

# THE FRIESIAN HORSE: From Ancient Roots to Near Extinction to Today's International Acclaim



The Friesian horse is native to the Dutch province of Friesland, where skillful livestock breeders and rich pastures have created a famous source for quality horses since the days of the Roman Empire. Many equine scholars believe that the Friesian exhibits qualities of the prehistoric wild Forest Horse (*equus ferus germanicus*) native to Europe, ancestor of the many great warmblood breeds. Despite its somewhat heavier build the Friesian is not considered a coldblood. It is a warmblood breed predating the so-named Warmbloods that received Thoroughbred hotblood genes in the 19th Century.

During the Middle Ages the Friesian was favored as a courageous, athletic and durable mount for knights in armor and began to show its current versatile characteristics. However the modern Friesian was



1568 Engraving of "Phryso" in Naples

developed in the 1500s when the Spanish invaders bred their Andalusians to the local Friesian mares. The result was a lighter and even more versatile horse well suited for High School dressage, urban use, and new forms of cavalry warfare. It is probably at this time that the Friesian also developed its trademark long crested neck, smaller ears and elegant high stepping gait. Yet the Friesian did not lose its gentle temperament, native intelligence, and powerful hindquarters. The Spanish influence resulted in combining the best of both original breeds.

The breed remained popular through the 18th and 19th Century for dressage, but became used more under harness than as a cavalry mount. Its superior qualities as a carriage horse also caused it to be used to develop new breeds such as the Orlov Trotter, the Morgan, and the ancestors of Hackney breed. Unfortunately this



Old postcard of Frieslanders in traditional costume

enthusiastic crossbreeding and the adoption of heavier horses for farmwork caused the purebred Friesian to almost disappear

by the late 1800s. Sadly, this horse, once so renowned throughout Europe, was reduced to a relatively small number of purebreds located only in and around Friesland. Alarmed at the prospect of the disappearance of their only native breed, a group of Dutch farmers established the first Friesian breeding registry, *Friesch Paarde Stamboek* (FPS), in 1879.

Despite their best efforts the ravages of two great European wars and the mechanization of agriculture had reduced the Friesian to near extinction by the mid-20th Century. Most Friesian farmers simply could not afford to keep this horse that "danced too much in front of the plow." By the late 1950s there were only three Approved stallions: Age 168, Ritske 202, and Tetman 205 plus a few hundred mares of quality. It is from this small group of horses that all of today's registered horses descend.

But that has proven to be enough. By the late 60s the economic growth of post-war Europe had spread to Friesland, farmers could support their stables, and the breed began to prosper. The registry doubled its efforts to ensure that inbreeding did not infect the increasing number of new Friesians, while resisting the pressure to inject new blood from other breeds. Perhaps no breed of horse in the world has had its bloodlines and genetic diversity managed so exhaustively.



Friesians are favored for four-in-hands.

By the 1970s several German breeders had invested in the Friesian and revived the interest in the breed as a superb dressage mount. With a somewhat different emphasis in the standards by which they judge horses, the Germans founded their own breeding association, in 1979, exactly 100 years after the first registry was founded. In 1988 this informal organization had evolved into the nationally sanctioned breed registry, *Friesenpferde-Zuchtverband e.V.* (FPZV). By the 80s and 90s the Friesian was also being bred in most European countries, North America, and even Australia and South America. Still, there are fewer than 50,000 registered Friesians

worldwide, and only a tiny percentage are stallions Approved for breeding by either registry.

### **The Friesian in America**

The first Friesians in the US were brought in the 1600s by the Frieslander Peter Stuyvesant to New Amsterdam (New York). They spread up through the Dutch settlements on the Hudson River into New England, where their descendants probably became an important part of the Morgan horse bred during the 19th Century. However, these early Friesians were cross-bred out of existence.

It was later 20th Century postwar emigrants from the Netherlands who reintroduced the Friesian to North

America, mostly at their dairy farms located from California to New Jersey. Slowly but surely, Americans lacking even a touch of Dutch learned to love this intelligent, versatile, gentle, proud, and elegant horse from seeing them in horse shows, the equine media, and even Hollywood movies. They began importing more horses from Europe.

This continues to this day, but there are now thousands of Friesians in the US. They are producing offspring equal to the best horses in their native Europe, dazzling crowds in exhibitions, competing and winning at the highest levels of Open Dressage, succeeding in driving events, and, most important, winning the love and devotion of their owners and equine enthusiasts everywhere. The Friesian is special

for what it is, but rare now only for the way it has survived the turmoil of history.



The Friesian is equally at home on a trail ride or in the arena