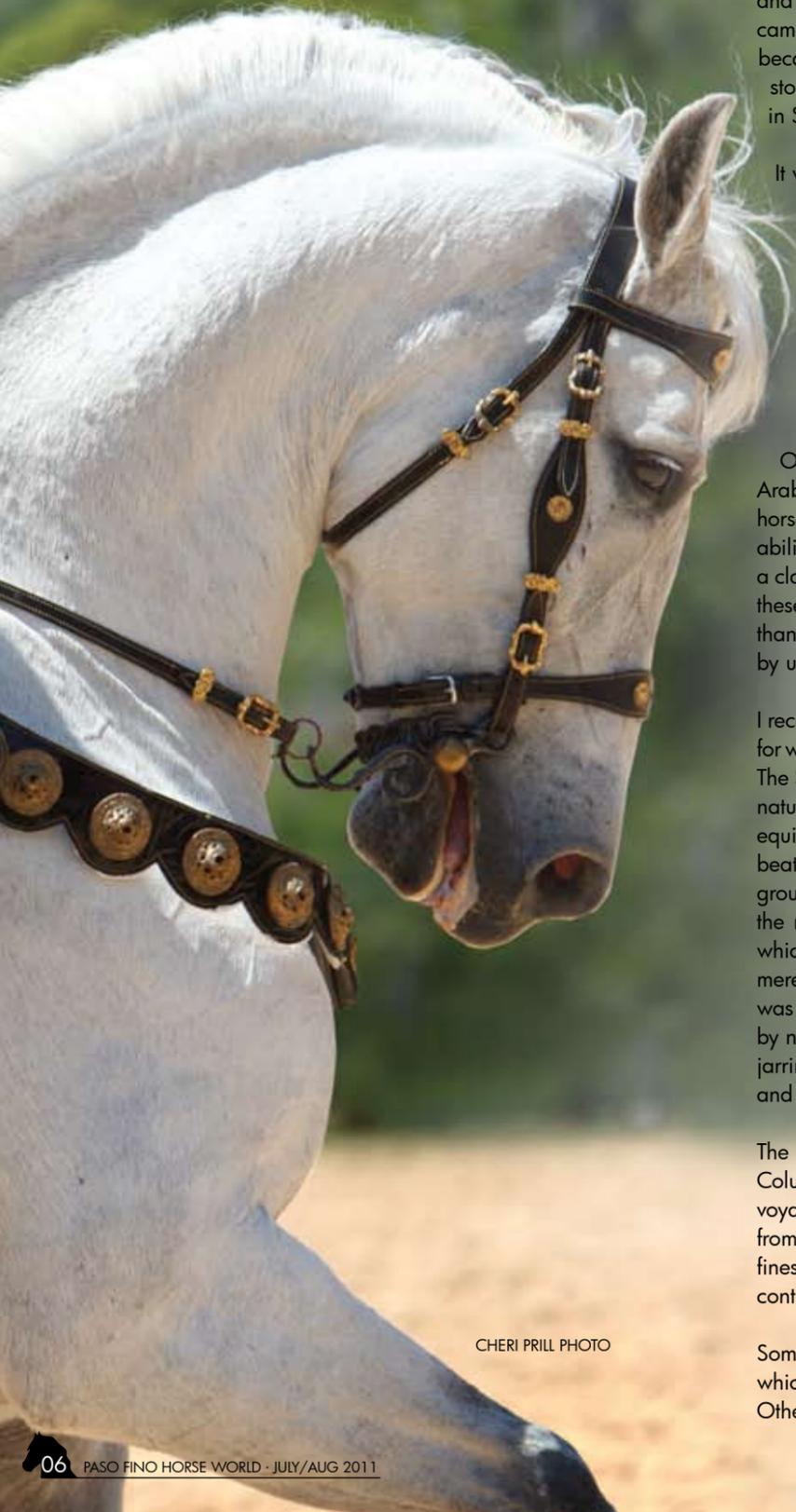


THE PASO FINO Story

By Donald Felty, PhD



Whether true, fictitious, or romanticized, a story reports a sequence of events in the order in which they happened. Julia Scherba de Valenzuela, Ph.D. explains that "stories are how people make sense of themselves and their worlds..." and that "the true and imaginary stories we wish to tell and believe suggest what we value most in this world."

Today, thousands of people all over the world who are in love with the Paso Fino are telling its story in books, articles, websites, and oral tradition. This is my story of how the Paso Fino of today came to be. I invite story-tellers to add to it, correct it, and re-tell it, because in the telling and re-telling we hopefully will get a truer story rather than make a tall tale that never was. My story begins in Spain and goes like this...

It was the age of conquest and discovery.

Seven centuries after Christ and seven centuries before Columbus, an army of Moors, Islamic conquistadors, invaded Spain. Their mode of transport was desert Arabs and Barbs, characterized by stamina and endurance. The Islamic long riders and their horses penetrated the Spanish countryside, and their horses crossed with native stock, including Andalusians.

One of the main types of horses to develop from the Barb and Arabian bloodstock was the Spanish Jennet, a relatively small horse noted for a comfortable gait and most significantly, the ability to pass this gait on to its offspring. Although we often hear a claim such as "Spanish Jennets don't exist anymore as a breed," these horses of medieval Spain were thought of as "types" rather than "breeds" as we think of them today and were differentiated by use and by gait.

I recently heard a story claiming that all Spanish horses were bred for war and bull-fighting. This is why we must tell and re-tell our story. The Spanish Jennet was in fact a riding horse known for a smooth, natural, ambling gait. It was, in my opinion, the first compact equine roadster engineered to get somewhere far away without beating its rider to death. The "amble" was the name given to a group of smooth, ground-covering, four-beat gaits which allowed the rider to cover long distances quickly across medieval roads which were narrow, uneven, and usually in poor condition, often merely packhorse tracks. During much of the Middle-Ages, there was no system of interconnected roads and bridges. Long-riders by necessity, medieval horsemen preferred amblers over the more jarring trotters. Such a gait can be maintained for long distances, and sometimes at considerable speed.

The term Spanish Jennet was in regular use during the time of Columbus. And so it was that in 1493, Columbus, on his second voyage to America, brought twenty stallions and five brood mares from the provinces of Andalusia and Cordela, the "cradle" of the finest of Spanish horses, and settled them at Santo Domingo on a continent without horses.

Some story-tellers say that Columbus and voyagers brought horses which were a mix of the Berber, the Jennet, and the Andalusian. Others simply claim that they brought *the* Andalusian, the Berber,

and the Spanish Jennet and that they brought them into what are now Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other areas of the Caribbean.

Some say that of these three, it was the Jennet, remarkable for its smooth gait, which prevailed in Spain during the age of the discovery and the American conquest. A historical reading, however, reveals that the Jennet was not the sole possession of Spain; it was common in England and France during the time of the Conquistadors. The Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs, Venice: May 1520, describes that after the Kings of England and France had jostled, "the master of the horse of France, who, being mounted on a Spanish jennet, covered and trapped entirely with gold brocade, he himself being armed as a light horseman, with stirrups and saddle jennet fashion, and wearing a short and close-fitting surcoat of brocade, ran a course with a thick spear a good four fingers in diameter at the extremity, and then repeated the feat..." The Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII, July 1536 make reference to the "Stable" and "the jennet delivered to the earl of Surrey." I could go on with many references to the "jennet" in State papers of the period.

During the Sixteenth Century, the horse multiplies and replenishes the Americas. In 1509, Juan Ponce de Leon, then governor of Puerto Rico, imported the first horses from La Espanola to the island. Bred for saddle riding purposes, some demonstrated a smooth lateral gait. Soon, horses became the country's principal export. In 1511, Diego de Velasquez came to Cuba with eight stallions and mares. In 1512, Spanish horses arrived at the Isthmus of Panama, and in 1517, Cortez took seventeen horses to Mexico. The first horses arrived in Colombia in 1524. In 1532, Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro sailed to the Pacific coast of South America and found the Incan empire. Some claim that the horses of this voyage were Barbs, Andalusians, and Spanish Jennet breeding.

By 1550, many horse breeding and training centers had been established in the New World. Ranches were set up on the islands of the Caribbean, eventually in Latin America, South America, and the southern United States. Different types of horses began to emerge, but it was the Spanish Jennet which consistently passed on their smooth natural gait to their offspring - even when blended with Barbs and Andalusians.

Astonishingly, this selective breeding was implemented by South American horsemen in Colombia, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and other Latin countries during the three hundred years before Darwin. Even Darwin, who examined biological specimens as whole entities and drew conclusions from the sum total of their traits, failed to offer any mechanism for how variations within species could arise. Further, this phenomenon of selective breeding within general isolation was in operation for nearly four centuries before Gregor Mendel theorized that the presence of even one dominant factor gives rise to the dominant trait and before scientists had even begun to apply the theory to animal genetics. And it came to pass that these horses were developed into the various strains of Paso horses known in South, Central, and North America today.

As colonization spread, demand grew for these smooth riding horses. In those days, long trips were common and the demand was for endurance horses able to deliver a smooth ride for hours. Also beloved on haciendas and plantations, landowners and managers rode them to survey huge sugar cane fields. Owners of large plantations kept strings of stallions allowed to do only the very collected form of the gait, referred to today as the Paso Fino.

This is my story of how the breed of the horses with the Fine Step, "Los Caballos de Paso Fino," came to be. It seems to me that we must acknowledge and celebrate Great, Great Grandfather Paso, the Spanish Jennet (a type, not a breed of horse) as the source of the smooth ambling gait, the dominant trait which was then refined through centuries of selective breeding and isolation into the Paso Fino. Along with the Fine Step, which defines what the Paso Fino Horse Association describes as the smoothest riding horse in the world, the Paso possesses the toughness and endurance of the Barb, the collection and charisma of the Andalusian, and a magical presence which captures the human heart. I can tell you from my personal experience that no other horse is more loving, loyal, and devoted than the Paso Fino. The Paso Fino, having developed over centuries from the Spanish Jennet, is perfect in form, in motion, and devotion.

Don and Judy Felty are owners of PlentyPonies, a Paso Fino horse farm and wild horse refuge (www.plentyponies.com). Don spends every day being trained and gentled by Paso Finos and wild horses and writing about what he has learned. Like Native ancestors, he believes horses are messengers from the Creator to teach humans. Judy, a breast cancer survivor, rides Chuwach, her Paso Fino gelding, to help heal her legs which were severely damaged by chemotherapy. Don earned a Ph.D. in Leadership from Miami University in 1992. A list of resources is available upon request.



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Stunning
Horse
2011