

Deep South Paso Fino Horse Association

The Paso Fino: Today and Tomorrow

The future is bright for the breed's continued growth in the USA.

By Elizabeth S. Creamer



The Paso Fino horse competing in the United States today is one of the finest examples to date of what has resulted from an international breeding effort launched in 1983 with the importation of top-quality bloodstock from Colombia, South America. Although not the first Colombian horses to arrive in America, those imported during the 1980's--many of which were national champions in their native country--are largely responsible for an unprecedented leap in the quality of the competition horse. These stallions and mares have made a major contribution in the shaping of today's breeding objectives and competition standards, and although many were only bred in this country for a few years, their descendants have begun taking top honors in Fino competitions nationwide. Considering how rapid the recent evolution of this horse has been, the Paso Fino offers and newcomers alike an exciting future.

"My opinion is that in less than five years, the United States will be able to offer the best Paso Fino horses in the world," says Alvaro Iriarte of Startown Stables in Newton, North Carolina. "The people in the United States are very particular about doing things properly; breeding properly, and they are a lot more careful about and interested in improving. They

can improve a lot faster here than anywhere in the world. What we've got here are the right bloodlines, the right way to raise horses and feed them properly, and, because of this, I would say in five years we will have the best Paso Fino horses in the world. I'm talking about a small number of horses, but of animals of tremendous quality."

In breeding the competition horse, the objective is to achieve the shortest step forward with the best execution and the most drive, stamina and elegance. At this stage in its evolution, the classic fino horse in America is making a transition in regard to forward motion versus execution. Where at one time smoothness and shortness in step were winning out, the fino horse of today is electrifying audiences with tremendous drive, quickness and execution.

"There is a type of horse that can be produced that has a short fino with no propulsion," explains Susan Sierra of Criadero del Ocho in Summerfield, Florida. "It's a horse that dangles like a marionette on a string- its legs are not covering much ground; but it's not driving, it's just dangling. I think people were very taken with that in the beginning, but shortness should not mean you have to suffer execution, stamina or drive. The ideal for us is to breed execution with shortness and speed. Now, speed is the hardest to breed when you get execution, because a horse that makes full circles with his legs in front and rear gives you excellent execution in his knees and hocks, but it's much harder for him to move as fast as the horse who doesn't execute. But if you can achieve that, where the three are balanced, that's the pinnacle of what we're supposed to be breeding."

This emphasis on execution of gait has transcended the fino classes and is now being stressed in performance classes as well. The performance horse is "tighter," faster and better balanced than ever before, and is just now beginning to come into its own. "The horses we're calling "performance" horses are not such because they have a lack of ability to fino," points out Sierra, "but they are performance horses because they have the extra ability to extend. Whereas years ago the breed had a horse that could collect and a horse that could not, that is no longer the case. We're breeding performance in the right direction now. We created a horse that didn't exist and now we're breeding to fit that description."

Many breeders are directing their efforts toward the performance market, which shows signs of rapid maturation over the next several years. The last five years have seen fino competition at the national level become stricter than ever before, and likewise, the competition is now heating up in the performance arena. With the athletic abilities of these competition horses continuing to improve, spectators can look forward to some genuine excitement during upcoming show seasons.

"What makes our horses unique is the fine gait," says Charles Minter, Sr., of Rancho Paso Bravo in Agua Dulce, California. "The agility, the quickness, the drive, the power--that's what I'm looking for. As time goes on, the very talented horse can go either way, as a fino horse or a performance horse. That's what type of horse we're breeding for."

The general buying public is also benefiting from these changes in breeding and competition standards, which are culminating in a better quality pleasure horse. Here is a horse that offers beauty, spirit, self-carriage, good disposition and

the solid four-beat gait that sets him apart from all other breeds. "Classic fino and Paso performance are where the quality gaits are," says Minter, "and you can make pleasure horses out of those two types because pleasure gait is no different from either one of those. We ride our classic horses on the trail just as we do our performance horses, and they can both be pleasure horses. We strive for execution, endurance, correct conformation, form to function. It is very important to me that a horse possesses the type of conformation it takes to get the job done in the manner that we require--to go down the trail or into the show ring--and to stay sound as a horse. I have paid strict attention to breed for a horse that is more correct for endurance, and not just gait, but consistent gait."

The Colombian influence on today's Paso Fino in America has gone far beyond the mere introduction of new blood to the breed. More and more American trainers are being introduced to Colombian training techniques through clinics and internship programs, which are helping to make a better all-around horse. "These Colombian trainers have a lot more experience because they have had a lot more time working these horses and they really know the breed in general," points out Iriarte. "But that doesn't necessarily mean that in America we don't have quality trainers. It's a matter of giving a hand a little bit and helping to be able to finish the classic fino, especially in the same way the Colombian trainer does. It is a matter of time and of a bit more cooperation with the American trainers who, in my opinion, are ahead of the Colombian trainers in the performance horses. We consistently see American trainers show and win the performance horses more than fino horses."

In fact, American trainers are presented with a tremendous opportunity in the Paso Fino breed which has traditionally suffered from a shortage of good, all-around trainers. One of the greatest needs is for trainers in the pleasure market, which Iriarte sees as the best place to start as a trainer new to the breed. "In order to be a professional trainer, it is one step before the other one. First we have to be able to train properly the pleasure horse, then the performance horse. At the same time, the people that are professional trainers in performance horses are making the step to the classic fino horse.

"I feel that there are so many new people involved with and excited about the breed that it's unreal, especially in the last two year," Iriarte continues. "They really like the breed, are helping to promote the breed and are very excited about doing things right. We don't have enough trainers, but we are working on it and I think that with clinics and other programs we will be able to increase the number of professional trainers. This would solve some of the problems which slow down our breed. But I see a fantastic future every day for the Paso Fino breed in America."

The classic fino market continues to attract investment buyers who appreciate the value of these horses not only on a national level, but an international level, and who seek the thrill of top-level competition. The performance market is up-and-coming, attracting a number of people new to the breed who wish to compete as well as to enjoy their investment on a one-to-one basis. And as more Paso Finos are introduced to the general equine market, the pleasure horse is rising steadily in demand and increasing in value.

"I think the breed is going to be very attractive to people right now because it's something entirely different," says Ray Gillis of Grapeland, Texas, who has been raising Paso Finos for over 20 years. "This will take people's eye as they begin to hear more about it and as we get more people into our show rings to see really good horses."

Minter is, perhaps, a perfect example of the type of individual drawn to the Paso Fino breed. He began breeding Paso Finos in 1970 after reading an article in *Western Horseman*. "I was dealing with Walking Horses, racking horses and various breed before that," he explains. "I was looking for a more natural gaited horse. That's what drove me to it, as well as the natural beauty of the horse--the natural presence."

The Paso Fino is steadily attracting attention to itself and this is reflected in the increasing number of new owners each year, as well as the increasing number of horses introduced to competition each season. Paso Fino show have a flavor and spice all their own, and whether they are showing fino, performance, pleasure, trail or conformation, the passion for this breed is reflected in participants and onlookers alike.