

Friesian horse in detail (1)

The Koninklijk Friesch Paarden-Stamboek is the second largest horse studbook in The Netherlands. Many Dutchmen own a Friesian but also outside the Netherlands the Friesian breed is enormously popular. Exterior and character traits clearly have a big attraction. But how do you know what is and is not desired in a Friesian? And what makes a Friesian a Friesian? In the series 'Friesian Horse in Detail' every facet of the Friesian horse is explained. This first part covers the history of the Friesian horse.

The Friesian horse is a time-honored horse in use



FRIESIAN HORSE IN DETAIL

That the Friesian horse has served us humans for many centuries is known from old documents. Since the keeping of time the Friesian horse was used as a war horse (1). Already in Britain there were Frisian troops. In the fourth century the English writer Anthony Dent described their presence by Carlisle. They rode their own horses. Presumably in both cases it concerns Frisian mercenaries with Friesian stallions. Some of these horses stayed behind and influenced local breeds.

Text: Marja Teekens • Translation: Anneke van den IJssel

Anthony Dent and other writers reported that the Friesian horse is the forefather of both the English Shire breed as well as the Fell pony. William the Conqueror (1) used horses in the 11th century that bore great resemblances with the Friesian breed. Of this era various depictions are known with knights riding Friesian-type horses. During the crusades and later during the 80 year war between The Netherlands and Spain the Friesian breed was most likely influenced by Arabian and Andalusian horses. The first written proof of the name 'Friesian horse' is seen in writings from the German elector Johann Friedrich von Sachsen in 1544. He traveled on a Friesian stallion to the Reichstag in Spiers (3). Three years later the elector rode the same stallion during the battle of Muhlberg. He was already spotted by Emperor Charles the Fifth from afar. The etching of stallion Phryso (1) from 1568 owned by Don Juan of Austria in Napels is well known with many Friesian enthusiasts. In the 17th century, the Friesian horse was well represented at various riding schools where the art of haute école classical dressage was practiced.

Limited

The use of the Friesian horse was in the 19th and 20th centuries more or less limited to what currently is the province of Friesland. In the rural areas of Friesland the Friesian horse was mainly a symbol of wealth and was mostly used to take the wealthy farmers to church. In addition the horse was used for entertainment in trotting races on short tracks and under saddle.

Traditionally the horse was then ridden with only a small orange blanket on its back. During that time the Friesian horse was most likely used in the breeding of the Orlov horse and the American trotters. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century a difficult period followed. The Friesian horse had to compete with the heavier horse breeds. The dancing 'show horse' of the wealthy farmers was less suitable for the heavy work. The farmers eventually switched to heavier breeds or crossed the Friesian horse with them. This almost proved fatal for the Friesian breed.

In café De Drie Romers in Roordahuizum on May 1, 1879, the Friesch Paarden-Stamboek was founded (4). The founding of the new studbook stimulated the owners to register the remaining Friesian horses but still the

popularity of the heavier horses, the so-called 'bovenlandse'/upland horses, kept plaguing the Friesian breed. In the beginning of the 20th century it quickly went downhill again. In 1913 there were only three older studbook stallions left available for breeding (4).

Expertise

Luckily there were people in Friesland who wanted to save the breed from extinction. They brought new life to the breeding of the horses by expertly purchasing and raising still present Friesian purebred stud colts of sufficient quality according to a policy plan. The policies were successful and the Friesian breed was saved (4). Among others stud farm Stoeterij De Oorsprong, founded in 1885 in Huis ter Heide by the Van Eysinga family, played an important role (2).



The Friesian as luxury driving horse.

FRIESIAN HORSE IN DETAIL

The Friesian horse has in addition to a fantastic exterior a personality that is characterized by friendliness, intelligence, adaptation, and an enormous amount of willingness to work for their human companions. Especially this personality made it that throughout history there have been people who would do anything for the Friesian horse.

Supporters of the upland horses were often equally harsh in their opinion about the Friesian horse. The Friesian 'danced' too much in front of the plow and wasted energy. In all reality the people who preferred the uplanders were somewhat right but they did not know the history of the Friesian horse. Also the deep connection between human and horse like that between the Friesian horses and their owners as is so often seen (3) was underestimated. After 1913, there was no choice left: during the agricultural phase the Friesian had to compete with the uplander. In order to perform the heavy labor in the field the horses were bred for strength instead of luxury. The Friesian horse became therefore a bit smaller and heavier in conformation. That is how the type of horse came to be that is currently less desired. Studbook and breeders want to nowadays return to the original luxury and long lines in conformation (4).



...as an agricultural horse....

Promotion

In the 1960s a crisis in breeding followed. Farms mechanized; there was no more use for horses in agriculture. Most farmers did not have the money to keep a horse just for fun, which made it that many horses disappeared from the farms. In 1965, there were only 500 Friesian mares registered with the studbook (3). Also in the 1960s enthusiasts came to the rescue of the Friesian horse. They put the spotlight on the breed with, e.g.,

people who were not raised with horses. The riding club L.R. De Oorsprong crusaded through the province of Friesland in 1967 to promote the Friesian horse. From March 28 through April 1, this parade of enthusiasts rode their Friesian horses from Huis ter Heide to Workum (2). That this promotional tour was effective was evident from the swift increase in popularity of the breed in the following two decades. Many people discovered the wonderful characteristics of the Friesian breed and used it for many purposes of use. In 2007, over 40,000 horses were registered with KFPS and annually some 7000 breedings are registered. •



Foto: Jacob Melissen

.... and a modern sport horse.'

Sources.

- 1 Het Friese Paard/The Friesian Horse, Ir. G.J.A. Bouma, E. Dijkstra, and Dr. Ir. A. Osinga.
- 2 Friese stamhengsten deel I/ KFPS stallion book, E. Dijkstra (quote by Dr. Geurts).
- 3 Text R.J. Zethoven, former KFPS board member.
- 4 Beoordelen van het Friese paard/Inspecting the Friesian Horse, put together by P. de Boer, S. Minkema, and A.M. Smith.