

CASPIAN HORSES

by Barbara Nefer

Imagine all the best traits of a hot-blooded horse wrapped up into a pony-sized package. Picture a sensitive yet sensible animal that exhibits fiery energy but doesn't panic when faced with spooky situations. Envision this horse excelling in dressage and jumping with a child rider or pulling a cart with two full-sized adults with no signs of strain. If you can imagine this, you've probably got a good mental picture of what the Caspian horse is all about.

Dick and Mary Kearley of Hawthorne, Florida, got involved with this intriguing breed several years ago when their daughter, Anne Marie, had her first pony ride and declared that she was “born to ride horses.” With all the conviction that a five-year-old horse crazy girl can muster, she convinced her parents to get her a pony.

Dick was actually double-teamed, as Mary had decided that she wanted a horse, too, and mother and daughter hit him with it together. Soon the Kearleys purchased an Appendix Quarter Horse for Mary and a little Welsh pony for Annie. The horses were boarded at a local barn, and Dick would watch the riding lessons and wonder just what made the equines tick as they trotted around the little dirt arena.

“I studied psychology in school,” he explains, “and my focus was experimental neuroscience. We used animal models, and it was all based on training through schedules of reinforcement.”

Dick became a professional dog trainer and found that his knowledge of how to reinforce or extinguish behaviors worked well with canines and obedience training. Eventually he entered the plant nursery business and his work with animals went on hold for the next decade. Now, with horses in the family, he mused on why an equine would allow itself to be ridden and commanded by a human.

“I would watch Annie, and it baffled me as to why a pony allows itself to be caught and puts up with child sitting on its back, kicking its ribs and hitting it with little stick. I thought, 'What is the reinforcement for the horse?' A little kid can't really force it to do something it doesn't want to, so why

does it listen to them?”

One day he saw a show about wild mustangs on Animal Planet. Handlers were taking blood samples to determine the percentage of Spanish ancestry, and the horses fought wildly. Dick says, “This fellow came on the scene and said that he could gentle the horses to where they could be handled for the blood draw without restraints. He was actually able to do it, and they said he was a horse whisperer. Even though I had studied animals and reinforcement, I had no idea how he did it. I wanted to know what he knew!”

An internet search quickly revealed information on top trainers like Monty Roberts and John Lyons. Eventually Dick, Mary, and Annie spent two weeks at a Wyoming ranch run by Ken McNab, a Lyons protege. After not riding for 10 years, he suddenly found himself in the saddle working one horse in the morning and another in the afternoon every day. Through this immersion, he learned what made equines tick.

“I learned about their herd instinct and their desire to have a leader, “ Dick says. “Horses are lazy animals and prefer to follow a leader, even it's a human. If you can give them clear direction, they will take it.”

This new knowledge gave him a different perspective on horses, and around the same time “Horse Illustrated” magazine did a profile on Caspians. The Kearleys had been considering getting a nicer horse for Annie because her little Welsh steed liked to pull typical pony tricks. “He would drop his head down to graze and pull her over his shoulder, decide that the lesson was done as soon as an hour was over and jump out of the arena...typical pony stuff,” chuckles Dick.

The Caspian breed intrigued him because it was the right size for a child, yet DNA has proven that it's truly a horse rather than a pony. It's the ancestor of today's full-sized hot-bloods, such as the Arabian.

Once thought to be extinct, these horses were rediscovered by Louise Firouz, an American woman married to an Iranian aristocrat, in 1965. She pursued rumors of very small horses that existed

in the remote villages above the Caspian Sea. She found the horses and noted that they showed distinctive characteristics typically linked to Arabians, such as large, protruding eyes, a prominent jaw, large nostrils, a dished head and a high tail set.

Over the next three years, Mrs. Firouz identified a total of 50 Caspian horses. She purchased six stallions and seven mares as the foundation stock of a breeding center in Norouzabad, Iran.

In the early 1970s, Mrs. Firouz exported nine stallions and 17 mares to Europe, where they became the European Foundation Herd. Although the turmoil and war in Iran hampered her efforts, she developed another breeding center once it was over.

In 1999, with the help of concerned people in the United States and Canada, Mrs. Firouz managed to establish yet another center. By the time she passed away in May of 2008, she had managed to make great strides in re-establishing the breed.

Although the first Caspian came to the United States in 1966, the largest influx happened in the 1990s. Part of this was a nine horse shipment to MCC Farms in Brenham, Texas, in 1995. An internet search led the Kearleys to MCC. They made a trip to Texas, where they were quickly won over by the spunky little horses. They ended up buying two mares and a colt. “Both mares were bred back, so we ended up with a whole package,” Dick says.

Within days, he realized that Caspians do indeed behave differently than ponies. “It's amazing,” he says. “They have the all the attributes of a horse, mentally and in their behavior and movements, but in a size that's easier to work with. Now I had a model where I could play around with the training concepts I had learned.”

As an adult he was too large to ride them, but Caspians have amazing strength for driving so he began working them in harness. “I really enjoyed spending the time with them, training them and understanding how they think,” he says.

Soon the Kearleys had their own farm, DiMar Caspians, which started out small but gradually expanded to 87 acres. Dick explains, “I had the opportunity to buy some adjoining pieces of property. I

was having enough fun with the horses to convince me to buy 'em.” At the moment they have 16 Caspians, including their current crop of foals.

Dick says it's hard to pick the best trait of his feisty little equines because Caspians have so many good qualities. “They have the strength and endurance of an Arab,” he says, “and they have such great minds. I love the fact that they're sensitive but also sensible. When other horses freak out about something, they will continue to freak even if it means hurting themselves. Caspians have the ability to think 'uh oh, this is getting worse. I'd better stop.’”

He points to a time when his trainer was practicing with a chariot and managed to flip it over. The trainer was able to bail out and roll away, and as he did so he called out, “Whoa!” Instead of panicking, the horses immediately stopped even though he wasn't holding the reins and there was a capsized vehicle behind them.

“It was the ultimate opportunity to freak out, but they didn't,” Dick says proudly.

He hastens to add, “That doesn't mean that they're plugs. They're not at all dull or logy. They have the spirit you'd expect from a hot-blood.”

As an example, he cites one of his geldings who makes an excellent driving horse despite the fact that he tends to bounce up and rear. “In September of 2007 I had a trainer tell me he thought I'd never be able to drive that horse because he was always up on his hind legs,” Dick says. “A month later I was using him for demos at the National Drive in Lexington, Kentucky. He still jumps up and down, but he's not doing it out of malice. He's just an active horse and he's ready to go, go, go.

“When I first got him, I put him in the round pen where the difference was really apparent. When you put in a regular horse like a Quarter Horse and stand in the middle to see what it will do, it might go around once or twice. Then it will stop and look at you. If you ask it to move on, it might go ten laps before it stops and wonders 'What am I running for?’

“With this horse, I stood in the middle with my hands folded; I didn't look or speak, and he ran 50 laps in one direction and 10 in the other. His energy level is just so high. He's an extreme case, but

he really illustrates the difference between Caspians and pony breeds.”

Dick believes that the long-held perception that Caspians were extinct was actually beneficial to the breed. “Because they were believed to be extinct for 1300 years, they were insulated from meddling,” he says. “Nobody has been messing around with them genetically. With other breeds, people say 'We need it to be bigger, smaller, thicker, thinner, or whatever' and they dilute the breed. That's never been done with Caspians. They're either purebreds or out-crosses, but the breed itself has not been altered. They're a product of nature, not a product of man.”

In the United States, the horses are registered with the Caspian Horse Society of the Americas. This breed organization states that its purpose is to “preserve the blood line integrity of the purebred Caspian horse.” The society acts as the registrar for purebred Caspians, “maintaining permanent records and engaging in activities which aid, promote, and foster the preservation and betterment of the...Caspian breed.”

Despite their low numbers, the sales price of a typical Caspian is within reach of the average equestrian. According to Dick, a weanling can go for as little as \$500 and prices go up accordingly based on a horse's level of training. A well broke Caspian that is trained to ride might sell for up to \$4000.

“The days of commanding a five figure price because it's a rare genetic treasure are over and done with,” he says. “The problem is finding a gelding because so many people were grabbing horses based on their novelty. They thought they were going to breed them and make a lot of money like the emu or ostrich breeders a few years back. They wanted to be the first one on the block to have the newest breed, and they didn't want to geld the horses.

“Unfortunately, this has created a scarcity of working animals. There are too many stallions and not enough geldings. Due to their size, Caspians need a smaller rider, but the mares are all out there pregnant and you don't want to put a kid on a stallion. Because of that, these horses rarely get a chance to really show what they can do.”

Dick also laments that out of the 600 Caspians currently in the U.S., very few are working horses. “So many are just hanging around in someone's backyard,” he says. He and his horses are doing all that they can to change this. They are active participants in exhibitions and clinics throughout the area and as far away as Kentucky, showing off the Caspian's driving ability.

“I'm not a competitor,” Dick says, “so I don't show them. I don't feel the need to beat the other guy. That's too much stress, and it just doesn't appeal to me.

“My mission is to educate people about the Caspian horse, and I'd rather do that by exhibiting and entertaining. There are thousands of equestrians who've never even heard of the breed. In a show ring, I might be seen by 50 competitors who are already into driving and ponies. At an exhibition, I can reach hundreds of people. There were 1500 in the stands at an expo I attended in Lake Helen/Deland.”

Even though awareness of the Caspian is still low, Dick's efforts are increasing it slowly but surely. He looks forward to the day when this dynamic little horse is used to its full potential. “Most Caspians have only been in the United States since mid-1990s, and most that were imported were quite young. That means that you're dealing with a young population,” he says. “Finding one over ten years old is rare, and it's usually one of the original imports.”

Because of the newness, there are no Caspians or Caspian cross-breeds making waves on the show scene yet. But as they become more plentiful and popular, the day is sure to come when a plucky little horse that almost faced extinction will make its mark on the modern equestrian scene.