

In August, we got great press from Bridle and Bit and also the PA Equestrian. They did a great job. You can follow the link or read on below.

<http://www.pennsylvaniaequestrian.com/news/perfect-horse-0809.php>

From the Click of a Mouse to the Perfect Horse



August 2009 By *Suzanne Bush*

Let's say you're a restless equestrian, who has been an enthusiastic rider for most of your life. You're a realist, but can't give up the romantic notion that the perfect horse for you is out there, just waiting for you. Somewhere. But how do you find that horse? You could read lots of books about horses. You could talk to horse experts. You could go to horse shows and racetracks and rodeos.

Or you could do what Lynn Kelley did. "I went to the internet and typed in all the words that I thought would make the perfect horse and this horse came up closest," she said. Kelley's perfect horse, it turns out, is a Mangalarga Marchador, a versatile breed of farm horse prized in its native Brazil for its spirit, intelligence and calm temperament. "I had never heard of the breed. I have a lot of horse books, but never saw anything about these."

While Kelley was falling in love with these exotic Brazilian horses, a Pennsylvania horsewoman named Signa Strom was casting about for new adventures in riding. "I had grown up with horses and had done a lot of riding as a young adult. And then I didn't have horses for all of my adult life until two years ago." Strom, who lives in Lebanon, PA is a consultant specializing in web design and internet marketing. "In preparation for getting back into horses I started taking lessons and looking at the various sorts of competitions available to me," Strom explains. "I ran across some information on endurance riding and it looked interesting to me."

The Perfect Endurance Horse?

Strom had always loved riding, and as a child she dreamed of living out west and just riding her horse everywhere, so the idea of endurance riding spoke to that inner child, the romantic part of her personality. "I knew pretty quickly that it was something I wanted to get involved in. The idea of riding long distances at faster speeds than a walk was intriguing." She was riding a friend's horse, just to polish her riding skills, and she bought a two-year-old unbroke Spanish mustang as an endurance prospect.

She realized pretty soon that the mustang was not going to be the right partner for her. "In the meantime we had purchased an appaloosa for my husband to use in endurance. She was a great horse, but he and she didn't hit it off." Nevertheless, he did ride the appaloosa in an endurance competition, Strom says. "I was jealous because he had a horse and I didn't. He came back and said 'you're going to love this sport!'"

The perfect endurance horse was out there somewhere, and Strom was determined to find it. "What I was doing was reading every horse magazine I could get my hands on, just because I was trying to decide what breed of horse was going to be good for me if I was going to be doing endurance. I was looking for something that was going to be competitive with the Arabians, but didn't have the high energy that I believed Arabians had," she says. "I've since learned that not all Arabians are crazy."

The Perfect Match, Hatched on the Internet

Kelley's internet search rippled through her life in profound ways, and led her and her husband to an extraordinary adventure. She had been the equestrian in the family, but her husband John got interested in horses when he retired and they moved out west from New England. "He took up riding, and started on an old Missouri fox trotter," she says. "I never did anything with gaited horses, but thought I should give it a try."

Once her internet search steered her in the direction of the Marchadors, she began researching the breed in earnest. They bought one from a Brazilian family that lived nearby. They fell in love with the mare, and when Kelley's husband outgrew his 20 year-old fox trotter, they started looking for another Marchador. "It's kind of like the truth is stranger than fiction," Kelley explains.

They went to Brazil. "We went to the national show, toured Brazil, looked at a lot of horses and didn't buy anything," she says. "We just weren't ready to buy." Back home, they met another Brazilian, who offered to introduce them to some of Brazil's top breeders of Marchadors. "We went back and met a veterinarian who is also a judge of Mangalarga Marchadors," she says. "He gave us lessons every day on what to look for. At the end of that trip, we brought back nine

horses, a lot of them pregnant to great stallions in Brazil.”

A New Venture Begins

Kelley and her husband bought their first Marchador in 2001. With the horses they brought back from Brazil they launched Summerwind Marchadors, and are dedicated to introducing the Marchador to equestrians in the United States.

“I actually stumbled across an ad for the Mangalarga Marchadors in one of the magazines I was reading,” Strom says. “And when I read the name I thought what in the world is that? Nothing in the ad gave me any idea of what kind of horse it was, and my curiosity got the better of me.”

Strom liked what she read about the Marchadors in the ad for Summerwind Marchadors, and contacted Kelley. “It was just absolute dumb luck that I ran across them. But as I was looking into the breed I knew immediately that this was the horse for me. The more I learned, the more I knew that I wanted one of these horses.”

Is it possible that both Kelley and Strom had the same streak of romanticism? Or is this breed so special that it inspires incredible leaps of faith?

The First Marchador in Pennsylvania

“I acquired Azenha sight unseen. I had never even ridden a Marchador at that point, but from everything I knew she seemed ideally suited,” Strom says of her mare Azenha de Maripa. “I got her the beginning of October and she had not been worked at all that year, so she was out of shape but she was a lovely, lovely, lovely horse. Her personality was awesome and she wanted to do everything I wanted to do.”

Throughout October, as Strom worked with Azenha, she wondered how the mare would actually do in an endurance competition. “In the beginning of November I entered her in my first endurance ride—the Mustang Memorial in New Jersey,” Strom says. “We had a blast! Considering the fact that we were both new to the sport, it was amazing that we finished first—we came across the finish line first.” In the sport of endurance, crossing the finish line first doesn’t necessarily mean that you finish first, though. American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC) rules state that the first horse whose pulse rate recovers to 60 beats per minute or less is the winner. Strom and Azenha actually finished in third place.

“It was a limited distance ride. The idea was conditioning and experience and introducing new riders to the sport of endurance,” Strom says. “I’ve done three or four endurance rides now, and it’s still competitive, and I’ve been absolutely thrilled with this Marchador. She wants to be first, but she’s manageable. She doesn’t get totally out of control like some of the horses I’ve seen at these rides.”

Intelligent, Sensible, No Nonsense

Both Strom and Kelley use the same words to describe the Marchador: versatile, calm, intelligent. Kelley believes the unique characteristics of the Marchadors are inextricably bound to the people of Brazil. “The people are warm and friendly. Their horses are exactly like them. They’re gentlemen and gentle ladies. The horses reflect the people, I think.” She says that careful breeding will result in retention of these characteristics, and that is at the heart of Summerwind’s philosophy.

She says that there are breeds of dogs that become the “flavor of the month,” and everyone gets into breeding them. Soon the things that made the breed special get lost in the race to breed and sell more dogs. “We haven’t screwed up the breed yet. I compare it to working dogs. These are working horses in Brazil. They’re no nonsense. They’re very quick learners. They just don’t have a lot of issues in their head. They’re very sensible.”

Strom says that there’s no end to the things that Azenha wants to learn. “We’ve been taking cross country lessons and some basic Dressage lessons and she’s a natural. She excels in both of those disciplines.” Although she had never ridden a gaited horse before, she said the transition was virtually seamless. “They’re gaited horses, but that’s secondary to the fact that they’re athletic, versatile horses. They’ve been bred for their versatility, their work ethic and their conformation,” she says. “The Brazilians wanted a horse that was smooth to ride, because they’d be in the saddle all day. They’re not gaited in the sense that Americans think of a gaited horse. It would be better to say that they have a smooth way of going.”

Marchadors Have a Friend in Pennsylvania

In less than a year, Strom has become another devoted fan of Mangalarga Marchadors. “Once you start working with the Marchador,” she says, “my personal opinion is that you’ll never go back to any other breed.” Her experience with Azenha has convinced Strom that she has found the perfect horse. “I’m actually selling the mustang and the appaloosa,” she says. “And I should have another Marchador coming in August.”

Kelley reiterates that careful breeding is the key to retaining the qualities that people love about these horses. “You can find a great individual in lots of breeds. This is one breed that I haven’t found a bad individual. In Brazil they inspect the horses before they’re allowed to breed, so it’s very consistent quality in the breed.” There are only 200 Marchadors in the United States, but the growth of sports like endurance riding, and an aging population of equestrians who are looking for a smoother ride might bring these horses to more stables soon.