

WHY AND HOW TO BUY A DESERT HORSE IN THE UNITED STATES

by Stephanie Sears

"God then took a handful of wind and created a horse to whom he said: I name and create you Arab..."

In the desert sand where I stood looking at the three pyramids of Giza, a sudden gust whirled up a rider and his silvery mount. The horse reared like some mythical image before galloping off with his rider into a realm of freedom and romance. No more perfectly in my view, could the term Faras Atiq, horse of the desert, apply more than to the Arab horse I admired that day in Egypt.

However, I found the exotic Arabian abundantly available in the United States. Approximately,

571,000 living Arabian horses are registered in the United States, compared with only 300,000 registered elsewhere in the world.

Organizations such as the Arabian Horse Registry of America, the International Arabian Horse Association, the Arabian Horse Trust, the Pyramid Society for Egyptian Arabians form a kind of university for the student of Arabian horses, providing statistics, research facilities and scholarships. Since 1995, systematic marketing has made it easy to purchase and sell Arabians in America. Some 1,196 Arabian stud farms across the States are listed in the Arabian Farm Registry. Programs like 'Discovery Farms' or 'Mentor

Network' give the opportunity to see Arabians in one's geographical proximity and to question knowledgeable breeders. In addition to eighteen regional Arabian shows, four main Arabian events gather the best Arabians in the country. In February, the Scottsdale show; in June, the Kentucky event for straight Egyptians; in August, the Saskatchewan Canadian Nationals; in October, the US Nationals event, alternating its location from year to year between Albuquerque and Louisville. Specialized publications provide the prospective buyer with numerous horse-for-sale advertisements. But the quickest and simplest way to find an Arabian horse is by typing on the Internet the keyword 'Pets'.

Before buying, warns a professional appraiser of Arabians, decide whether you want a horse for pleasure riding, competition, or breeding, though none of these activities is incompatible with another. In any case, the purchase of an Arabian will prove to be a practical choice. His purchase price and keep make him more approachable than the English thoroughbred. By choosing a small breeder's undervalued horse whose value may be enhanced by marketing, you can make a sound financial investment. Variations in price depend on bloodlines, producer and performance records, but sometimes, alas, also on fads. A purebred may be found for near to nothing up to several million dollars. A 'nice' pleasure Arabian horse may cost no more than \$500 to \$800, but a 'good' pleasure horse ranges between \$25,000 and \$75,000. Good breeding stock colts and fillies sell for \$15,000 to \$25,000, though prices for colts vary to a greater degree. Mares of excellent pedigree fetch higher prices than 98%



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of stallions which are not top grade; in a span of five to ten years, mares will prove to be better investments by producing three marketable offspring. The winner of an important Endurance competition will be worth \$100,000 to \$500,000. The winning yearling of the most important Halter event of the year will fetch the highest value of all.

If the buyer has insufficient time to prospect himself yet has in mind to make a good investment, he should hire the expertise of an appraiser to locate the undervalued horse. This can avoid the frequent mistake made by people who first buy an average quality Arabian for pleasure riding and later decide to breed him, believing that they will improve on his inferior quality by breeding him to a higher quality horse, a policy which regularly fails to produce a much superior animal.

If the buyer decides to enter his horse in a competition, it will be necessary to prepare him with proper nutrition and training. A yearling participating in a Halter event will have to wait until he is three years old to enter a Performance event, thus giving the owner the chance to double his horse's value by entering him in both types of competition in succession. Turning one's Arabian into a breeder or a competitor also has tax advantages that sometimes allow breeding and showing related costs such as board, transportation, hotels, to be deducted.

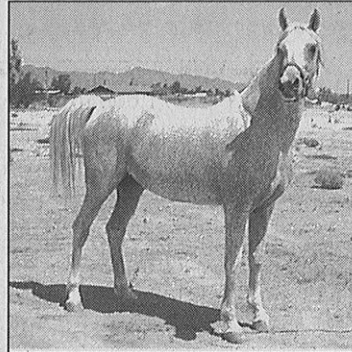
But Americans seem equally susceptible to less material benefits in owning an Arabian. The tie between Arabian horse and owner is unlike that of any other breed. The horse's intelligence and sweetness of character create a more intimate relationship. This explains why Arabians have become 'pets' in America, a term unsuited to the heroic image of the Arabian seen at Giza. Nevertheless, in America, where he infrequently lives in the desert and not in nomadic style, he retains his denomination of Arabian and is both pet and a heritage of legend.

Is this 'pet' the same horse of spirited and unaffected beauty which I saw in the Egyptian desert? While undeniable parallels can be drawn between the Arabian's value to the Bedouin and to his American owner, American admiration for the Arabian has sometimes drifted into certain excesses. In both societies, the Arabian is synonymous with freedom and escape, though in America, both terms connote recreation rather than tribal divisions and regional warfare, as was the case in Bedouin society. George H. Conn's comment on the importance of Bedouin warfare for the preservation of the Arabian's qualities should be noted here: "Wherever he is the property of the warlike and nomad tribes of the desert who use him for their migrations and raids, he is still of great value and of the purest breeding... when he belongs to sedentary tribes, more or less attached to the soil, he is little more than an object of trade..."

While in both cultures, the Arabian has been closely associated with human society, sharing of the Bedouin's life never entailed any pampering of the Arabian. In the United States, anthropomorphizing of the Arabian some-

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times seems inordinate. One breeder describes the Arabian as 'liking to express opinions,' as being 'interested in human opinions.' Comparisons are made between a fashion model's youthful beauty and the Arabian's physical symmetry which is, upon occasion, similarly enhanced through cosmetic and even surgical modifications.

Loyalty, physical endurance, wealth, prestige, even divine protection were expected from the Bedouin horse. Samely, the American owner expects his Arabian to be loving, versatile, even angelic. These qualities correspond to a national moral and athletic ideal and are asserted in the marketing process, partly to excuse the breed's small size and to interpret in positive fashion its exoticism. But the American Arabian may enjoy an air-conditioned stall supplied with music, a swimming-pool, the regular services of a chiropractor and acupuncturist; he can expect toys, birthday cakes, special shampoos... all of which affiliates him more with a dolled-up beauty pageanteer or with a swaggering over-achiever in an affluent family existence than with a desert war horse.

American breeders will argue that their Arabians' endurance is tested as much as that of their Bedouin forebears through the stress of training and performance com-

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petition. The international renown of the American Arabian, exported to countries as far apart as Taiwan, Germany and Brazil, and also respected in the Middle East, supports this argument. Middle-Eastern breeders have found it difficult to acquire pure-bred horses at home where, for racing purposes, Arabians were crossed with thoroughbreds, and have imported from American Arabian stock to rescue their native breed.

How has such a drastic turnaround occurred?

After all, Arab breeding began some two thousand years ago or more, somewhere between southern Turkey, the Euphrates, the coast of Egypt and southern Arabia.

The relation between the Arabian horse and the new world has been going on for longer than one might think. Arabian horses arrived in America with the Spaniards in the mid-sixteenth century. Later on, changing the lives of Indian tribes such as the Cayuse, the Comanche and the Nez-Perce, these horses returned to a nomadic life in the Great Plains similar to that of their forefathers in the Arabian desert.

American Arabian breeding began in earnest when in 1893 at the Chicago World Fair, Arabian horses from Turkey were shown. Of the forty-five horses exhibited, five had off-spring in America. The mare Nejdme and the stallion Obeyran became the foundations of the United States Arabian stud book, first published in 1908.

The early American breeders Horatio Davenport, Spencer Borden, W.K. Kellogg, introduced the breed

mainly from stock bought from the great northern Arabian breeding tribe Anazeh, said to be descended from Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar, and the first individual to domesticate the Arab horse. Though the Ismaelite origin is refuted by some historians in favor of King Solomon's stables, one can see how either of these backgrounds would contribute to the aura of quasi-sanctified antiquity enjoyed by the Arabian in America.

Over some ninety years, American Arabian breeding acquired all bloodlines: Egyptian, Crabbet, Polish, Russian, Spanish. Knowledgeable breeders such as W.K. Kellogg paid little heed to Arabian strains whose specific physical differences had been associated with particular tribes in the heydays of Bedouin life. They favored conformation according to American demands. The American Arabian became taller, smoother-bodied and longer-necked than his counterparts in other countries.

During the 1960s, boosted by Federal tax advantages, the Arabian's reputation soared as a financial investment. In a country lacking both antiquity and an aristocracy, ownership was attracted to the ancient lineage of the breed's blood lines. Arabian horse ownership grew, and breeding to meet demand resulted in some cases in the loss of 'desert type.' Some American breeders counteracted by breeding 'straight' Egyptian Arabians with a stark-looking head and a smaller frame.

But overall, the horse's athleticism was still overlooked.

Federal tax laws changed disadvantageously in the mid 1980s. To remain financially viable, American breeders began to emphasize their horses' athletic versatility and endurance through racing, reining, jumping and long distance events.

In 1997, American Arabian breeding distinguished itself by refusing the World Arabian Horse Organization's (WAHO) definition of purebred which it believed to include cross-breds. Since its expulsion from the WAHO, the United States has signed separate international trade agreements with Jordan, Brazil and Canada.

To conclude, while some American Arabian owners do seem to have misinterpreted the qualities reflected in the Arabian's beauty, American Arabian breeding, on the whole, continues to maintain and improve the breed's excellence. The names of American-bred star stallions and mares are internationally referred to and inscribed in the historical progression of Arabian horse breeding. Through all his geographical displacements and sociological nuances, the Arabian continues to embellish and improve human society, aesthetically and morally, whether eastern or western. □

