

The Friesian Horse: A Beautiful Balance

The modern Friesian combines athleticism with beauty and temperament.

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Equine Journal Magazine

The Friesian horse of today is a dark and noble masterpiece created by time. It went from steady work horse, to bold warhorse, to high stepping trotter, to today's high performance sport horse. Whether these changes were the result of utility or vanity, the qualities the breed displays have been carefully chosen by breeders throughout history.

Farmers needed horses with pulling power, while knights required mounts with agility and speed, but what are breeders striving for today? Do they seek ultimate beauty or ultimate performance, or a combination? Whatever the discipline, there is not just one quality breeders are seeking. Instead, it is a careful balance of traits that creates the ideal Friesian horse. Appearance, temperament, health, and aptitude all come into play.

The Balance Begins

The balancing act began in the Friesland region of the northern Netherlands. This grassy region is best known for its Friesian potatoes, and black and white Friesian cattle. The main source of income for the Friesian people was farming, including crops, milk, cheese and butter. The agricultural lifestyle of these people molded the Friesian horse into a hardy breed that could pull farm equipment, carriages, and sleighs. The Friesian breed was developed on a foundation of hard work and small rations.

Later on, its thriftiness and work ethic made it an excellent mount for battle. It was used by the Friesian armies when they were fighting against the Normans, and then by knights battling in the Crusades in the Middle East. At this time, the Friesian was still coarse in appearance, but, during the knights' conquests in the Middle East, it was refined through the introduction of Arabian and Andalusian blood. The Arabian influence is evident today in the Friesian's arching neck and active movement.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the high-stepping Friesian was in great demand as a trotting horse. Horse races were popular in Friesland, and many towns held annual races. The races began on horseback but later evolved into harness races. In 1823, King William I created an annual race in remembrance of the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium, during which Europe regained its freedom from the French Emperor Napoleon. This prestigious race became known as the Kings-Golden-Whip-Day because the winner was presented with a golden whip.

However, the breed's use as a trotting horse ended with the appearance of faster Russian and American race horses. In fact, the influx of these breeds and the resultant crossbreeding nearly led to the Friesian's extinction. By 1913, there were only three approved stallions standing in Friesland and no young stallions had been registered since 1907. The dire situation spurred the creation of the Het Friesche Paard ("The Friesian Horse" association), which sought to bring back and improve the breed. At this time, the important balance of temperament, beauty, and build was brought to the forefront. The strict guidelines the association developed are still in use today.

A Star Temperament

Careful breeding has created a horse that is widely recognized for its easy-going personality. Temperament is one of the most important attributes for Lana Markey, owner of North Ster Friesians in Wisconsin. The Friesian's kind manner is what first attracted Markey to the breed. "We were at the Minnesota Horse Expo and came across a beautiful two-year-old Friesian standing in the aisle, just in time to witness a three-year-old child wrap her arms around the horse's back leg. We were amazed at the results ... nothing!" This moment struck a chord with Markey. As the mother of four children, she wanted a gentle horse for her family. The Friesian fulfilled this requirement.

In addition to temperament, Markey finds bloodlines, especially the mother-lines, to be very important. The exceptional bloodlines Markey has in her broodmares help her to promote her goals as a breeder. With every mare/stallion match Markey creates, her goal is, "To put a horse on the ground that will better the breed. I want to maintain the beauty and superior movement of the breed, and put a stronger back end on it."

Markey is able to track the success of her breeding program by participating in a strict judging process called a keuring. During this process, judges and inspectors qualified by the Friesch Paarden Stamboek (FPS) are sent to the United States to inspect Friesian horses. The main goal of the evaluation process is to promote better breeding programs and quality sporthorses. All but one of the broodmares at North Ster Friesians have received a Ster rating, which means they are exemplary to the breed. Only 15 to 20 percent of the horses at the keurings are awarded Ster status. Markey also has one mare that made Model, which is not only the top one percent of Friesian mares but a perfect Friesian mare. In 2004 Markey's mare Tjitske, out of the Preferent stallion Oege, achieved Preferent status because four of her foals were awarded Ster status. Markey's adherence to breed guidelines and her desire to produce a better horse have been successful. Her horses were awarded these ratings because they fulfilled the strict breed requirements that the judges are seeking. Sixty percent of the rating is based on movement and forty percent is based on conformation.

Conformation is Key

Like Markey, **Gina Benson-Cook, owner of Centaur Farms in Silver Creek, Georgia**, was drawn to the Friesian breed because of its temperament. Several years ago she took in a Friesian stallion for training and was amazed by its willingness to work. Initially, Benson-Cook believed it was just that horse, but as more Friesians were sent to her for training, she learned the eagerness to work was a breed trait. Benson-Cook then purchased her own First Premium Friesian stallion, Bente D.

As a United States Dressage Federation (USDF) Bronze and Silver Medalist, and FEI competitor, Benson-Cook's focus is on developing Grand Prix dressage prospects. She works to breed Friesians of the modern, forward-moving, sport horse type. "I don't want knee action, because I want to be able to compete against the toughest warmblood without prejudice from the judges." This forward, floating movement stems from good conformation. Benson-Cook says that, "Conformation comes into place before movement." Ideally, the Friesian should be a well-balanced horse with a noble head and small, alert ears that point slightly towards each other. Its neck should be arched and well muscled, and the withers should not be

too flat. The back may be slightly low, but must not be too long. The Friesian's shoulders are to be sloping and the points of the shoulders need to be set wide enough to allow for free-moving shoulders. The legs should be properly positioned, and the cannon bones not too long, but the forearm must be long enough to allow for elevation and extension of the legs.

Benson-Cook explains that Friesians are known to have weak backs and upright shoulders which prevent free forward movement. She looks for Friesians with shorter backs and more sloping shoulders in order to achieve the collection and extension that are demanded in the upper levels of dressage. She feels that if the horses are missing these aspects of conformation, their movement will be too choppy and they will fail against the warmbloods in the dressage ring.

Bred For Performance

Mary Jean Gould-Earley, owner of Laurel Highland Farm in Cogan Station, Pennsylvania, agrees that competing against warmbloods without the right mix of conformation and movement can be very challenging. "Judges are learning to accept Friesians in the dressage ring, but it took a lot to break the mold of what they expect to see. It is hard to compete against what judges are used to," says Gould-Earley.

Gould-Earley not only links conformation and movement with show ring success, but also with ridability. As a breeder of Friesians and Fell ponies, Gould-Earley's goal is to produce all-around sport horses. For this reason, rider comfort is an aspect to which she pays close attention. "Some Friesians are not comfortable to ride. You don't want just front-end action; you need hind-end balance so the movement is not so bouncy," she says.

Gould-Earley works to breed Friesians for dressage and driving. She explains, "If you breed for dressage, you can do both dressage and driving. If you breed only for the carriage, you may not get the extension needed for dressage, you can only do carriage." This belief holds true for many Friesian breeders. In most cases, breeders have moved away from breeding Friesians strictly for carriage driving.

As the breed becomes more popular as a sport horse, higher demands are being placed on its ability to perform. In spite of its beauty and nobility, the Friesian does have its weaknesses. Lack of natural stamina is known to be a trait of the breed. This is one of the reasons Gould-Earley stresses temperament in her breeding program. She explains, "You want good temperament to go with good looks," but also to insure the horse's desire to perform. Gould-Earley feels that the Friesian's work ethic is critical to the breed's success as a sport horse, because of the consistent training and conditioning required to overcome its lack of endurance. The Friesian can only tolerate rigorous training if it has a desire to work. Pleasure driving and hacking were easy for the Friesian because they were short events. Now breeders need to have a stronger awareness of stamina in the Friesian.

Universal Traits

Gene Sweeney, of Van Guard Friesians in Chester, New Hampshire, believes that the breed is changing for the better. "In years past Friesians were more of a light draft type," says Sweeney, "and now they have been doing selective breeding to get the breed to have a more refined body type..." Friesians are no longer being bred to do one job. The new refined Friesian sport horse has the ability to succeed in a number of disciplines.

Sweeney focuses on finding geldings to compete in the highest levels of dressage, saddle seat, and driving. No matter what the discipline, Sweeney desires the same qualities in all his horses.

At Van Guard Friesians, “We believe if you start young, and have an outstanding halter horse with great conformation and great tracking movement at the walk, the rest just falls into place.” Although Markey, Benson-Cook, Gould-Earley, and Sweeney have different goals for their horses, the breed traits they are seeking are universal. They all believe that the right mix of temperament and conformation is necessary create the athletic, beautiful sport horse Friesian of today.