

SO MUCH MORE

than just a show horse

BY THOMAS EQUELS

Going back generations, my family always had gaited horses. They were Tennessee working stock, mostly racking horses and racking mules. Nothing fancy. All were bred for endurance, with a smooth single-foot gait, and the ability to ride comfortably under saddle cross-country, plough a field, or pull a buggy to church. My father taught me, and my siblings, to ride early. We shared an old sorrel racking horse gelding named Cliff. A good starter horse, he was calm and forgiving. For as long as I can remember, I have been comfortable in the saddle.

My thirty plus years love affair with the Paso Fino breed began in the mid-1980s. I had just successfully completed a business project for Ernesto Recaman, the owner of the legendary Paso Fino stallion, Nevado. To celebrate, Ernesto threw a party at his horse farm in South Florida's Redlands. It was a traditional Colombian fiesta. Food, drinks, live music, and horse after horse on parade across the small arena's sounding board. After we shared a whisky - or two - Ernesto had a groom bring out Nevado for a demonstration. Nevado was magnificent looking as he walked in on a lead line. But when the rider mounted him and did a few figure eights before approaching the sounding board, the stallion seemed to blossom, his chest expanded, as if swollen with pride, and his crest and headset were in perfect form. I had never seen such a smooth and rapid single-foot gait. I complimented Ernesto, in my haltingly effective Spanish, commenting on Nevado's quick and balanced four-beat lateral gait. Ernesto's facial expression at my comment, a slight smile and an uplifted eyebrow, was non-verbal communication of his surprise at my knowledge of gaited horses. Without hesitation, he then asked if I wanted to ride Nevado. Nevado was pumped up and pistoning at redline as he traversed the sounding board with the "ta-ta-tat-tat" of a machine gun. "Yes, Sir" was all I could say.





Equels Racing Center borders on the Cross Florida Greenway and the Florida Horse Park in Ocala. These days, the primary business of the farm is training thoroughbred racehorses on our five-furlong racetrack. But I have always had a few gaited riding horses, and over time I transitioned from racking and spotted saddle horses to paso finos. To me, a personal horse means a versatile horse, and I knew the paso was perfect for that role. As an initial priority, I wanted to breed to paso fino show standards, thereby building foundation stock that would meet breed standards for both conformation and gait. After just a few generations, I foaled a colt suited to compete in performance and pleasure classes and then another similar colt was born in quick succession. In time these two Equels-bred and born stallions, **Resortissimo** and **Attila**, went on to win numerous major bella forma, performance, and pleasure championships. Both stallions were awarded the United States Equestrian Federation's coveted Legion of Merit.

During those years of competition, I also learned that the Paso Fino horse is so much more than just a show horse. Although I was the only one in my family to compete in PFHA shows, my parents, children and grandchildren all loved to trail ride. Go out the back gate of our farm and you are in the Cross-Florida Greenway forest preserve and the Florida Horse Park. While we would often settle for a leisurely walk in the woods, just as often the more adventurous of us were roaring through the forest, jumping over fallen trees, sliding down sand dunes, or going for a swim in a remote forest lake. This is an aspect of the Paso Fino that is sometimes overlooked in a show culture, but probably is much closer to the heart of the typical recreational rider. Modern motorized transportation began just a century ago. Before that, we were a horse culture. We pulled goods to market. We hunted. We farmed. We rode into battle. For a thousand years, gaited horses have been the preferred horse for pleasure riding,

plantation supervision, and long-distance trips under saddle. Back then, horses were not a pet or a hobby, they were equine partners in the important tasks of daily life.

With 'equine partnership' in mind, I began to breed for the specific characteristics I valued in a trail horse. Natural gait was a priority, but not the only priority. I am 6'3" tall, so the size of the horse was a consideration. I needed a horse with strength and stature. I also liked pinto coloration, so I worked to achieve a genetically homozygous pinto line that assured good pinto color every time. I love to ride in the forest for hours, so endurance was a quality I cherished. Athleticism, the coordination to go down a steep and winding narrow trail on a forested hillside, the ability to stop, turn and retreat if the way became impassable, the ability to jump over logs and ditches, the strength to power up the side of a steep sand dune. Such things all require an equine athlete.

Temperament is extremely important, too, and it was a clear consideration in my breeding program. My personal horse, **Hidalgo de Luna** (Kunikoti de Oya x La Luna de Sun Haven), was bred and born at our farm several years ago. I believe disposition is a genetic trait. For example, I chose a horse sired by **Nevado**, **Profeta de Besilu**, as Hidalgo's great grandsire. Profeta was the reigning national champion Fino stallion for several years in a row, but unlike many of his contemporaries, Profeta had a perfect disposition, sweeter than sugar.

I love it when a horse is in sync with me. I appreciate it when a horse is calm and serious. A horse like that can learn quickly and master a wide range of skills, from crossing the sounding board with perfection, to jumping over fences cross-country, to pulling a cart on those days when you want to show the trails to a non-rider. I selectively bred for these qualities. Believe it or not, all of this can be done with the breed we love, the Paso Fino. ■

