

HISTORY OF THE ARABIAN BREED

Article from the Arabian Horse Association – Arabian Horse Guidebook

“The Arabian horse – Steeped in adventure, legend and romance.”

DESERT BEGINNING

Between 25,000 and 40,000 years ago, the Arabian horse was clearly illustrated on the walls of caves that show the small, fine muzzle, pointed ears, deep cheeks, short back, slender limbs and dished facial profile which remain some of the most distinctive features of the Arabian horse. While its origin is lost in antiquity, many scholars and breeders agree that the Arabian horse is the same as its ancestors from thousands of years ago.

The first and most famous Arabian horse breeders were Bedouins, nomadic tribesmen that roamed the vast deserts of the Middle East. Breeding good horses was crucial to their survival and prosperity. Only the finest specimens could reproduce. Breeders concentrated on performance, selectively breeding certain bloodlines for stamina, soundness, speed, disposition and loyalty. They kept strict oral histories of pedigrees that were passed down from one generation to the next.

Bedouins prized mares above all possessions. Females didn't nicker when approaching enemy tribes. They carried their masters into battle with courage and pride, standing loyally by the fallen, leaving only when forcibly led away. No greater gift could be given than an Arabian mare and the value placed upon the mare led inevitably to the tracing of any family of the Arabian horse through the dam or female parent. Mare families, or strains, were often named according to the sheik or tribe that bred them, and some sheiks still maintain a herd of milking camels for their mares, feeding them fresh camel's milk and dates at sunset.

Close bonds of friendship developed between master and horse that gave the Arabian breed an innate desire for human companionship. They became beloved members of their nomadic families, gentle enough to share the desert tent.

Like a gifted child, the Arabian is intelligent and sensitive, eager to please and easy to train. While beauty and proud bearing have inspired poets and artists, it's the Arabian horse's stamina, heart, work ethic and versatility that have captured the attention of horsemen through the ages.

CAREFUL BREEDING

The Bedouins paid careful attention to breeding only the best to the best, keeping pedigrees pure and not diluting the genetics of their precious bloodlines. This concentration of genetics makes Arabian DNA “prepotent” or dominant in passing on the trademark characteristics of refinement, stamina, soundness and intelligence.

The tradition of improving a breed through the infusion of Arabian blood still thrives. In fact, the use of Arabian blood to strengthen other bloodlines has occurred so often throughout history that most modern recreational or “light” breeds such as the Quarter Horse, American Saddlebred and Morgan have been crossed, at some point, with the Arabian horse.

The purebred Arabian was the original racehorse, bred to withstand the toughest desert conditions. Its durability and heart were legendary, and the horse's reputation spread. In the 1700's, three Arabian stallions were imported to England and bred with Barb or Royal mares imported by Charles II. The resultant offspring became the foundation stock for the Thoroughbred breed. Over 98 percent of all modern Thoroughbred pedigrees trace back to two of these stallions. The intermingling of Arabian blood with the Thoroughbred breed was so pervasive, that the American Jockey Club continued to accept purebred Arabian horses in its studbook until 1943. Today Arabians race around the world, competing for more than \$5 million in purses every year in the United States alone.

"I have had several *Arabians*. To me, they are the utmost in grace, beauty and intelligence as well as a darned good friend to have around. Whether I am trail riding, cleaning stalls or giving her carrots, there is no place better to be than with my wonderful Arabian mare. She's my *best friend* and has kept me out of danger more than once." – Lynda Hamilton, Myles Texas

The popularization of Arabian horses in the United States began with the introduction of 45 Arabian horses from Turkey at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 that were eventually dispersed to breeders throughout the United States. The importation of 27 Arabians horses by Homer Davenport in 1906 precipitated the establishment of the Arabian Horse Club of America in 1908, and in 1909, the first stud book was published with 71 horses.

UNIQUE BLOODLINES

Unlike many breeds that originated in the United States, the Arabian horse is centuries old, its presence worldwide. From the late 1800's through the 1930's, breeders spanning the globe imported stallions and mares from Middle Eastern countries to develop strong national Arabian horse breed programs. Consequently, Arabian bloodlines are sometimes further delineated by the country of importation.

Crabbet horses are from the Crabbet Stud, an English estate owned by Lady Anne Blunt who imported foundation stock from Egypt in the 1800's. Her horses have influenced breeding programs in Australia, Holland, Spain, Poland, Russia and the United States. Horses with *Raffles, *Seraphix and *Skowronek in their pedigrees trace back to the Crabbet Stud.

Polish stud farms tested their stock on the racetrack before allowing a horse a place in the stallion or brood-mare barn. Poland produced Skowronek and exported him at 4 years old to the Crabbet Stud where he became an important breeding stallion. Poland has exported Arabians to the United States since the end of World War I, but the biggest influx came in the 1960's as breeders brought in greater numbers to develop their herds.

*Bask was one of the most remarkable sires to come to the United States from Poland, winning national championships in stallion halter and park and siring numerous horses with his great beauty and ability. The annual Polish sale at Janow attracts buyers from all over the world.

Mohammed Ali the Great, founder of modern Egypt in the 1800's, established one of the world's greatest Arabian stud farms with horses imported from Arabia. His descendant Abbas Pasha, the Viceroy of Egypt, built up a herd to more than 1,000 purebred Arabian horses. To qualify as a straight Egyptian horse today requires tracing lineage back to the Arabian desert or to the horses of Abbas Pasha.

Until the early 1900's, breeding was the domain of the royal family. However, the Egyptian Agricultural Organization now oversees the breeding, importation and exportation of horses. The Pyramid Society of United States, founded in 1970, pursues the preservation of this valuable pool of genetic bloodstock. The Egyptian Event, held every year, celebrates the Egyptian Arabian horse with a show, social events and seminars.

A band of Spain's government-owned horses and purebred Arabians imported from Poland, the Middle East, England, France and Argentina, formed the basis for the Spanish Arabian. The military used their mare band primarily to produce top stallions, leaving private breeders the task of producing good mares. The small number of horses in Spain and stringent culling left the Spanish Arabian with a concentrated gene pool that's exceptionally prepotent when outcrossed.

Although Arabians have existed in Russia as far back as the 17th century, actual breeding programs at the government owned Tersk Stud began in 1944. Horses were imported from France, England, Poland and German, with specimens selected on the basis of athletic ability and beauty. Russian horses are noted for their strong, balanced movement and classic conformation. Famous Russian imports to the United States include *Muscat, *Marsianin and *Padron.

In the United States, the term "Domestic" refers to horses born of animals that lived in this country for two generations whose lineage is not maintained as "straight" or "pure" in any direction. Famous Domestic stallions include Ferzon, Fadjur, Khemosabi++++, Abu Farwa and The Real McCoy.

Delving into bloodlines is a passion of many owners who become captivated with the romantic history of their own Arabian horses. The Arabian breed has endured through wars, political regime changes and geographical holocausts and holds the wisdom of the ages deep in its soul. To some, the horse stands as a piece of living history, honed to perfection through centuries of selective breeding.

BREED STANDARD

The Arabian horse's physical attributes result from its desert heritage, making it both athletic and beautiful. Its short, dished head and flaring nostrils allowed maximum oxygen intake. Long eyelashes protected eyes from sun, wind and sand. A long, arched neck kept the windpipe defined and clear to carry air to the lungs.

Well-sprung ribs and a deep chest cavity left plenty of room for lung expansion. A short back provided strength under saddle over long distances. Dense bone provided strong resilient legs. Large round hooves helped navigation on sand. A combination of harsh environment, long distance travel, combat, and scarce food and water created a breed with incredible stamina. Considered to be one of the most intelligent breeds, the Arabian possesses a long memory, quick comprehension, curiosity, sociability and loyal disposition.