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Dressage

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Shagya Arabians: Thriving in their Homeland

A U.S. breeder and judge travels to Babolna, Hungary, to officiate at the Shagya European Championships.

By Adele Furby

Creating the best sporthorses for dressage, jumping and eventing is the lifetime passion of many breeders around the world. So when an integral part of that equation is almost lost and then saved by a small group of conscientious breeders, it is cause for celebration.

For centuries, the blood of the Shagya Arabian had been intermingled with European warmblood breeds for refinement. Not to be confused with its smaller, purebred Arabian cousin, the Shagya Arabian's qualities include its greater size (15 to 16.2 hands), bone and body substance, calm disposition and powerful hindquarters, which produce elastic, cadenced gaits and the ability to elevate the forehand.

Today, Shagya blood runs through the pedigrees of top dressage horses such as Rembrandt, who won two individual Olympic gold medals under his rider Nicole Uphoff; Romantico, U.S. Olympian Robert Dover's Grand Prix horse; and Conduis, U.S. Olympian Hilda Gurney's Grand Prix Trakehner stallion.

American Shagya breeder Adele Furby says that the Shagya, in danger of disappearing not long ago, is now thriving once again. She made her sixth trip in 17 years to the ancestral home of the Shagya breed in Babolna, Hungary, last summer. There she judged the Purebred Shagya Society International's European Championship Shagya Arabian Show. Here is her report.

I was absolutely stunned by the improvements in the quality—and quantity—of the Shagyas I saw at the championships this time around. An international team of five judges—one Swiss, one German, two Hungarians and myself—judged about 100 Shagyas, each of us using marks on a scale of 1 to 10 for type, head, neck, body, legs, walk and trot, as each horse was presented in hand on the triangle.

In the 7- to 10-year old stallion class, there were eight stallions presented, and the average score was an excellent 8.46—unheard of just a few years ago. The mare classes surpassed the stallion classes. In the 7- to 10-year-old mare class, seven out of 12 scored over 8, and the average score for the entire class was greater than 8. From outstanding mares come some of the best stallions.

But to appreciate this breed and what we were seeing last summer, you need to know a bit of history: The Hungarian State Stud of Babolna, birthplace of the Shagya Arabian breed over 200 years ago, is located about halfway between Vienna, Austria, and Budapest, Hungary. The venerable buildings, still painted in the Imperial gold of the Hapsburg monarchy, are beautiful examples of the architecture of the period when the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary were united and horse breeding was one of the most important endeavors of government.

During Hungary's communist era—about 50 years, from 1939 to 1989—the complex was part of the largest agricultural cooperative in Hungary and considered



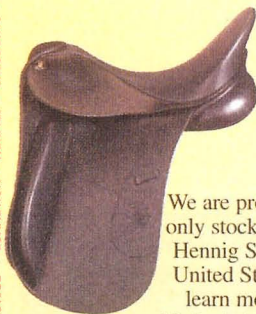
Winner of the 7- to 10-year-old stallion class, Impala (above), by Shagal out of a Farag II daughter, is a classic Shagya type. Shagal (below) is an international champion that can trace his lineage back 10 generations to the original "Shagya" for whom the breed is named. He was leased to Babolna for two years.



Shagal is well-known worldwide to Shagya fans. Originally bred by Ulla Nyegaard in Denmark, where he was used to improve the Danish Warmblood breed, he later lived in Germany and was used as a Trakehner improver. After a few seasons at Babolna, he's now breeding to Shagyas and Trakehners in Ireland.

a showplace of the political system. Although the communists preserved the buildings along with the original Shagya studbooks dating back to 1789, unfortunately, big mistakes were made in the Babolna breeding shed during that time.

With politicians rather than horsemen in charge, the breed was overly diluted



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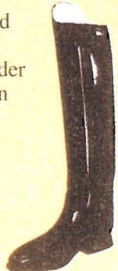
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Hungary's long tradition of excellence in carriage driving was well represented by several exhibitions of Shagyas in singles, pairs, four- and five-in-hands. Turned out beautifully and shown with typical Hungarian flair, the period carriages and costumes were a delight.

with too much purebred Arabian blood. The old, proven system of only occasionally returning to such blood for refreshment was abandoned. Often good Shagya mares from performance-tested mother lines with the unique Shagya qualities were bred to Egyptian Arabian stallions. These half-Arabian daughters were often bred back to the same or other Egyptian stallions. Thus, the qualities that we dressage lovers seek were getting harder and harder to find in Hungarian Shagyas.

When I first visited Babolna in 1986, there were only a handful of real Shagya-type mares left there. The majority had far too much purebred Arabian blood to qualify as Shagyas by international standards—no more than nine ancestors out of 16 in the fourth generation may be purebred Arabian.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe, the correct Shagya type was being perpetuated by a handful of dedicated breeders who organized the Purebred Shagya Society International (ISG) during the 1980s.

When the Iron Curtain was pulled back from Hungary in 1989 and new management arrived in Babolna, an unprecedented cooperation between ISG members, the Babolna Stud and other private breeders in Hungary rebuilt the Shagya breed in its native land. Western

European owners of superior Shagya stallions and mares took a personal interest in the revitalization of Hungarian Shagya breeding and generously leased or sold their horses for use in Hungary. The Babolna management worked hard, and private breeding, not allowed in Hungary during communist times, flourished. The results of these endeavors were plain for all to see at this championship.

Performance classes held on Saturday and Sunday showcased the multiple talents of the Shagya. There were two endurance rides as well as dressage and jumping classes. German breeder Walter Huber and his Shagal son, Shagan, impressed us by competing in the 30-kilometer endurance ride early Saturday morning and then the same pair successfully competed in two challenging jumping classes the same afternoon.

A large and enthusiastic crowd of more than 1,000 people from far and near witnessed the exhibition of international and Hungarian Shagya breeding, once again in full flower. It is a shining example of how international cooperation among breeders can perpetuate a special breed with both historic value and modern relevance.

For more information about the Shagya Arabian, visit the Web sites shagya.net and shagya-isg.de.