

Paso Fino—The Horse South America Made

By ROBIN STANBACK

For 500 years a breed of horse set apart by an unusual gait and a certain presence has been selectively bred and perfected in the Western Hemisphere. Small in stature but massive in attitude, these horses possess a “Brio” which means a mixture of energy, arrogance, and fire with tractability. It is a perfect term to describe the Paso Fino, a versatile and willing equine companion, as at home in the show ring as he is on the trail.

Rick Meyer, president of The Paso Fino Horse Association, said, “So many people misconstrue the term “Brio.” They think it means spirited but, to me, that definition is incorrect. Spirited implies a horse that is not controllable. These horses have all the fire anyone could desire but combine that

sturdy but delicately gaited horse known as the Spanish Jennet. Mix the Jennet with a touch of Andalusian and the result was a horse fit for the discoverer and the conquistador.

Christopher Columbus brought the first horses to what is now the Dominican Republic on his second voyage to the New World. Hernando Cortez, Martin de Salazar and others like them brought their Spanish horses to serve as intimidators, transportation, and companionship during their conquest of Mexico, Cuba, the Isthmus of Panama and more. It was these horses, blending all the most treasured attributes of their combined backgrounds, that served as the ancestors of the modern day Caballos de Paso Fino, or, in English, the horse with the fine step.

It was this fine step that was the most valued attribute of the horses brought to the New World. It came courtesy of the Jennet and became the genetic stamp that transcended all the physical changes brought about by location and breeding practices. These horses possess a sedate walk and a canter but the Paso Fino does not trot. Instead, they perform an even, lateral, four-beat gait in differing speeds, the *paso fino*, *paso corto*, and *paso largo*. The gait is rhythmic, purposeful, balanced in flexion and synchronous front to rear which results in a ride unequalled for smoothness and comfort.

The *paso fino* is a collected elegant movement. Each hoof hits the ground independently. The forward power in the movement comes from the rear legs allowing for higher action from the front legs but, unlike man-made gaits, does not exhibit exaggerated leg action. The ride is so incredibly smooth that the demonstration used to display it is a rider carrying a glass of wine on his flat brimmed hat without spilling a drop.

Paso corto is aptly titled. In English the word *corto* means short. While the speed of this gait is faster than that of the *fino*, the *corto* sees the horse maintaining a collected carriage, moving in as smooth a fashion with short collected steps. The *corto* is the speed most similar to the trot and a well-conditioned Paso Fino can travel at the *corto* for hours covering miles of trails or multiple trips around the show ring.

The *paso largo* translates in English to long and



Working on the Pista to enjoy the sound of a perfect gait.

with a willingness and trainability that makes them exceptional animals.”

It was a chance mix of bloodlines that combined to produce this unique equine dynamo. With the Moorish occupation of Spain came a blending of the Berber horse, often called a Barb, which was a strong, compact, and durable animal, with the native Spanish stock. This combination produced a

again is aptly stated. This gait is an extended version of the corto and horses performing it can travel at incredible speeds while still maintaining a smooth, balanced ride.

The unique gaits of the horse make him suitable for many varied uses including trail riding, working livestock, endurance, and, for those individuals with exceptional carriage and presence, the show ring. But, according to Mr. Meyer, the show ring champions are also gifted with the ability to transcend the show ring and provide hours of enjoyment on the trail. He stated, "I have national champions in my barn that can win a championship on Saturday night and be trail riding on Monday. These horses truly offer something for everyone."

For the horse show enthusiast, competition in the ring provides the opportunity to showcase the "Brio" for which the Paso Fino is so highly prized. Novice riders and professionals have a wide range of classes that allow juvenile and aged horses as well as pleasure and high performance competitors to exhibit their style and grace. The Pista or sounding board is used to demonstrate to judges and a hushed audience the resonance and evenly spaced gait that is so highly prized. A true champion will provide a distinctive rhythm and cadence that is immediately rewarded by applause as gratifying to the horse as it is to the owner and trainer.

It is the proud nature of the animal that makes him as delightful a working horse as he is a show ring superstar. Paso Finos have been prized as gymkhana competitors, competitive trail horses, and combined driving contestants. Chris Cox owns the Outback Ranch, a training stable in Ocala, Florida where he is training two Paso Finos as rein-



with the fact that, according to one breeder, "these horses are what anyone would call very easy keepers," which make them animals that are as at home in the Pacific Northwest as they are in the southern climes of their origin. The breed registry contains horses from literally all over the world.

Mr. Meyer said, "Paso Finos are fast becoming a very popular breed for a number of reasons. They are versatile as well as expressive, talented, and intelligent. Our registry grew last year by 14% above even the natural attrition that occurs."

The registry currently recognizes over 28,000 horses with 2,115 registered in the last year. With over 500 years of breeding background, the characteristics of the breed are well defined. Paso Finos

Conquista de Plebeyo displays the temperament needed to work happily with her foal following behind.

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ing horses. He said, "Both of these horses are training well. They have a nice lope and are good minded. I think, they should do well." These horses are also valued companions on the working ranch and in bird dog trials. Combine this ability

can come in every equine color with or without white markings. The horses typically stand 13.3 to 14.2, making them an easy horse for mounting and dismounting and a highly valued lesson horse for those afraid of taller animals. They are well

balanced with an average weight of from 700 to 1,100 pounds. The shoulders slope into the withers that are defined but not prominent. A great depth through the heart and a chest of moderate proportions make the Paso Fino a sturdy and pleasing to

straight, sound and flat. Standing slightly under in the rear is typical. The hooves do not show excessive heel, are proportionate in size, and are well rounded. Typically they are quite tough and many do not require shoes. Show horses, by neces-

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the eye equine. The midsection of the horse is as balanced with a wide, well-sprung rib cage, a topline that is somewhat shorter than the underline, and a back that is strong and well muscled. The hindquarters have a slightly sloping croup with well-rounded hips, broad loins and strong hocks. The tail sets comfortably and is carried gracefully when in motion.

A Paso Fino has the type of strong, sturdy legs and hooves a horse with such a graceful gait would require. The muscles and joints are well defined but not exaggerated. The bones are

sity, are shod but lightly so.

Paso Finos are gifted with a fine expressive face above a gracefully arched medium length neck. The neck is angled to allow for the high head carriage that is a hallmark of the breed. The head is neither small nor large with a straight profile. The eyes are a distinctive feature in that they are large, expressive, and alert. They are wide spaced below comparatively short, slightly curved, and closely set ears. The overall impression is one of keen intelligence and grace. The mane and forelock add to this expressiveness with their full and luxurious nature.

The disposition is defined by the registry as being one of an “extremely willing horse that truly seems to enjoy human companionship and strives to please. Spirited and responsive under tack; sensible and gentle at hand.” It is this disposition combined with the balanced attractiveness of the animal that adds to the overall impression that this is a horse that knows he is unique and is proud of it.

“It’s the temper and energy of these animals that makes them such stand outs,” added Cathie Seimer, a long time owner, breeder and exhibitor of Paso Finos. She rides the only stallion on the breed association’s drill team. She stated, “I ride my horse with mares and geldings. He is unflappable. We have participated in many events where the distractions would frazzle any other horse, but these Paso Finos are solid as rocks. Nothing bothers them.”

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The prized “Brio” in evidence at Asociacion de Criadores de Caballos Criollos Colombianos Asdesilla, Medellin, Colombia.

