

The Foundation of All American Gaited Breeds - The Mountain Pleasure Horse

Tuesday 17 January 2012

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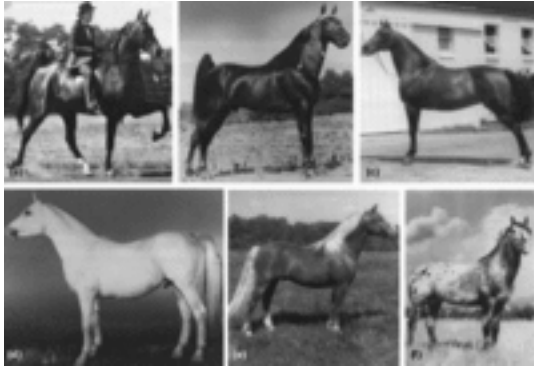


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The Mountain Pleasure Horse is the gaited breed that existed in Kentucky over 160 years ago and from which breeders developed Tennessee Walking Horses, American Saddlebred Horses and Rocky Mountain Horses. Long before these other gaited breeds, the Mountain Pleasure Horses quietly existed and were being bred on the steep hillsides in Eastern Kentucky, where they were being selected for gait and disposition with an eye towards working in the fields and for riding. They were known as Mountain Horses or Kentucky Saddlers or Country Saddle horses and were the pride of the region for their hardiness, smooth gait and sweet, willing dispositions. But just as importantly, these rugged, reliable, smooth-gaited horses came to be the foundation of other breeds in the United States.

There are several breeds of Mountain Horses that have been developed in the Appalachians of Kentucky and sorting them out can get confusing when all the breed association sites say much of the same thing, but in different ways. For example, in writing this article, I came across this comment from the Mountain Pleasure Horse Association (MPHA) website: "Horses registered in the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association are often referred to as Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horses. Several gaited breeds of horses are included in the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association's registry, the Mountain Pleasure Horse being one of them. Whereas, the Mountain Pleasure Horse and the Rocky Mountain Horse are "breeds" of horses, the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse normally refers to the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association registry. [...] many horses registered with the Mountain Pleasure Horse Association are also doubled registered with the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association." However, on the website of the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association (KMSHA), it states that "the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse and the Spotted Mountain Horse breeds, each with their own distinctive characteristics and genetic DNA markers, are recognized by the University of Kentucky, Equine Parentage Testing and Genetic Research Center as their own unique breed of Horse."

The Mountain Pleasure Horse breed existed 100 years before the existence of the Rocky Mountain Horse, even though neither registry existed until 1989. Blood typing research by the University of Kentucky has shown that the Mountain Pleasure Horse is the parent stock of all other American gaited horse breeds, including the Rocky Mountain Horse, Tennessee Walking Horse, and American Saddlebred. In 1994, Brereton C. Jones, Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, recognized the Mountain Pleasure Horse to be the oldest gaited American breed of horse through a Commonwealth of Kentucky Proclamation based on this blood typing information.

There are 17 different genetic markers which, along with their variations, total 125 specific items that indicate EXACTLY the type of horse that the blood sample came from and the parents it had. A chart has been developed by Dr. E. Gus Cothran, geneticist in charge of blood typing - parentage verification at the University of Kentucky's Pathology Department, that clearly shows the linkage between all the gaited horse breeds and the full chart traces all the way back to the Przewalski horse. Additional information, generated by worldwide testing, has outdated this particular chart for some breeds, but the Caspian is shown to be the ancestor to all modern horses, with the exception

of the Przewalski.

Sam Tuttle tapped into the Mountain Horse Heritage by crossing native Mountain Pleasure Horse stock with Tobe, a stallion carrying an unusual chocolate color, and his descendants eventually spawned the Rocky Mountain Horse Association breed registry, and the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse.

But the key difference between the Mountain Horse registries is the genetic foundation. Fewer than 17 percent of the foundation horses of the Mountain Pleasure Horse Association carry any trace of the Tobe bloodline, which is also present in the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse. Aside from the chocolate color, there are also various physical characteristics and slight variations in gait among the horses descended from Tobe bloodlines that generally are not present in the Mountain Pleasure Horses.

But in spite of the Mountain Pleasure Horse being behind so many other breeds, it is a rare breed in itself. There are approximately 3,000 Mountain Pleasure Horses registered in the United States and it is considered rare enough that the American Livestock Breed Conservancy has listed its status as "Watch", along with the Rocky Mountain Horse.

The Mountain Pleasure Horse ranges from 14.2 to 16 hands and weighs 900 to 1100 pounds. The head should be medium sized with a broad face which is neither dished nor protruding. The breed has bold eyes and well shaped, medium-sized ears. The neck is gracefully arched and medium in length with a naturally proud carriage. The horse should have a wide and deep chest and an ample mane and tail to round out the appearance.

Any coat color is acceptable, including bay, black, chestnut/sorrel, roan, gray cremello, buckskin, palomino, and chocolate and in some lines, golden-coated horses predominate. While there is no restriction on white markings, spotted coats are not encouraged by the MPHA for either breeding or showing, but color is not considered a criterion of quality either.

In showing the Mountain Pleasure Horse, two gaits are used in the ring. The Mountain Walk is a flat walk, such as a trail walk and is used for entering and exiting the show ring. The Mountain Pleasure Gait is a lightly collected, low, moderate rack, evenly spaced four-beat, square, lateral gait with moderate speed and extension and without exaggerated knee or hock action. The gait can be heard as the horse moves such that one can count four distinct hoof beats that produce a cadence of near equal rhythm, and the gait is initiated by the hind leg. It is a natural pleasure gait such as a single-foot or mountain running walk, though neither is more desirable than the other as long as it is performed naturally and consistently. The gait is smooth and easy to ride, and from the saddle it feels relatively action-free with only a slight front to back motion. It is a surefooted gait because each foot moves independently and separately -- the horse always has one foot on the ground and three in motion.

Unlike some gaited horses, no action devices, aids or harsh training methods are necessary or allowed. The gait is natural and is bred into the horses through many generations of selective breeding.

Today, the MPHA registration books are closed. Any offspring resulting registered Mountain Pleasure Horse parents is eligible for permanent registration provided that parentage is confirmed by blood typing. In addition, all horses submitted for registration must demonstrate that they possess gait by sending a videotape to the MPHA.

The Mountain Pleasure Horse has a superb memory and once trained, remembers their lessons well. Veteran trainers are amazed at how fast this breed can learn. But then, the Mountain Pleasure Horse is a very intelligent horse with a willing disposition that also loves attention.

Read more at <http://www.horseclicks.com/general-equine/the-foundation-of-all-american-gaited-breeds-the-mountain-pl/63#7HwpjhIpsFHGmeLO.99>