike advises doing the same when it comes to sales prep. He said it’s also important to work with someone you trust and to keep your expectations in check, because for every home run at a sale there is also a strikeout.

“It’s not cheap, and it’s not a get rich quick deal,” said Pike. “But when it works, especially with a 2-year-old when you have a sound horse and a fast horse, it’s a lot of fun.”

Again, just like with trainers at the track, you want to find the right consignor to fit your horse. If you are looking for a lot of back-and-forth communication, perhaps picking a consignor with the most horses in the sale is not the way to go. Likewise, a modestly bred prospect might not be the right fit for a consignor who sells mostly high-end horses.

“I’ve had calls out of the blue where people kind of feel me out, but I also want to know what kind of horse they have,” Pike said. “I don’t want to just take someone’s day money, so if I don’t think they have one that will sell well then I’ll tell them that.”

Like any aspect of horse racing, sending a horse to auction involves risk, but it’s the reward at the end that entices Pike and many others to put in the long hours and hard work with the hope of seeing the hammer drop as the auctioneer announces a big sale price.

“It’s like winning the Kentucky Derby when you sell one for a lot of money,” he said. “But it’s also like parachuting from 30,000 feet; it’s hard to hit the X.”

## **LTBA ANONYMOUS COMPLAINT LINE**

LTBA members may report someone violating the By-laws in reference to the domicile of mares in the state of Louisiana, by contacting LTBA Inspector, Mike Whitler. All calls are handled anonymously. You will not be asked for your name or contact number.

When the inspector receives a complaint, an independent investigation will be conducted.

Any infractions will be reported to the Board of Directors.

**Contact Mike Whitler, LTBA Inspector**  
**318-218-2921**  
**Fax 318-795-0888**