

Spanish Barbs From Conquistadors to Mounted Shooting



Arizona CSMA Senior Men's Champion 2005 & 2006

The Dragoon Mountain Spanish Barbs project was created by leasing a breeding group of Wilbur-Cruce Colonial Spanish Horses (also known as Spanish Barbs). The owners joined a select group of conservation breeders dedicated to bringing back to popularity the horse that conquered the New World and settled the west. The Barbs, known for their intelligence, diverse athleticism, hardiness and gentle temperament, inspired the quest to save and popularize them. This particular strain of Spanish Barb

developed over hundreds of years in the dry and rocky terrain of Sonora, Mexico and Southern Arizona near the Dragoon Mountains. For those who are interested in preserving ranching horses of the Old West this is a significant group of horses. Nino Cochise, the grandson of the great Chiricahua Chief, Cochise, writes about the barb in his biography, "These thirty horses were good ones: half-feral, half-domestic snip-nosed Barbarie referred to as Barbs and prized by all good cowboys." (Circa 1896) ("The First Hundred Years of Nino Cochise" by Ciyé "Nino" Cochise as told to A Kinney Griffith, p.168) Today this appreciation of the Spanish Barb is being spread by Rick Levin who participates in mounted shooting, hunter/jumper, eventing, trail and cattle work on Dragoon Mountain Spanish Barb horses.

The History

Iberian and Barb horses, both breeds closely related, were the horses the conquistadors brought to the New World. Settlers of the vast new territory of Hispania also imported Barbs directly from Africa when Spain became drained of her original breeding stock from excess exports to European nations and the New World. In 1667, Sir Walter Raleigh found the West Indies as having the finest-shaped Barb horses as he had ever seen (www.ColonialSpanishHorses.org). These horses were bred in the West Indies and shipped to Mexico to begin the conquest of both the North and South American continents.

In the late 1600's Jesuit missionary and explorer Father Eusebio Kino established a herd of Spanish Barb horses along with cattle and other livestock at Rancho Dolores, Mexico to supply the expanding settlements of the Pimeria Alta region. Father Kino developed a mission system reaching from Mexico to San Xavier del Bac outside Tucson, Az three centuries ago. He was known as the "Padre on



Horseback” for his extensive riding. Father Kino and his Spanish Barb horses were said to travel 70 miles a day, making many trips from Mexico City to the Pimeria Alta settlements. Known for the attributes of endurance, easy keepers and hardiness these Barbs were instrumental in settling the West.

In the 1870’s, according to family history, Dr. Wilbur, an early homesteader near the town of Arivaca, Arizona, purchased a group of these Mission horses. These became the foundation stock of the Wilbur-Cruce rancher strain of Colonial Spanish Horses. Dr. Wilbur’s granddaughter, Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce, preserved this isolated herd through much adversity until she sold her family ranch in 1989 to The Nature Conservancy to be included in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Fortunately, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy became involved. Blood typing and visual inspection supported the oral history and resulted in the rescue and conservatory distribution of the herd. Today Eva’s “rock horses” as she fondly called them noting their ability to negotiate very difficult, rocky, mountainous country with skill and ease – are preserved by breeders in several western states. (“A Beautiful, Cruel Country” by Eva Wilbur-Cruce, 1987)

Dragoon Mountain Spanish Barbs

The Horse Ranch is located at the western foot of the Dragoon Mountains in Cochise County, Arizona, bordering the Coronado National Forest. This area represents a rugged and habitable land, which was historically know as The Horse Ranch because early settlers would find their lost horses in this large box canyon. After buying the ranch from an oil company that held the land for nearly 40 years it seemed logical to the owners that this land be returned to its former beauty. Cattle were removed to allow revegetation of the land and after five years the Dragoon Mountain Spanish Barbs project was created to breed and preserve the Spanish Barb horse on the vast range.

Knowing the Wilbur-Cruce horses were self-managed for over one hundred years on a ranch in Southern Arizona the owners of the horse ranch decided to enable this rare strain to develop and bred in a natural setting. Owners, conservationists and breeders believe that the Spanish Barb horses’ traits must be preserved and being raised in a natural setting appears to enhance their well-known mild temperament, intelligence and resourcefulness. Allowing the horses to be disciplined by mares and stallion seems to produce a well-managed, mentally healthy and easily trainable horse.

New horses enter the project in April. Foaling, breeding and settling takes place during the following two months at the headquarters. Foals are socialized and taught to lead during the six weeks after birth. The mares are bred to appropriate stallions. At the end of the mares breeding and foals

socializing a stallion is chosen to stay with the herd for the next 10 months and the herd is taken to the thousand acre pasture. The pasture has native grasses, Mesquite trees, and natural terrain where the horses can roam as they have for centuries. The herd is a family and you see the stallion taking an active role in natural rearing.



Stallion, Padre with ten month old colt Pancho

Training

When the herd is brought in from pasture they have experienced the natural world of horses, and terrain with every imaginable obstacle. They are ready for training in any discipline. The preservation of their keen sense of their surrounding as well as acceptance of the natural pecking order which is vital in horse behavior.

All of the horses are started under saddle around three years old. During round pen work, they learn voice commands, such as: walk, trot, canter and whoa. This helps the horse learn to associate rein and leg cues much quicker and with a more relaxed attitude. The horses are started in a snaffle bit and stay in a snaffle bit until they have a firm grasp of the training fundamentals. Suppleness and softness are stressed at all levels of training.

Trainers note that the Spanish Barb learns very quickly and requires less repetition than most horses. During the first four to six months of training the horse is introduced to several equine activities, such as cattle work, dressage, jumping, mounted shooting and trail in the Dragoon Mountains. An equine discipline is then selected that suites the horse's ability and specific training begins in that field. These horses have competed in hunter/jumper, eventing, mounted shooting and trail competitions.



Dragoon Mountain Spanish Barb horses in the disciplines of Western Riding and Show Jumping

Although the Spanish Barbs have done well in many disciplines they have exceeded all expectations in mounted shooting with two of them taking State and World Championships after only one season of training. The history of these horses and their role in settling the Wild West make a focus on mounted shooting a logical pursuit. Why not, “The horse with a historic past making records for a sport with a historic flair.”



Rick Levin on Hombre at Single Action Shooting Society “End of Trail” event in New Mexico