

From Arabian to American Saddlebred

A history of the horse in five breeds

South Africa has a rich variety of horse breeds with many fascinating stories. This month, MARKtoe! brings you a brief history of the five most common and iconic. Whether you ride every day or all horses look alike to you, we guarantee that you'll learn something surprising!

By Anna Mouton

Although horses were key to the rise of civilisation, they were domesticated comparatively late. Our ancestors already had dogs, pigs, cattle, sheep, cats and chickens by the time they started keeping horses in about 3500 BC. The first people to breed horses lived on the Eurasian Steppe in the area of present-day Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Horses were initially tamed for meat and perhaps milk, but soon enough people started using them to carry stuff and then later on, themselves.

The first horses to reach South Africa were delivered by Jan van Teylingen on behalf of the Dutch East India Company in 1652. For the next hundred years, all the horses brought to the Cape came from the East and were of Arabian or Persian origin. In 1778, the first European breeds were introduced and once the British held the Cape, English thoroughbreds began arriving.

Drinkers of the Wind

The Arabian is one of the oldest and best-known horse breeds. Arabians are easily recognisable by the concave profile of their face and their high tail carriage. They are small – 14,1 to 15,1 hands in height, weighing 360 to 450 kilograms – but very tough. Arabians have a higher bone density than other breeds, as well as sound legs and short, broad backs. This gives them greater strength than many larger horses and has contributed to their dominance of endurance races.

We have the prophet Mohammed to thank for the Arabian horse. Mohammed realised the importance of horses in warfare and he established horse-breeding as a religious duty. There is a legend that he kept a herd of horses away from water for seven days. When they were let loose to drink, he sounded the call to battle. Five mares responded and turned away from the water. It is said that all Arabians descend from these five mares.



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The Arabian horse spread through Asia and Europe after the death of Mohammed due to Islamic conquests. And wherever they went, they won admirers. Egypt was the first major center for breeding Arabians outside Arabia. While campaigning in Egypt, Napoleon was so impressed by the horses of his opponents that he imported Arabians to France and rode them for the remainder of his career.



Although Arabians were among the first horses to come to the Cape, the earliest Arabian stud was only established in 1910 in the Colesberg district. Serious breeding began a few decades later and horses were imported from England and Egypt. The Arab Horse Society of South Africa was founded in 1961. According to their records, there were 490 active breeders as of May this year.



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The Sport of Kings

Picture a racehorse and you probably think of a thoroughbred. The breed was developed in the late 17th and early 18th centuries by crossing native English mares with stallions imported from the East. There is a common misconception that these stallions were Arabians and that the thoroughbred is therefore founded on the Arabian. However, recent genetic studies have shown surprisingly little Arabian influence on the thoroughbred breed.

Genetic evidence suggests that thoroughbreds were in fact descended as much from Turkoman and Barb bloodlines as Arabians. Turkoman horses survive today in the rare Akhal-Teke – recently championed on the web as the most beautiful horse in the world. Barbs or Berber horses hail from North Africa where they can still be found in places such as Morocco. Back in the day, all these breeds were called Arabians, even if they originated from nowhere near Arabia.

Thoroughbreds are big horses – 15,2 to 17,0 hands and weighing up to 600 kilograms. They are the most common breed in South Africa, owing to our long tradition of horse racing. According to official statistics, there were around 4,000 races held last year on eight courses around the country. The racing industry is worth around R 2,71 billion and some people think this figure will increase due to the global demand for South African thoroughbreds.

Horse racing is popular around the world, not least because of the associated gambling. Add high fashion and big money and you can understand why the sport continues to thrive. The World Thoroughbred Racehorse Rankings Committee rates an animal called Frankel as the best racehorse since they started keeping records. Frankel is a British stallion who was unbeaten during his racing career, earning his owner a cool £ 3,000,000 pounds in prize money. That's just over 55,000,000 in rands.

Frankel retired at the end of 2012 and now commands a stud fee of £175,000 – or R3,2 million in our money. That may sound like a lot, but consider that his first foal to be sold at auction in 2014, fetched R21,4 million. Sounds like a king's ransom, doesn't it?

Proudly South African

Although horses are not indigenous to South Africa, we have produced some unique breeds from imported stock. The best-known are the Boerperd and the Basotho and Nootgedacht ponies. Unsurprisingly, the history of these three breeds is intertwined.

During the early days of the Cape Colony, horses were scarce. Those that survived the difficult journey by ship from the East were then faced with predators and disease. Jan van Riebeeck wrote of the delivery of four ponies from Java in 1653 – and that the stallion was eaten by a lion within days of arrival. Conditions at the Cape were harsh with no hay or grain and poor grazing.

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A century later, there were still only a few thousand horses in the whole Colony including Stellenbosch and Drakenstein. Spanish blood was introduced with the importation of Andalusian horses from South America. Once the Cape became English, thoroughbreds flowed in, thanks largely to the governor, Lord Charles Somerset, who took an active interest in improving the local horses. Still later, other European breeds, including Friesians, also contributed their genes to the mix.

Gradually, a distinctive Cape horse developed. They were small – around 14,2 to 14,3 hands – with a slight build and scruffy looks, but with endurance second to none. Contemporary writers praised the Cape horse's ability to stay healthy while working hard and eating little. Their hooves were so strong that they were often unshod. And they were good-natured and disease-resistant.



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It is this Cape horse that gave rise to the Boerperd, ridden by the Voortrekkers. The breed was decimated during the Anglo-Boer Wars. Then postwar farm mechanisation nearly finished it off. In recent decades there have been many attempts to revive the Boerperd and today we have a vibrant community of Boerperd breeders and enthusiasts.

Cape horses captured by the Basotho people were the ancestors of Basotho ponies. The Nooitgedacht pony was selectively bred from Basotho ponies at the Nooitgedacht experimental farm near Ermelo. Both are excellent ponies for children and their agility makes them ideal for trail riding.

As the decades worn on, South Africans crossed Friesian horses with other breeds, including the Cape horse, creating a unique breed called the Vlaams.

A Case of Mistaken Identity

Friesian horses come from Friesland in the Netherlands. They are large – 15,0 to 17,0 hands – black steeds with long, thick manes and tails, as well as long hair on the lower legs. During the Middle Ages, they carried knights in armour and they have not lost any of that romance. An elegant bearing and high-stepping gait add to their appeal.

The first Friesians came to South Africa not much longer than a century ago. They were a team of stallions imported by an undertaker to draw his hearse. But the first record of Friesians in the South African Studbook refers to them as Vlaams – Flemish – horses. Well, Flemish alludes to Belgium and not the Netherlands, so what on earth is going on?

Seems like those pioneer Friesians were shipped from Antwerp in Belgium and that place of origin stuck in people's minds. As the decades worn on, South Africans crossed Friesian horses with other breeds, including the Cape horse, creating a unique breed called the Vlaams. At 14,2 to 15,2 hands, the Vlaams is smaller than the Friesian, but it shares the dark coat and beautiful motion of its Dutch ancestor.

Today we have active breed associations for both the Friesian and the Vlaams. They are often seen strutting their stuff at shows and are popular harness and classical dressage horses.

Gait-keeper Genes

All horses can move at any of the four gaits: the walk, trot, canter and gallop. But only some horses can pace or amble. The trot and the pace are two-beat gaits. In other words, the horse swings a front and a back leg together at each stride. In the trot, a horse moves its legs diagonally – right front with left back – whereas in the pace it moves them laterally – right front and right back together.

The walk is a four-beat gait, so only one leg moves at a time. Ambling gaits are also four-beat, but faster than a walk yet slower than a canter and with a different rhythm. Horses that can amble or pace, are called gaited.

You're probably wondering what the big deal is. After all, how hard can it be to just move your legs in a different order? Turns out it's impossible to do without rewiring the nervous system. Gaited horses all have exactly the same mutation in a gene called *DMRT3* and therefore they all descend from a single common ancestor. *DMRT3* – also known as the gait-keeper gene – helps to configure the spinal circuits involved in locomotion. Individual horses can have either one or two copies of the mutated gene, which may explain why some are more adept at pacing or ambling than others.

The most popular gaited horse in South Africa is the American Saddlebred. The Saddlebred has a number of pacing breeds amongst its parents and is closely related to the Standardbred and Tennessee Walking Horse. The oldest gaited breeds trace back to Iberian bloodlines that include the Andalusian and Lusitano.



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The American Saddlebred stands 15,0 to 16,0 hands tall and weighs between 455 and 545 kilograms. As the name suggests, it was developed in the United States, with the first breed registry dating from 1891. Saddlers are best known for their high stepping, exaggerated motion and, of course, their gait. The South African Saddlebred Society holds an annual championship which is the largest Saddlebred competition outside the United States.

So there you have it: a whistle-stop tour of the most common and iconic South African horse breeds. It won't help you decide about that gift horse, but it may give you a new appreciation of horses as part of our heritage. 