

Friesian Fever @

By Petra van den Heuvel for the Driving Digest, Number 58, 1990/2

(Reprinted with permission from the Driving Digest Magazine, www.drivingdigest.com. This interesting early telling of the Friesian Horse story contains many details not found in other histories, in addition to the commonly portrayed backdrop of crusaders and knights, etc. - all set against the period of increased growth and fascination that was 1990. Even though the article is now over 10 years old, and many procedures have evolved or locations have changed, it really does show that the Friesian created quite the "fever" in many countries - and continues to do so in 2002. - Ed.)

For several years now, an ancient horse breed from Europe has really hit North America. It's the Friesian horse: totally black, with impressive mane, a lovely small head, feathered fetlocks and a splendid trot.

Origin

The history of the Friesian horse goes back to the end of the Middle Ages. In the 12th and 13th centuries it was already named for the main area where it was bred, Friesland, the northeast province of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Friesland was quite isolated at that time but famous for the knights who took part, with their black Friesian horses, in the Crusades.

Throughout the centuries to come the people of Friesland kept their horses pure, with no significant influence from other breeding. That lasted until the war against Spain, 1568-1648. During those 80 years the Spaniards fought with complete armies against the willful Dutch, who did not want to be part of Spain but free under the reign of Prince William of Orange, ancestor of present Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.

The main influence the Spaniards had in that period, however, was on the Friesian horse. Thousands of their Andalusian horses were left on the battlefields. The Dutch used the Andalusian stallions (some confiscated from Spanish earls and dukes) for breeding with their own Friesian mares.

Nowadays the influence of the Andalusian horse can still be seen. Not in the color of the Friesian which remains completely black, but in the small head with big black eyes, the rich manes, tails and leg feathers, and the trot with high action.

After the Spanish left, the Friesian people again kept their horse breed pure. But two centuries later there was turmoil over the breeding. In 1879 a group of breeders decided to start a Studbook for the Friesian horse (and also one for the famous Friesian cow). Difficult times arose around this ancient breed because in the decades prior to 1879 crossbreeding was "high fashion," using Friesian mares with outside stallions, such as the Oldenburger. Only a small number of truly purebred Friesians were left. The group that started the Studbook saved the purebred Friesian horses, for only they were allowed to be registered in the Studbook.

King William III granted permission for the Studbook. A keen horseman himself, he loved the "art of trotting" and that is a special ability of the Friesian horse. The King stimulated many trotting competitions by giving personal prizes, often gold and silver whips, for the best trotting Friesians. In fact, it had been through the influence of his grandfather, King William I, that the Friesian horse became founder of the famous Orloff trotter, now mainly found in Russia and Eastern Europe. This is no surprise because the King was married to Grand Duchess Anna Paulowna, daughter of the Czar of Russia.

Growing Interest

In the period between 1879 and 1910 the popularity of the Friesian horse was on the rise. Used for trotting and used for the famous Friesian sjees (a high two-wheeled carriage, translated "gig" or "chaise"), the horses flourished. But then disaster loomed.

Due to difficult economic times in Friesland, the breed was, cruelly said, a luxury. And so the population went down, this time drastically. In 1917 there were only three stallions accepted for breeding left and a small number of mares. But a new group of friends of the ancient breed stood up and kept it alive.

At the same time, local agriculture was active and the Friesian was transformed to a typical horse to be used for work on the many farms in Friesland. The breed changed type - no longer the elegant, high-stepping charming black horse, it became heavier, more solid and with more flesh on the body. What stayed were the typical characteristics: the small head, swan-like neck, black color and the leg feathers.

Real lovers of the breed still used their best horses for trotting classes with a single or pair of Friesians to the sjees. In 1937 a riding association was founded at Huisterheide, called "De Oorsprong."

The members used the Friesian after work on the farms for riding under saddle. And they still do.

Quiet Period

The years between 1920 and 1960 were a quiet period for Friesian breeding and the Studbook. Purebred Friesians numbered about 1000 to 1500 horses and almost no one outside the province of Friesland knew of their existence. The Studbook directed the breeding, members had their annual shows watched by interested people from the province, and that was that.

But the granddaughter of King William III, the then Queen Juliana, did not forget the black Friesians. She became Patroness of the Studbook in 1949, the year she ascended the throne of the Netherlands, and made the Studbook at its 75th anniversary a Royal Studbook; a title seldom granted.

Trouble Again

Yet again there were hard times to come for the breed. By the 1960's the mechanization of agriculture was complete. Times were changing as combines and tractors replaced the horse for farm work. Prices were extremely low for horses, fillies and colts. Within a few years the Friesian breed was decimated. The population fell to about 500 by 1967, counting stallions, mares, geldings, young ones, old ones.

Crusade

Seven hundred years after the first crusades to the Holy Land, another crusade took place in Friesland. Members of the riding organization De Oorsprong decided that they had to save the breed. Together a group of breeders and friends, led by the president of the Studbook, Jhr. C. van Eysinga, undertook with 16 Friesian horses a crusade throughout the province of Friesland. Much publicity came along during the week that they traveled with their black horses. They were received in nearly all important cities and many people in Friesland became aware of what they would lose if they continued to neglect their own Friesian horse.

Within a few months the Studbook gained hundreds of members and the provincial government decided to give a firm financial injection. Again the Friesian horse survived a major disaster.

Growing to Enormous Popularity

The moving history of this ancient horse shows that even when severely threatened to the point of near extinction, the breed has always survived. Within 20 years after the worst decline in

its history, the Friesian horse lives now in one of its most glorious periods.

Friesians increased from that poor 500 in 1967 to more than 5200 today (*This is the figure for 1990 – ed.*). Not only in Friesland, far from that, but spread all over the Netherlands and much of Europe. There are now Friesians in West Germany, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Great Britain and Sweden. And the breed also went worldwide, crossing the Atlantic by plane to the United States and Canada and by boat to Australia.

Combined Driving Starts A Boom

It was the new branch of the equestrian world, the FEI four-in-hand driving competitions beginning in the early 1970's, that was a major factor in saving the breed.

Tjeerd Velstra, director of the Dutch Equestrian Center at Deurne, needed horses for training lessons and for a four-in-hand competition team. Velstra remembered the beautiful black Friesians from the province where he was born. He bought six, trained them and took his team to driving events in the Netherlands and across Europe. That was the start of the "big boom." Within a few years there were no less than seven competitors driving Friesian four-in-hands.

Everywhere they showed at events, the black ones attracted the eyes of drivers and spectators with their impressive exterior, the waving manes, tails and feathers, and excellent trot. The breed is notably reliable in driving, with a nice temper and fine character. It was a horse that many spectators wanted to have for their own.

Handling The Popularity

The Studbook (Het Friesch Paarden-Stamboek) office in Leeuwarden, capital of the province of Friesland (*now stationed in Drachten – ed.*), was flooded with questions from people who wanted to know where they could buy a Friesian. Soon four new breed associations (a club of breeders in a certain region) outside Friesland were founded in other parts of the Netherlands. In West Germany the first foreign breed association was founded in 1978, followed by similar organizations in France, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark, and more recently, North America.

Some great public relations for the breed came when actor Rutger Hauer rode a Friesian horse in the film *Ladyhawke* (Warner, 1985).

How The Studbook Works

Since 1879 the Studbook has registration records for every Friesian horse among the membership which means the whole family of every Friesian can be traced from the start. The Studbook keeps different registers for mares, stallions and geldings with specific rules for registration.

A mare enters the Studbook register when she is three years old. She will be judged by a Studbook jury, presided by one of the inspectors, to see if she is good enough to enter. She then becomes a Studbook mare, receiving her official number and the letter "F" on the left part of the neck. *{All branding was ended by the European communities in 2001 - ed.}* The better mares (about one-third of the mares judged) become Star mares (FS). Besides excellent exterior conformation, the mares also have to show excellent stepping and trotting. The judges are very strict about that. And the very top of the mares can reach the predicate Model mare (FSM), in general, not before they are seven years old. Very seldom, a younger mare becomes Model. At the moment there are about 50 living Model mares within the Studbook.

For stallions, registration is even more stringent. There is a very strict system of selection. Only about one out of 300 colts reaches the status of "officially registered and accepted for breeding." The stallion prospects are brought in their third year (or at four or five years, at the owner's discretion) to the Central Stallion Show at Leeuwarden, every February *{Every January for three days at present - ed.}*. Before they are allowed to enter the show, a semen evaluation is conducted.

During the two-day show the judges watch and select the young stallions. In 1989, 67 stallions were entered, 13 of them were finally selected. Two weeks later this group went to Ermelo for a 50 Day Central Test in which they are trained in driving, riding and main tests on character, temper and behavior. At the end of the Central Test, they do their exams. An ultimate condition is that the basic movements in stepping, trotting and canter must be positive. *{This test is now held at Drachten. See the "News From the Netherlands" in this issue for a comparison to present day procedures - ed.}*

From this group of 13 in '89, seven were admitted with their official Studbook number in the Stallion Register. Then they are allowed for use in breeding. If a member of the Studbook should breed an unaccepted stallion to his mares, no Studbook papers are given. And a Friesian horse without the official papers is simply no Friesian horse. *{After 1990 the Studbook had to accept, by European law, all purebred Friesians into the Studbook, so the*

Bijboek - what we call the B-Book - was instituted - Ed.}

Strict Standards

It might seem a very strict system maintained by the Friesian Studbook. But in view of the directors it is the only way to keep quality high, especially in a period when everyone wants to have a Friesian horse. Another point is that in one way or another, all Friesian horses are related to each other. To keep negative inbreeding effects as low as possible, a system of breeding advice is important. The use of artificial insemination is being considered and may soon give the possibility of breeding mares in, for instance, North America to stallions in the Netherlands and vice versa.

The Friesian Magic

The ancient Friesian combines show and achievement. It is an all-around horse with an impressive appearance.

In driving the Friesian is used in classes for single, pair and tandem, all to the traditional Friesian sjees. The breed is also ideal for pair and four-in-hand competitions or just for pleasure.

As a riding, dressage under saddle is currently very popular. About six of the 34 stallions accepted for breeding in the Netherlands are now used in the highest class for dressage competition, class Z.

And, of course, Friesians are favorites in exhibitions. In the Friesian Quadrille, eight Friesian sjees pulled by pairs drive the traditional patterns of the Quadrille. The Friesian Ballet features 12 ladies in authentic Friesian costume on their unsaddled Friesian horses. Famous European circuses such as Knie and Strassberger use Friesian stallions in their performances. The long teams canter before a mailcoach driven by Piet de Boer who set a world record with a team of 22 Friesians.

But most of all it is the horse itself. The charming black Friesian, dating back centuries with that brilliant trot, flowing feathers and nice character. It's something special. And if the "Friesian-flu" has infected someone, there is no cure. You want to have one for yourself. And you want to be part of that doted family all over the world, all connected with the old Royal Friesian Studbook, preserving the breeding of the most wonderful horse of them all: the Friesian.

Petra van den Heuvel is a resident of Friesland and board member of the Het Friesch Paarden-Stamboek.