

Majestic Friesians!

By: Erin Bisco

Rearing up on his hind legs, Goliath strikes, smashing open the church doors to stride into the interior. As the massive black stallion slowly trots down the wide aisle of the church, knees high, his iron-shod hooves ring out in a heavy, measured cadence. Silky midnight mane flows from his thick, arched neck; a long tail trails behind like a banner made from the night sky. His armor-suited rider sits easily in the saddle as Goliath seems to float in ebony splendor. The horse and knight stop before the altar to stare down contemptuously at the quivering Bishop before them. With a boom and clatter of shod-hooves, the doors open once again and a grey horse and rider trot elegantly in, prepared for battle. Yet for all the second pairs' terrible beauty, neither can match the grace, power and magnificence of Goliath and Navarre as they charge to engage in combat.

For anyone who has seen the 1985 movie "Ladyhawke", starring Rutger Hauer and Michelle Pfeiffer, this scene starring the Friesian stallion, Othello, is one of many that has captivated viewers. Most people had never seen a Friesian, much less heard of them before the movie put them in a starring role. However, Othello's beauty and grace moved many to seek out more information about the Friesian breed.

Seven years ago, images of Othello as "Goliath" on-screen set the stage for future Friesian owners Lori Brock and her husband, Steve, to sell all their Quarter Horses and embark upon a new journey: Brock's Majestic Friesians. After watching "Ladyhawke", Lori was captivated and wanted to know more about the horses listed in the movie credits. The Internet provided an untold wealth of information as she began researching the history and the characteristics of Friesian horses.

History

Friesians are one of Europe's oldest domesticated breeds. Their origins are in the country of Friesland, one of the eleven provinces of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, dating back to 500 B.C. Throughout the years, the Frisian peoples developed the Friesian horse. These horses were used in all aspects of life, however were prized as both gaming and warhorses. Over time, with a small influence from other breeds, Andalusians in the 16th and 17th centuries and Oldenburgs after WWI, the Friesian came to be what it is today.

Through time, they were used across Europe for knights, cavalry, farming, coach horses and to improve other breeds. It is believed that Friesians influenced the Old English Black Horse, the Fell Pony, the Norwegian Dole and others. Having the breed characteristics of the ability to trot fast, high knee action, a heavy mane, long flowing tail and fetlocks at the feet of the original forefather of the horses, it is possible that the Morgan Horse is of Friesian descent. Records show that even as early as the 1625, Friesians were being exported to the future United States of America. This movement into the U.S. has continued on through the centuries to hold a small, but impressive presence representing the Friesian which continues to grow today.

Due the mechanization of farming and transportation, the population of these horses began declining rapidly, nearly becoming extinct in the early 1900's. Farmers were unable to afford to keep their horses as pets while purchasing tractors and trucks. Before WWI, it is reported that there were only three Friesian stallions left in existence. The influence of Oldenburg blood in the 1940's has helped to regain their numbers to the present day.

Breed Characteristics and Registration

Friesians are most well known for their coal-black coloring, thick feathering on the legs and rich, flowing manes and tails. Manes and tails are never cut, often times reaching the ground. The breed has a high neck carriage which is carried rather vertically and is low-set. White markings are not allowed except for a small star which may be accepted. These horses have a mild temperament. They are reported to be kind, gentle, willing, and exceptionally versatile. Friesians are used for light carriage horses, as jumpers, dressage horses, saddle seat, as well as english and western riding styles.

Mares are presented with their weanling foals at a studbook inspection called a Keuring. Judges fly in from the Netherlands to judge all Friesians to decide what foals are awarded Premium status. They are judged mainly on conformation and gait. At three years of age, the horses are once again judged to decide whether or not they are judged as top stock. Mares and geldings are awarded Ster status if they are Premium status. This Ster quality ranks the mares, or geldings, in the top 3-5%. Once Ster ranking is awarded, the mares, and geldings, cannot be stripped of this ranking.

For a stallion to be awarded breeding status, they have to be awarded 1st and 2nd Premium status as foals. At three years old the stallion candidates are re-inspected; subsequently awarded stallions are then shipped to the Netherlands. Once they are conditionally approved at Central Approving in Amsterdam, the horses go through six months of training with handlers. The stallions are then bred for two years to produce foal crops to be inspected. If the foals are not what the Dutch Registry, KFPS, believes an improvement on the breed, the stallions are stripped of their Dutch breeding approval. Horses that are denied or stripped of breeding status in the KFPS are eligible for registration in the German Registry. A Dutch registered Friesian cannot be crossbreed, where as the German registered can. Due to the more strict regulations, Dutch-bred horses are worth quite a bit more.

Brock's Majestic Friesians

Brock's Majestic Friesians is located in Leroy, MI, in Northern Michigan, near Cadillac. Originally, the farm raised Quarter Horses. With the purchase of the first Friesian mares, the farm underwent a radical facelift and got a name change as well. After extensive research, Lori and Steve decided that they wanted to start with imported Friesian breeding stock from the Netherlands. As the gene pool is fairly small in the U.S., importation of Dutch lines opens the pathway for improvement and reduces the risk of inbreeding.

Presently, there are eighteen horses on the farm, including three stallion candidates. All of the Friesian breeding stock mares on their farm are imported from the Netherlands, allowing the Brocks the ability to breed to any of the stallions in the U.S. without crossing bloodlines. The mares are all Ster quality and registered in the Dutch Friesian Horse registry. This ranking lists their mares in the top 3% in the world.

Predominantly, the mares are bred with frozen semen imported from stallions in the Netherlands. However, there are several foals on the farm that are by Anton of Friesian Dreams Farm in Franklin, WI. The next foal crop will be the farm's fourth. Most foals are sold before they go to their second Keuring as three-years old to be judged for Ster ranking.

One of Lori's favorite horses is her two-year old stallion candidate, Prodigy. Prodigy's dam is Brock's Ster mare Wietske, by Tsjalke who is one of the top stallions standing at stud in the Netherlands. He has a great deal of character. While very full of himself, this young stallion is always ready to be loved and give hugs. Being completely all about him, Prodigy loves to work the camera and once ignored a trainer in favor of his own reflection in a mirror. Lori has high hopes that the Keuring in 2008 will move Prodigy into the ranks of young stallions flying off to the Netherlands to continue his quest for breeding status in the Dutch Registry.

Friesians are a family affair at Brock's farm. Lori shows the horses in hand and under saddle and both her husband and oldest son enjoy carriage driving. Friesians are very gentle and their youngest enjoys spending time in the stall with Lori when she is grooming and braiding. Their younger children both look forward to the day when they, too, can ride the Friesians, just like their mom. In fact, Lori's middle child wanted to ride a Friesian so badly, she took all the black shoe polish in the house and dyed her Welsh pony black. Needless to say that while black shoe polish doesn't wash off, the pony didn't stay black, instead he faded out to a lovely shade of purple over the summer.

Lori loves to answer questions that someone may have about Friesians, the horses she describes as "Poetry In Motion". Farm tours for others to get a chance to meet her horses are also available. Requests for information about the farm can be made by phone or email, contact information is provided on their website: www.majesticfriesians.com. She encourages people who are interested in learning more about Friesians to look them up on the Internet, as there a wealth of knowledge is listed. The Friesian Horse Association of North America, FHANA, is a subsidiary of the KFPS and is an excellent source of information on the Friesian Horse.

References:

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www.majesticfriesians.com

Interview with Lori Brock

About the Author

Erin Bisco is a Manual Medicine Technician, Certified Equine and Human Massage Therapist currently residing in Michigan. She has been practicing for two years and owns White Willow Therapies, LLC, an onsite manual medicine therapy business for horses, dogs and people. www.whitewillowtherapies.com. She is also a freelance writer and has authored articles for *Horses Magazine* and *At A Gait Magazine*.