

Fascinating Falabellas

These miniature horses are one of the rarest breeds in the United States.

by Jeanie Long

Sharon Morrison is generally a do-it-yourself and get-it done kind of person. She's handy with a hammer and can out-build, out-mow and out-work most men twice her size.

However, when arthritis began to take its toll on Sharon four years ago, simple daily chores became challenging and increasingly difficult. Caring for her full-size horses was a problem, but Sharon did not want to give up her favorite past-time. Her solution? Falabella horses.

Small Wonders

Small Wonders Farm of Ocala, Florida, is a haven for, well, small wonders. Nestled in the outskirts of Ocala, Florida, Small Wonders is home to creatures with small legs—Falabella horses, Jack Russell Terriers and miniature Dachshunds.

Ron and Sharon Morrison, owners and managers of Small Wonders, moved to Ocala in 2000 from Davie, Florida. Ron, a funeral home director, helps Sharon with the animals, but Sharon does most of the work herself, when she's not working part-time at Ocala's Stop N' Smell the Roses Flower Shop.

On any given day, Sharon excitedly shares stories about all the animal residents, including the fascinating Falabella horses.

"I just love horses," she says. "I was watching them run across the pasture after the storm with their heads in the air, tails flying in the wind. Just magnificent. I had tears in my eyes."

Fala What?

Falabella horses, a breed of miniature horses, were developed more than 140 years ago by the Falabella family in Argentina.

"Falabella horses are unique because the Falabella family was the only people in Argentina breeding the small horses," says Laurie Stevens, president of the Falabella Miniature Horse Association.

"They are a separate breed of miniature horses because of their pure bloodline," Laurie explains.

The Falabella Ranch still produces pure Falabella horses in Buenos Aires, Argentina. However, you do not have to travel south of the equator to find this rare horse. Today, Falabella horses can be found world-wide.

“ There are only 500-600 Falabellas in the United States and only about 2,000 world-wide,” Laurie says, illustrating their rarity and uniqueness.

But I Thought it was a Pony

What one would commonly mistake for a very small pony at Sharon’s place is really a miniature horse. According to Laurie, size is the most distinguishing trait between the miniature horse and a pony. The maximum height of a pony is 56 inches, while the maximum height of a Falabella is 30 inches.

Moreover, the features of the Falabella are harmonious and in the same proportion as a bigger horse.

Color Is My Thing

Even though these pint-sized horses are small, they pack a punch with sheer elegance, superb conformation, friendly disposition and striking color.

“Falabellas are the cream of miniature horses,” Sharon says.

In addition to her affinity for miniature horses, Sharon also has an eye and a fondness for color. Many of the breed’s descendents come in a variety of colors including bays, buckskins, palominos, pintos and appaloosas.

“ Color is my thing,” Sharon explains. “Quality and conformation are important, but I love paints and appaloosas.”

According to Laurie, Julio Falabella, the great grandson of the Falabella Ranch, loved flashy-colored horses, and he bred spotted and painted horses into the bloodline. Furthermore, Laurie explains Julio Falabella perfected the miniature Falabella during the 1940s and 1950s by refining the shape and size of the breed.

For the Love of Animals

Sharon’s love for animals goes back to when she and her husband lived in Davie, Florida. For 35 years, she bred and trained standard poodles and Dobermans for show. During her show career, she accumulated numerous honors and championships. She also owned full-size horses and acquired her first miniature horses in 2000 from a neighbor, before moving to Ocala.

“ A friend in Davie had 150 horses running wild on about 1,000 acres,” Sharon explains. In 2000, Sharon’s friend let her pick five Falabella horses from the herd to purchase. Sharon and Ron continued collecting miniature

and Falabella horses each year to expand their herd. Today the farm has 10 horses: two stallions, five mares and three youngsters. Three of the five original Falabella horses still live on Small Wonders Farm and are part of the farm's breeding program.

Miniature Activities

Even though the Falabellas are too small for adults to ride, they are trained and shown just like their bigger counterparts in halter, driving, jumping and costume. Some Falabellas are purchased for pets while others entertain crowds with their tricks. Small Wonders' most accomplished stallion, Rapid Fire, is trained to pull carts, ride for the grandchildren and perform tricks.

Because Falabella Horses do not grow taller than 30 inches, they have become popular candidates for seeing-eye horses. Within the past decade, Falabella horses have proven their ability to be safe, reliable and intelligent guide horses. Cincha, a 24-year-old mare owned by Small Wonders, is the dam of Panda, a black and white pinto mare, who has been trained to be a seeing-eye horse in Pennsylvania.

Quality and Conformation

"The quality and conformation of a Falabella is very refined," Sharon says. She first saw Rapid Fire 15 years ago, and she thought he was the most gorgeous horse she had ever seen. According to his Falabella Miniature Horse Association registration papers, the 24-year-old stallion was imported in 1983 from the Falabella Ranch in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Rapid Fire was given to Sharon as a gift from a friend, and she has used the stallion as the cornerstone in her breeding program.

"If I can't breed the best quality horses, then I don't need [to breed] them," Sharon explains. She admires the breed's magnificent disposition, gorgeous gait and overall elegance. She strives to produce top-quality miniature horses with sound-minds, excellent dispositions and superb conformation.

Additionally, she ensures that all youngsters sold at Small Wonders go to a good home.

In the Feed Room

Nutrition and healthcare at Small Wonders Farm is important. Sharon's philosophy: "Horses are what you put into them."

Since moving to Ocala in 2000, she has provided Seminole Blue Ribbon 10 and Seminole Senior Formula for her equine friends. And the dogs thrive on Seminole Feed dog food as well.

“ Seminole is the best. Everyone here gets Seminole,” Sharon says.

In addition to a consistent feeding routine, Sharon de-worms her horses monthly, vaccinates twice a year, and trims the horse’s hooves every six to eight weeks.

“ They are just like other horses when it comes to health care and maintenance,” she explains. “Since feeding Seminole, my horses have never been ill; no colic, not even a cold.”