

IF SHAGYAS ARE SPORHORSES, WHY HAVEN'T I HEARD OF THEM BEFORE?

By Adele Furby

You are not alone. In Europe the breed is often referred to as the "New-Old" breed. And, in truth, it is. It is "new" because Shagyas are being rediscovered by many around the world, and "old" because Shagya breeding began 200 years ago, in 1789 when the Babolna State Stud in Hungary was founded.

The Shagya breed was developed to be an elite horse for the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, as well as an all-purpose military horse (for driving as well as riding), and an "improvement" horse—a horse to be used in crossbred breeding to upgrade other breeds. Based largely on desert Arabian bloodlines, traces of several Transylvanian light horse breeds as well as Lippizanner and English Thoroughbred can be seen in Shagya pedigrees. The breed actually acquired its name from an original Arabian foaled in 1810 by the tribe of the Bani Saher in Syria. Of the Koheil Siglavy strain, he was imported to Babolna in 1836. This original Shagya was remarkably strong and tall, standing almost 16 hands. He exerted such a strong influence over the breed that eventually the Purebred Shagya Society International, the international breeders group for Shagyas, adopted this name for a breed which had variously been known in Europe as "araberrasse" (arabian-bred), "Babolna arabians", or "part-bred Arabs". This official adoption of the term "Shagya" did not occur until 1978, so you can see why even in Europe, while the Shagya horse itself is not so unknown, common usage of the name for the breed is relatively new. As an example, in August of 1989 while at the Purebred Shagya Society International Championship Show in St. Gallen, Switzerland, a Swiss judge of the riding classes said to me, "You know,

a number of years ago I had a horse that I now realize was a Shagya. But at the time he was just considered a partbred Arab with no special breed identity. This is the first time I've judged riding classes at a Shagya show and when I look back I realize it was the best riding horse I ever had!" Strong praise from a credible source for a "new-old" breed!

The Babolna State Stud developed the Shagya's sporthorse qualities and genetic strength through the most effective methods. Firstly, it maintained a rigorous set of performance tests for both mares and stallions before they were accepted for breeding. Methods included a 480-mile ride in 10 days across plains, forest, and mountains, 2-mile sprints, and long-distance driving. Mares as well as stallions were also sent to the headquarters of cavalry regiments near established hunt clubs and officers would ride them in the hunting field. A careful record was made describing the horse's jumping, speed, condition, disposition, as well as how good a keeper the horse was. Mares and stallions which did not meet high standards in these performance tests were all sold at auction.

Secondly, besides using culling coupled with performance testing, the Hungarians were able to use extensive progeny testing. New desert arabian stallions were bred to 30 mares for each of three successive years. Ten of the stud's best, ten of the middle quality, and ten of the lowest quality mares were used, and at the end of the three-year period, all ninety offspring were brought up before the breeding committee for evaluation. If the offspring were not judged to be good enough, the entire group was sold. Consequently, very few stallions were actually allowed to continue in the breed.

Thirdly, the Hungarians were able to maintain athletic ability and genetic strength through judicious linebreeding coupled with careful and regularly repeated (usually once every 4 generations) outcrossing to purebred Arabians. This method insures genetic predictability as well as protects against the dangers of inbreeding. The classic genetic principal of "three times in and one time out" is exemplified here in real life.

Another reason why the Shagyas have remained relatively unknown is that political and geographic factors have played a big role in its recent history. A large majority of the world's Shagyas were in the wrong place at the wrong time during the final days of World War II. Many were killed or slaughtered for food, still others were captured as prizes of war and eventually lost. Shortly thereafter, when the Communist regime took over Hungary in the 1950's Shagya breeding at the Babolna State Stud was given pitifully low priority. Fortunately knowledgeable horse breeders in western European countries were able to salvage some of the most superior remnants of the Shagya bloodstock—many were saved from the slaughterhouse in this way. Consequently, the torch of purebred Shagya breeding was passed on to West Germany, Denmark, Austria, and Switzerland. In recent times Shagya breeders have also organized breeding groups in Norway, Sweden, Italy, France, the USA, Canada, and Venezuela. Also, the eastern European countries of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Rumania have some Shagya breeding still continuing.

The country with the most Shagyas today is the country we most often associate with sport horse breeding—West Germany. There are over 500 breeding animals there, with about 500 breeding animals sprinkled amongst the other Purebred Shagya Society International member countries. In Germany Shagyas have an excellent reputation as sporthorses. They compete regularly at the various 100-day stallion performance tests against the Warmblood breeds, and several times have come out champion or reserve champion at Warendorf and Marbach—considered warmblood meccas. Purebred Shagyas have also contributed significantly to the development of those selfsame German Warmblood breeds. Probably the most influential Shagya in German Warmblood breeding would be a mare named JORDI. JORDI was actually bred in Poland, and it was there that her famous son RAMSES was born. RAMSES's sire was the English Thoroughbred RITTERSPORN. RAMSES is probably best known to Americans as the sire of the famous CONDUS, but RAMSES actually spread his positive influence over seven different German Warmblood breeds, and is called a "Century stallion" in Europe. He is considered especially remarkable for his ability to sire top jumper as well as dressage horses. And his mother was a Shagya.

The second most influential Shagya in warmblood breeding is GAZAL VII. GAZAL VII was head stallion at the Babolna State Stud for many years, and was imported into Germany in the 1960's. He and several of his sons and grandsons have stood at the Hannoverian State Stud at Celle, and were also used for Trakehners, Holsteiners, and Westphalians. Interestingly, his grandson AMOR was also leased to the Austrian State Lipizzaner stud in Piber in order to help regenerate that breed.

So, what is this breed actually like? The purebred Shagya is a medium-size (15hh--16.1hh) horse of distinctly Arabian type, but with improved sport horse qualities such as more bone, longer, more sloping pelvis, prominent withers, improved coupling and better topline. They are not just larger imitation purebred Arabians. Neither are they imitation Warmbloods. They are Shagyas. Perhaps a few photos will help you to gain an impression. But the best introduction is to see one in person, because in person you can experience their elegant and flowing movement coupled with their proud, yet down-to-earth working disposition.

If you would like more information about Shagyas and the North American Shagya Arabian Society, please write or call NASS president Adele Furby, Star Route, Hall, Montana 59837. Telephone: 406-859-3380.