

## The Florida Cracker Horse<sup>1</sup>

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Jorge Rey<sup>2</sup>

### The Cracker Horse

Florida Cracker horses are small saddle horses known for their stamina, intelligence, quickness, strength, and easy ride. They are spirited willing workers with a strong herding instinct and great agility over rough ground.

The ancestors of the Florida Cracker Horse were the Spanish stock brought to the New World during the 1500s. These horses became distinct from their ancestors, partially in response to unique conditions of the Florida environment, but they still maintain many of the ancestral characteristics including their size, short backs, and sloping rumps. Although not strictly considered a gaited breed, many crackers have a distinctive single-foot gait known as the "coon rack".

In 1791, William Bartram referred to the horses used by early Florida cowboys as "The most beautiful and sprightly species of that noble creature that I have ever seen" Over the years, Cracker Horses have been known by a variety of names including Chicksaw Pony, Seminole Pony, Marsh Tackie, Prairie Pony, Florida Horse, Florida Cow Pony, Grass Gut and others.



**Figure 1.** A playful yearling. Credits: Mary Kate Herron

The term "cracker" comes from the name given to Florida cattlemen because of the sound made by their "cracking" cow whips. The name was extended to their agile horses, which were perfectly suited for herding and driving Florida's free roaming scrub and cracker cattle. These hardy horses adapted well to the harsh Florida environment, were essential to the Florida cattle industry and are a fundamental part of the Florida agricultural heritage.

### Breed Characteristics

The Florida Cracker Horse Association lists the breed's characteristics as follows:

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  2. Jorge R. Rey, professor, Entomology and Nematology Department, Florida Medical Entomology Laboratory, Vero Beach; Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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**Figure 2.** Cracker horses in a Florida pasture. Credits: Fl. Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services

"[Florida Cracker horses are] small saddle horses, standing from 13.5 hands to 15.2 at the withers and weighing 700 - 1000 pounds. The head is refined and intelligent in appearance. The profile is straight or slightly concave. The throat latch is prominent and the jaw is short and well defined. The eyes are keen with an alert expression and have reasonable width between them. The eye colors are dark, with a white sclera, gray or blue. The neck is well defined, fairly narrow, without excessive crest and is about the same length as the distance from the withers to the croup. The withers are pronounced but not prominent. The chest is medium to narrow in width with an inverted "V" formed between the two front legs. The shoulders are long and sloping with a 40 to 50 degree angle. A well laid back shoulder with smooth muscling is preferred. The back is short, narrow and strong with well sprung ribs. The point of the withers and the point of the croup are equal in height. The under line is longer than the top line. The croup is sloping and short and the tail is set medium low. Colors are any of those known to the horse; however, solid colors and grays are most common".

### Brief History

There is evidence that prehistoric horses were once numerous in Florida (McFadden 2005), however, for unknown reasons, they became extinct between 12-25 thousand years ago. It is also known that, in his second trip in 1493, Columbus brought horses to the island of Hispanola. These horses formed the first of several Caribbean breeding herds established by the Spaniards to supply their explorers

and colonists. Most of these horses came from Córdoba and were a mixture of the North African Barb, the Spanish Garraro pony, the Sorraia, the Andalusian, and other horses from the Iberian Peninsula (Getzen 2008). Based on the descriptions by writers of the period, the Florida Cracker shares many characteristics with those early horses brought to the Caribbean in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.



**Figure 3.** A handsome cracker from the Florida Agricultural Museum herd. Credits: Stephen Monroe

The first horses known to have come to Florida were brought by Ponce de León in 1521, presumably from one of the Caribbean island colonies. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century many Spanish explorers brought horses to Florida, including Pánfilo de Narváez, who is said to have released more than 200 horses near the mouth of Charlotte Harbor from ships that were drawing too much water. Although escapees from these early horses could have survived and reproduced in the wild, it was during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Spaniards started cattle ranching in earnest that the numbers of horses in Florida increased significantly. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Florida cattle industry had grown to over 30 ranches; some, like the Rancho La Chua (near what is now Alachua County) with as many as a thousand cows and horses.

During the U.S. Civil War, Florida was one of the major suppliers of beef for the troops on both sides of the conflict. In addition to their critical role for working the cattle herds, the Florida horses were also highly sought for transportation during this period. After the war, pioneer families in Florida established a lucrative cattle trade with Caribbean

islands, particularly Cuba. The Florida horses were essential parts of this industry that served as the foundation for the state's extensive agricultural economy.



**Figure 4.** A late 19th century Florida cow hunter and his horse. Credits: Florida Archives

In Florida, the range was open and cattle were usually allowed to roam free, with ownership established by earmarks and brands. The Florida cowboys, known as "cow hunters" rounded the cattle to drive them to market or to relocate them. The cracker horse was particularly adept at navigating the difficult Florida terrain such as Florida scrub and swamps where the cattle roamed. Florida cow hunters were very different from the western cowboys. They used their cracker horses, braided whips, and dogs to herd the cattle and wore flat wool or straw hats. Because they did not use lassoes, they did not need the western saddle's horn for anchoring and thus often rode simple flat saddles or surplus McClellan (military) saddles.

During the Depression, one of the government relief programs involved moving cattle from the Dust Bowl region into Florida. Some of the incoming cattle were infected with screwworms, and spread the pest to Florida, which brought about a change in the way cattle were "worked" in the State. Because of the pest, it became necessary to fence in some of the cattle, and to rope and hold cattle in pens for treatment. As a result, cattlemen turned to the larger and stronger Quarter Horse.

Because of the diminished demand, the Cracker Horse became rare. By the late 1980s there were only a few hundred horses maintained by families of

ranchers who continued to breed them for their own use or simply because of their love for the breed. The Florida Cracker Horse Association lists the Ayers, Harvey, Bronson, Matchett, Partin, and Whaley families as some of the ones responsible for saving the Cracker Horse. There were also three small herds maintained by the State; two of these were started in 1984 at the Florida Agricultural Museum in Tallahassee and at the Withlacoochee State forest with horses donated by the late John Ayers. The third was started at Payne's Prairie, near Gainesville, with horses purchased by the Friends of Payne's Prairie, a local citizen's organization.

## Current Status

The Florida Cracker Horse Association (FCHA) was formed in 1989 by cattlemen interested in protecting the breed from extinction. The FCHA Registry was created in 1991 and started with several "foundation horses" (horses of known ancestry from cracker lines of long standing). By the year 2000, the Registry included 130 foundation horses and 285 descendants.

At the start of 2009, there were 964 horses in the FCHA Registry, approximately 30 at Payne's Prairie, four mares and one stallion at the Agricultural Museum, and three mares and one stallion at Withlacoochee.

Although still used predominantly as working cattle horses, Crackers have been used for pulling wagons and farm implements, for penning, for reining, as pleasure and trail riding horses, and have served a wide variety of other functions. In addition, their agility, quickness, and easy ride have also made them popular in several types of equine events such as team penning, team roping, endurance riding, polocrosse, and others. In 2008, the Florida legislature officially designated the Cracker Horse as the State's Heritage Horse.

## Events

Cracker horse owners and enthusiasts are active in general equestrian events throughout the year and they also enjoy several annual events including:





**Figure 5.** A new addition to the herd. Credits: Mary Kate Herron

- The Bob Barry Fall Ride, usually held in mid-October every year.
- The Lake Bradford Trail Ride, held annually in Tallahassee during March.
- The Annual Spring FCHA Gathering and Business Meeting, usually held in April of every year at different locations.
- The Cracker Cattle and Horse Auction, held near Brooksville every November.

The Florida Cracker Horse Association can be contacted at: <http://www.floridacrackerhorses.com/>.

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**Figure 6.** Florida's Heritage Horse. Credits: Florida Agricultural Museum