

The American Quarter Horse Epitomizes Versatility

BY ROBIN STANBACK

It has been called the working man's horse. Mention the American Quarter Horse and pictures of a strong, athletic animal charging after a cow leap to mind. Perhaps it is the image of a reining horse sliding to a halt or the working hunter easily clearing an obstacle or the trail horse stoically handling rocky terrain that people imagine. While all of these are well within the realm of their capabilities, none was the original purpose for the breed's development. The Quarter Horse evolved from the mix of equines brought into the New World that was to become the United States to be a betting man's horse, one that could run straight and true over a short distance.

In the early 1600s the English and Irish settlers brought with them a wide mixture of horses including Arabians, Turks, Barbs and Thoroughbred types. The Quarter Horse evolved from this mixture to be the first true example of the American melting pot. The result was a compact, heavily muscled creature that could work fields, pull wagons and carry his owner into town. It was in the villages that match races became popular. The short streets provided some of the first tracks and the quarter mile eventually became the favored distance. The first Quarter Horse races were held in Enrico County, Virginia in 1674. By 1690 the races had

become so popular that the winners of some of them were said to take home the deed to the losing owner's plantation or homestead. The horses that proved to be the swiftest were known as Celebrated American Running Horses.

As the settlers expanded their conquest of the New World they brought along their horses and other livestock. Here the horses became known by other names usually associated with stallion lines. An early sprinter by the name of Steeldust lent his name to a legion of "Steeldusters." One of his line, Billy, was the popular sire of a host of "Billy horses." "Copperbottoms" were named after the favorite horse of the legendary Sam Houston. It was on the plains of West where the "cow sense" of Quarter Horses became evident. Their calm disposition and ability to maneuver on the fly made these horses exceptional for working cattle. Selective breeding practices enhanced this ability to the point that today American Quarter Horses can be found on every continent as valued working partners of cattle ranchers.

Racing a quarter mile and working cattle are just two of the American Quarter Horse's abilities. Their calm nature makes them extraordinary pleasure mounts and children's horses. It is probably one of the breed's most important characteristics and one that has made their registry the largest in the world. At the end of 1998 there were a total of 2,892,527 living horses registered with the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) with 125,308 new horses having entered the ranks during that year. The Association, which was founded in 1940 in Fort Worth, Texas, has over 300,000 members and a youth association with more than 30,000 members.

To be registered horses or foals must be the product of registered American Quarter Horse dams and sires. There is also an appendix registry for foals with one numbered American Quarter Horse parent and one Thoroughbred parent registered with the Jockey Club or more distant Thoroughbred heritage such as the product of a Quarter Horse parent and an appendix parent. Quarter Horses are heavily muscled, strong horses with broad chests, straight backs and powerful hindquarters. The breed is so well known for the

Smooth Eyed Sonny, an American Quarter Horse stallion better known as "Smackers," and his friend Miss Ashton Krumnow.



Photo by Chief Danny Krumnow



Photo by Catherine Bishop

The American Quarter Horse is well suited to be a trail horse for riders of all ages and abilities.

strength and musculature of the hindquarters that many photographs of these horses are taken from the rear. The average height is between 14.3 hands and 15.3 hands. They possess a heavy bone structure and a low center of gravity. The registry is very particular about the coloring of the horses. An American Quarter Horse is allowed only limited white markings on the face and on the legs of breeding horses with slightly more white allowed on geldings. There are thirteen recognized colors with sorrel being the most prominent; the remainder are bay, black, brown, buckskin, chestnut, dun, red dun, gray, grullo, palomino, red roan and blue roan. There are no Quarter Horses registered as being white.

The registry is populated with the kinds of horses and people that have come to be synonymous with the American West. The first horse accepted into the registry was Wimpy, a stallion bred and owned by King Ranch Quarter Horses that won the title of Grand Champion

Stallion at the 1941 Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show held in Fort Worth, Texas. King Ranch was founded by Captain Richard King who purchased a 15,500-acre parcel of land that had been called the Wild Horse Desert but was actually part of a Spanish land grant known as the Rincon de Santa Gertrudis. A riverboat captain, King was an adventurer who founded a dynasty that would produce two breeds of cattle, a Triple Crown winning Thoroughbred and some of the world's greatest American Quarter Horses. Wimpy followed his winning show career by siring 170 registered foals among which were an AQHA champion, four Performance Registers of Merit and a number of halter and performance point earners. A statue of Wimpy stands at the entrance of the AQHA headquarters in Amarillo, Texas.

King Ranch also produced two renowned cutting horses, Mr. San Peppy and Peppy San Badger. A cutting competition requires a horse and rider to "cut" a cow from a herd and keep that cow from returning to it. King Ranch produced two of the best. Mr. San Peppy won the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) Open World Championship in 1974 and 1976, the same year he won the AQHA World Cutting Championship. He was the first horse ever to win both titles in the same year and the first horse to win \$100,000 in open cutting competition. Peppy San Badger won the NCHA Futurity and went on to capture the 1978 NCHA Derby.

Up until the start of the Breeders Cup races in the early 1980s when Thoroughbred racing jackpots soared to greater heights, Quarter Horse racing's All American Futurity held at Ruidoso Downs in New Mexico was the richest race for horses. Today the pot is still a handsome one with horses competing for \$1 million. There are over 11,000 AQHA sanctioned races held each year. One of the greatest American Quarter Horse racing horses was the great Refrigerator. He had career earnings in excess of two million dollars. The gelding won 11 stakes races in his total of 22 wins in 36 races. He was the only horse to capture three runnings of the Champion of Champions race and holds the record for 400 yards in the All American Futurity race. Another champion racehorse, Dash For Cash, was recorded at speeds of 55 miles per hour. He won 21 of 25 starts and placed second in the remaining four races. He was given the title of World Champion Racing Horse in 1976 and 1977. Dash For Cash also sired one AQHA Supreme Champion, 954 Registers of Merit, 16 world champions and 142 stakes winners. All told, his offspring won \$37 million.

American Quarter Horses have also been Hollywood

movie stars. The equine version of the Academy Award, the AQHA's Silver Spur Award, was won by Plain Justin Bar. Justin, as he is known at his home on Redstone Farm in Pilot Point, Texas, is better known to the movie going public as Cisco, the brave mount of Captain John Dunbar, Kevin Costner's character in "Dances With Wolves." More recently, an unregistered American Quarter Horse, Hightower, played the lead role of "Pilgrim" in the Robert Redford film "The Horse Whisperer." The movie featured 17 American Quarter Horses in its herd. Mr. Redford rode Rambo Roman throughout the movie and another well-known equine star, Docs Keepin Time, played the role of "Gulliver" in the movie. Docs Keepin Time has also portrayed Black Beauty in the Warner Brothers rendition of the classic tale. He has also been the star of Busch Beer commercials, music videos and the American television series "The Black Stallion."

When they are not racing, cutting cattle or portraying horses on the silver screen, American Quarter Horses can be seen in a wide variety of events. There are over 2,300 AQHA-approved shows held each year. The breed makes exceptional barrel racers, pole benders, reining horses and polo ponies - all sports requiring athletic, maneuverable horses. American Quarter Horses have been members of the United States and Canadian Olympic Teams where their ability to maintain a calm demeanor is almost as valued as is their athletic ability. The breed is highly prized as an outrider's horse at Thoroughbred tracks throughout the world for their disposition and fast reaction time.

Senior Marketing Manager of AQHA Programs Stacie Higgins stated, "These horses are well known for their athleticism and versatility but of all their wonderful characteristics, perhaps the greatest is their personality. It is this trait that makes them such adaptable horses. They not only adapt to the task at hand but to their rider's ability. We have had many people who have told us that their American Quarter Horse is their best friend. They are very knowing and caring animals."

The adaptability of the American Quarter Horse has been showcased in the 1990s by the AQHA's participation as a Silver Level Sponsor of the World Special Olympic Games. The AQHA since 1991 has worked to provide the horses used by the Special Olympic equestrians. At the 1995 Special Olympic World Games held in Connecticut 260 representatives of the breed were gathered to allow special Olympians the opportunity to compete. Connecticut native Erin Flanagan was on hand to help with the horses. She explained, "Not only are these horses the perfect size for our programs but they have the most forgiving natures. The AQHA was phenomenally helpful during the 1995 Games when they helped us to assemble the large number of horses we needed. These horses had to accept riders who had a widely varying degree of ability and they could not have been better

chosen. They have the most forgiving natures."

Ms. Higgins attended the recent 1999 Special Olympic Games held in Raleigh, North Carolina. The AQHA had organized the use of 140 horses from North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia and Virginia to have on hand the necessary amount of horses for the Olympians. She explained, "People brought their horses to Raleigh for these athletes to use for two weeks. We paired the horse and rider and gave them a week to get to know one another. Then the athletes participated in events for another week. The horses were incredible. They seemed to know they had someone very special aboard."

"Brains and beauty in one package - now that's a horse for me," stated Sharon Ohler, a Central Kentucky owner and breeder. A middle school band director, Ms. Ohler praised the breed for being "solid and dependable. I've done just about everything with my Quarter Horses. I've bred and shown, trail ridden and trained them in my own back yard. They have incredibly giving personalities."

Whether in the show ring, rodeo arena, riding program or back yard, the American Quarter Horse has endeared himself to legions of fans. The breed goes far beyond a working man's partner or a betting man's pleasure to be a shining example of why horses and humans have formed such a lasting attachment. ☺



Photo by Alfred Janssen III

AQHA World Champion and Superior Halter Horse Freeway Foxy.