

The Purebred Spanish Horse¹

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Introduction

The Purebred Spanish Horse, also known as the Andalusian or the Pura Raza Español (P.R.E.), is an elegant breed with ancestors dating back thousands of years to the Andalusian region of the Iberian Peninsula (Figure 1). The horse evolved to have catlike agility, power, and beauty because it faced rugged terrain and needed to co-exist with local wildlife, including wild bulls.



Figure 1. The Andalusian is an elegant horse with an ancient ancestry (Hacienda del Sol's Triunfador XXIV).
 Credits: Bob Langrish

Brief History

Before the written word, and before the Greeks and Phoenicians reached the Iberian Peninsula, ancestors of what we now know as the Purebred Spanish Horse roamed the marshes of Andalucía. Partly because of its antiquity, the exact origins of these horses are not fully known. Some experts consider the P.R.E. to be a native and pure breed, whereas others speculate that the breed is a result of crosses between native Iberian horses and horses brought by the Berbers from Northern Africa in the 8th century during the Moorish conquest (see below).

In 206 B.C., Carthage abandoned Spain, and the Romans extended their rule to the country. The Roman art of this period shows the beauty and significance of this animal in numerous mosaics, paintings, and sculptures. The Roman Empire held control over Spain for centuries, but crumbled to the Goths from Central Europe in the 6th century A.D. The Goths brought their own “cold-blooded” animals (meaning heavy draft horses), but quickly showed a preference for the more nimble (“warm-blooded”) Andalusian. The leading historian of the time, Saint Isidor of Seville, in his *Laudes Hispaniae* declared that the Spanish horses were “the best in the world.”

Muslims from North Africa invaded and conquered most of Spain in the 8th century. Contrary to common speculations, it is not likely that the Andalusian bloodlines were heavily contaminated with Arab/Barb genes during this period because the invading Muslim population was small compared

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to the existing local population (Chejne 1980) and they brought very few horses (Forbis 1976). Also, recently obtained genetic evidence does not support the notion of extensive gene flow between Iberian and Northern African lineages during the Moorish invasion (Royo et al. 2005).

By the 13th century, the Muslim influence in Spain was minimal, and the Iberian Peninsula was united under one crown with the fall of Granada in 1492. The “reconquista” (of Spain from the Muslims) and the extension of the Spanish Empire to the New World were heavily dependent upon the Spanish horses. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a chronicler of Hernán Cortés, once wrote: “After God, we owe these lands to the horses.” During the Middle Ages, Carthusian monks began to breed Andalusians and zealously guarded the purity of their bloodlines. Most of today’s Spanish Purebred Horses are descendants of these Carthusian horses.

The Purebred Spanish Horse has been a prized possession of Europeans through time, and the Spanish horses have been exported and crossbred with many foreign breeds in efforts to transfer some of the coveted characteristics of the Andalusian. French Kings, from Francis I to Louis XVI, were portrayed on Spanish mounts. Likewise, English royalty such as William the Bastard, Richard the Lionheart, and Henry VIII were often depicted riding Spanish horses as early as the 11th century. The Spanish horse was the choice mount of all European royalty and was thus regarded as the royal horse of Europe throughout history.

Breed Characteristics

The horse developed a strong, arched neck and a short, coupled, powerful body because it needed to fight for survival and graze over rough, hilly terrain (Figure 2). The hind legs of Spanish horses are positioned well underneath the body with strong hock action and impulsion, which give the horses a natural ability for collection.

The Andalusian is strongly built, yet extremely elegant. The typical Andalusian stands 15.2–16.2 hands (one hand equals 4 inches or 10.14 centimeters). The most common color for a Spanish horse is grey, but they now occur in many different colors (Figure 3). For many years, the only colors accepted as breeding quality were either grey or bay, with grey being the dominant color. Over time, black became accepted, and later different colors were also accepted, including chestnut and pearl.

The head is of medium length and is rectangular and lean. The Spanish horse’s profile is strongly convex or straight with a broad forehead and well-placed ears allowing for



Figure 2. Purebred Spanish Horses have a strong arched neck with a convex or straight profile.
Credits: Bob Langrish



Figure 3. Grey horses are the most common but many colors are acceptable (clockwise: TriunfadorXXIV, Orgullosa CXLVI, Liviana X).
Credits: Leonardo Mandina and Bob Langrish

a wide range of motion (Figure 4). The ears are small, rounded at the tips, and straight, with a thick, silky forelock resting between them. The eyes are large, kind, alive, triangular, and placed within an orbital arch. Seldom does one see the white in the eyes of a Spanish horse. The face should narrow as it reaches the muzzle, which encompasses the nostrils, mouth, and chin.

The neck is reasonably long and arched, broad yet elegant, and well-crested in stallions. The mane is thick, long, and silky, giving way to well-defined withers that precede a short back. The quarters are broad and strong with a rounded croup (Figure 5). The tail is set low and lies tightly against the body.

Influence on Other Breeds

Due to the multinational nature of many European royal families, the Andalusian has been crossed with many other



Figure 4. The eyes are placed within an orbital arch and the face narrows as it reaches the muzzle.

Credits: Bob Langrish



Figure 5. The Spanish Horse's quarters are broad and strong with a rounded croup (Hacienda del Sol's Orgullosa CXLVI).

Credits: Bob Langrish

European horses, which influenced many breeds such as the Neapolitan, Groningen, and Kladruher. The development of the English thoroughbred was also influenced by Spanish horses imported by British monarchs during the 16th and 17th centuries. Alphonse the Magnanimous introduced the Spanish horse to Italy in 1455. After the Andalusian was exported to Sweden, Hungary, Denmark, Bohemia, and Holland, Spanish bloodlines gave rise to a new breed, the Lipizzaner in 1580. Because the Andalusian was used in dressage competitions in Germany, it also influenced many German breeds, including the Holstein, East Friesian, and Oldenburg, as well as Dutch and Danish breeds, such as the Friesian and Knabstrup. The Mexican Azteca breed resulted from crossing Andalusians with American Quarter Horse and Criollo bloodlines.

Current Status and Events

Because Andalusians were superior war horses, many of them were killed during wars. The Spanish conquest of the New World, the wars with England and the Dutch, and the Napoleonic wars were devastating to the Andalusians. These events, combined with a disease epidemic in 1832 and internal strife in Spain, brought the breed to the verge of extinction in the early 20th century.

Because of this situation, export of Andalusians outside of Spain without explicit Royal consent was forbidden so that breeding programs in Spain could be re-established. Since then, the breed has rebounded and export resumed in 1962. Currently, approximately 175,000 animals are registered with the Spanish National Horse Breeders Association.

Spanish horse bloodlines have been preserved throughout the years. Today the Spanish National Horse Breeders Association (A.N.C.C.E.) is vigilant over the breed. This association organizes the annual National Championship for Spanish Purebreds, SICAB, where the demands of international competition are met and surpassed each year.

Professional Spanish horse judges travel the world to conduct official reviews of eligible stallions and mares to determine their ability to serve as breeding stock. After these horses pass the initial review, they must pass a further test called "qualification." During this official review, the horse is judged morphologically as well as under saddle. The horse is also subjected to x-ray examinations and undergoes a complete physical exam in order to acquire the esteemed rating of a qualified individual. There is also a higher level, "elite"; however, no horse has yet attained this honor.

Today the Andalusian horse is used in many disciplines of the equestrian arts. The Purebred Spanish Horse is extremely versatile and successfully competes in show jumping, eventing, driving, reining, vaulting, bullfighting, western pleasure, and most importantly, dressage (Figure 6). The Andalusian was among the first horses used for classical dressage, and they are still successfully competing at the international level. Andalusians have a natural ability for the discipline that is highly desired among practitioners. The Andalusian has also been extensively used in films and has been featured in *Gladiator*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, *Braveheart*, *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, *King Arthur*, *First Knight*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and many others.



Figure 6. The Purebred Spanish Horse is extremely versatile and successfully competes in many equestrian events.

Credits: Bob Langrish

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