

Rare Lusitano Horses Auctioned In Florida

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EQUESTRIAN: Stallion [Cupido](#) Interagro ridden by Heather Bender USA [trainer](#) for Interagro Farms. (Myriam Moran)

WELLINGTON, Fla.—The Lusitano Collection is a registered mark for rare horses imported into the United States by two of the world’s most important breeding farms in Brazil. Interagro Farms and Coudelaria Rocas do Vouga combine their best horses in an annual event that has been celebrated at the Jim Brandon Equestrian Center located in Wellington, Fla., since 2008.

The annual event was conceived by two Brazilian men, one a banking and insurance executive, the other a lawyer, whose vision was to create breeding programs to perfect and maintain bloodlines of horses than can be traced back to domestication 5,000 B.C. on the Iberian Peninsula. The Lusitano horse descended from Sorraias or Marismenos, a primitive breed that dates back in time 50,000 years, indigenous to an area that is today Portugal and Spain.

These strong, intelligent animals were perfected by nature to exist on sparse feed and in rough terrain. They were used in warfare by Christian cavalry that repulsed [the Moors](#) when they first invaded Iberia in A.D. 711. Overwhelming numbers of Moorish soldiers and the connivance of King Rodrigo’s enemies on the peninsula caused the overturn of Christian rule.

The small, sturdy, courageous, gaited Iberian horses were coveted by the Moors and shipped back to North Africa to be bred with their own horses. The Barbs and Arabs began to appear as breeds with Iberian characteristics.

The name of the breed derives from Lusitania, a region named by Roman occupiers and colonists. Early Lusitanians were fierce cavalry riders. They practiced “gineta,” a unique individual form of combat that meant riding fast at an enemy and engaging in guerilla tactics on horseback.

Breeding Farm

Dr. Paulo Gonzaga founded Interagro Farms in 1974, in Intapira, Brazil. The 1,200-acre ranch is located in rolling green country side about two hours north of Sao Paulo. From an original pool of four mares and one stallion that Dr. Gonzaga imported from Portugal, Interagro maintains herds of 800 Lusitanos today.

“We continue with the same strategy we adopted from the beginning. The breed is not well known in the world. Horses sold on the American market four years ago are showing up in [dressage](#), polo, jumping, and Olympic sports,” Dr. Gonzaga said.

“Buyers know now what to look for. An auction is a big unknown. We are sold out for the event. At least we have people showing interest. The number of hits on our website and the number of people asking for facts is increasing.”

His daughter Cecilia is Interagro’s managing director. “It is a fantastic breed. People are astounded. They exclaim, ‘You have five stallions working in the same ring.’ These horses are very smart. They are all 4 or 5 years old. They are teenagers but behave like adults. We are very, very proud of our horses,” she said.

Heather Bender, Interagro's U.S. trainer, was on hand to ride horses during the event and answer buyers' questions. To find the right horse for specific purposes is not always an easy task.

Heather works closely with Pia Aragao, the farm's Brazilian trainer, to begin selection of horses long before the event. They know the horses from birth and watch them interact with their herds, then begin training early at the farm in Brazil.

Heather is a United States Dressage [Federation](#) (USDF) rider and instructor, gold medalist, and licensed USDF dressage judge.

"The breeding program gets better every year. It takes a long time in a program to the perfect characteristics of a breed. Lusitanos are great mounts; they have great temperaments. These horses have substance, they have trainability," Bender said.

Next: They Have a Lot of Stars



LUSITANO HORSE: Trainer Heather Bender shows off the magnificent horse before the auction. (Myriam Moran)

"We have a lot of stars. It is not like racing where the fastest one wins. It is like judging dancing or ice-skating, somewhat subjective. There are 18 Interagro and 10 do Vouga horses. We'll see Saturday night," Bender said smiling. She turned her face to a beautiful 5-year-old bay gelding and the [affection](#) was returned with a nuzzle.

Raul Silva, manager of the Rocas do Vouga Lusitanos was preparing their horses for a pre-event showing. One of the mares, 15.2 and one-half-hand-high Cepa do Vouga was poking her face out of a stall at the Jim Brandon Equestrian Center, looking for affection.

Raul opened the door wide and the mare gently put her face against his arm. When visitors stroked her she responded with gentle affection, characteristic of the breed perfected by Coudelaria Rocas do Vouga.

Manuel Tavares de Almeida owns do Vouga. His daughter is a competitive rider preparing for Pan American and Olympic competitions on Lusitano horses.

The do Vouga farm is located in Itu, Sao Paulo. The 240-acre farm consists of 40 paddocks, stalls, arenas, treadmills, and mechanical guides that aid in training for athletic Lusitanos.

There is a perfect contrast between Interagro and do Vouga horses—the predominately smaller size flea-bitten or speckled grey do Vouga Lusitanos and Interagro's larger horses. The match is perfect for buyers. They can choose traits for their own breeding programs or sizes suited to specific riders and equestrian goals.

"We continue to have a long term view. We remove the biggest block. Buyers that import horses have to have papers, tests, [and] quarantine. Here everything is done. This is a great advantage," Dr. Gonzaga said.

Riders come for tryouts. Having the horses in Florida a month before the event expands the opportunity for tryouts.

"In Brazil if you go to any club where Lusitanos are being ridden you see that ladies, children, and beginners can handle them," the founder of Interagro said proudly.

In the end a 6-year-old grey mare Brincalhona do Vouga, tall at 16 hands, brought the highest bid at the Saturday night auction going for \$78,000. Little Cepa do Vouga sold for \$33,000. Interagro's white Isabel stallion Cupido Interagro, 16.1 and one-quarter hands high, sold for \$43,000. The happy disposition bay gelding Chaos Interagro went on the block for \$20,000.

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Samba dancers brought the audience to their feet with music adding to the Brazilian ambiance. Fire dancers awed guests and the horses, ah! The horses, they drew admiration from an international equestrian interest public.

Lusitanos are here to stay. They are making their mark in competition and working their way into owners' hearts by their alluring dispositions and temperaments.

Dr. John Christopher Fine is the author of 24 books. His work with wild mustangs in the American West has seen the formation of a foundation to save the last of the Spanish mustang's DNA tested back to horses conquistadors brought to America. His articles appear in magazines and newspapers in the United States and Europe.