

Mountain Horse “Breeds”...What’s the Difference??

First and foremost, I NEVER wanted to delve into this subject. Period. Folks are extremely passionate about their chosen “breed” and are often offended if the history and heritage is portrayed in a way that might seem to diminish the breed. However, I’ve had many, many folks ask me over the years, and I believe it’s a common and legitimate question which SHOULD have a simple answer. It does NOT.

As a lifetime and 3rd generation breeder/owner of the Mountain Pleasure Horse (Old Kentucky Saddler), I was around when all three of the original registries (MPHA, RMHA, and KMSHA) were formed. Keep in mind, all 3 registries were formed in the late 1980’s, however, the horses, themselves, are much older than any of the registries.

Both my father, Ronnie Little, and my grandfather, R. T Little, were good friends with many folks from all three registries and well acquainted with the foundation stock registered into each one. With these things in mind, here is my answer, to the best of my knowledge and experience of the differences in the Mountain Horse breeds.

The Mountain Pleasure Horse (historically called the Old Kentucky Saddler):

This is the oldest of the mountain horse breeds. Based upon research done by Dr. Gus Cothran on the MPH at the University of Kentucky, the MPH was placed on the genetic equine family tree as “ancestral” to the other gaited breeds created in America, making it the foundation stock to all other American gaited breeds, with over 200 years of traceable history. It’s important to keep in mind that the Mountain Pleasure Horse “breed” existed some 100 years before the existence of the Rocky Mountain Horse as a “breed” and 190+ years before the KMH “breed”. In fact, Kentucky governor Brereton Jones, in September of 1994 recognized in his official proclamation:

"The Horsemen of Eastern Kentucky developed a type of horse, known as the Mountain Pleasure Horse, to be smooth of gait, gentle of disposition, willing to work and sure-footed as necessary for mountain terrain; and this Mountain Pleasure Horse has been carefully and closely bred for over 160 traceable years along the original Kentucky mountain bloodlines; Blood typing research by the University of Kentucky has shown the Mountain Pleasure Horse to be the parent stock of American gaited horse breeds," including the Rocky Mountain Horse and Tennessee Walking Horse."

The Mountain Pleasure Horse / Old Kentucky Saddler is the rarest of the gaited American breeds with only around 2500-3000 living today. They are listed as **critical** with the Equus Survival Trust.

All color coats are acceptable except spotted. The deep, golden palomino is one of the prized colors, but sorrel, gray, black, buckskin, liver chestnut, cremello and blue roan are also found. The MPH/Old Ky Saddler range from 14.2-16 hands, but generally are larger in stature (15+ hands), thicker boned and have a more relaxed, low breaking, ambling gait.

The Rocky Mountain Horse:

Around 50 to 55 years ago, Sam Tuttle set out to develop a distinct breed. He tapped into the Mountain Horse Heritage, crossing the native Mountain Pleasure mares with "Tobe", a stallion carrying an unusual chocolate color, and his descendants spawned the Rocky Mountain Horse breed.

One of the key differences between the two breeds (RMH/MPH) is genetic foundation. Fewer than 17 percent of the foundation horses of the Mountain Pleasure Horse Association carry any trace of the "Tobe" bloodline, while the majority of Rocky Mountain horses carry a 70% or higher "Tobe" influence.

In the Rocky Mountain Horse, the chocolate color, especially with the flax mane and tail, is generally preferred. Besides the chocolate color there are, to those who study closely, various physical characteristics and slight variations in gait among horses descended from Tobe bloodlines that generally are not present in the Mountain Pleasure Horse.

The Rocky Mountain horse is generally smaller in stature and slightly more animated in its gait than the MPH.

The Kentucky Mountain Horse:

Horses registered in the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association are referred to as Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horses. When the registry was first formed in 1989, it was not intending or claiming to be a "breed", but rather a performance registry where gaited horses, which did not comply with the height or color standards of the other breeds, could be registered and also compete in a show circuit.

Many different gaited breeds have been included in the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse Association's registry: the Mountain Pleasure Horse, Rocky Mountain horse, Tennessee Walking horse, Paso Fino, Missouri Fox Trotter, were just a few. Many "grade/non-registered" gaited stock were also included.

Whereas, the Mountain Pleasure Horse and the Rocky Mountain Horse are well documented, "breeds" of horses, the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse functioned strictly as a registry until a few short years ago when the books were "closed" to allow for their recognition as an actual "breed". This would basically make the KMSH "breed" less than 8 years old. There is still an appendix program which allows for "grading up" to occur, which does not apply for Mountain Pleasure Horses/Old Ky Saddlers, which must be "parentage verified" from 2 purebreds before registration can occur.

The KMSH encompasses the largest gene pool of the three and therefore exhibits a larger variety of type within the breed due to the influence of multiple breeds.

Multiple Registrations of Mountain Horses:

The reason for multiple registrations in many of these horses, which is confusing and, honestly, simply inaccurate, is multi-layered. You obviously cannot be both a Poodle AND a Golden retriever, hence the new "breed" of "Goldendoodle". The practice of allowing horses to be registered with multiple registrations occurred early on in the Associations' conceptions, and unfortunately was, no doubt, somewhat money driven to gain members as well as horses for the "new" organizations. Also, the DNA testing and genetic differences weren't discovered until several years later, and no one wanted to "un-register" horses that had been previously registered. I believe most of the breed differences are obvious enough now, after several generations of breeding, that most folks can just look at a horse and know it's breed. And that's how it SHOULD be, you shouldn't have to "guess" if a horse is a certain breed or not, you should be able to tell by physical characteristics or you probably don't really have a true breed after all.

Summary:

In summary, the Mountain Pleasure Horse / Old Kentucky Saddler is the heritage breed at the foundation of all the Mountain Horse breeds at 200+ years. The Rocky Mountain Horse is a distinct breed, carefully developed for certain characteristics of color and conformation around 50 years ago. Since the early breeding program of the RMH was heavily dependent on the Mountain Pleasure Horse, the two breeds might be considered close "cousins". Finally, the Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horse, the most recent one to close books in an attempt to stabilize as a true breed, is around 8 years old and contains a multitude of gaited horse breeds in its background.

It is also worthy to note that although Blood typing/DNA testing has been performed on these horses for several generations, only the MPH required "proof of parentage" blood typing and later, DNA, since its inception. This basically means that just because a horse may show parentage on its official papers, until the time proof of parentage DNA testing occurred, that was simply a name written down by the horses owner/breeder, and should be considered as "hear-say" not actual fact. This is the least known and most crucial information needed to determine true parentage of a breed. Unfortunately, that makes the Mountain Horse Breeds unable to trace their ancestry beyond 3 generations with true accuracy. That's not to say that historically that information should be discarded or ignored, but also shouldn't be claimed as "fact" in the association registries.

My sincere hope is that someday soon, equine genetics will evolve into such an accurate science that we will no longer have to guess how our beloved breeds actually developed. Until that time, I'd say to everyone with a horse/breed they love...strive to be the very best breed ambassador you can be and appreciate the passion each person/Association has for their

chosen breed or breeds. In the end, we are all just HORSE lovers and strive to be the best partners for our equine companions we can possibly be. *Robin Little-Basil*, Pres. MPHA