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With Gladstone just around the corner the Selection Trials are on every sport horse enthusiast's mind, but for Florida Dressage trainer Heather Bender "selection trials" are a quarterly event. Bender is the United States trainer for Interagro Lusitanos of Brazil, and travels to the South American country four times a year to help select horses to present at the annual Lusitano Collection™ International Horse Auction.

Each February, Interagro Lusitanos of Brazil hosts the annual auction in Wellington, Florida. Renowned Lusitano breeder and author, Dr. Paulo Gavião Gonzaga, started Interagro 35 years ago. Dr. Gonzaga's daughter, Cecilia Gonzaga, manages the operation. Today, Interagro is the largest breeder and exporter of Lusitanos in the world. "The Lusitano Collection™ International Horse Auction offers the most prestigious collection of Brazilian Lusitano horses selected specifically for US sport horse enthusiasts," said Gonzaga.

Bender, who is the Director of USA Training, Interagro Farm Export Program, plays an integral role participating with Interagro's staff in the selection of the appropriate horses for the annual auction. "I just returned from another exciting trip to Brazil where I rode and evaluated over 30 of the Interagro Lusitano horses that are being considered for this year's Lusitano Collection™ International Horse Auction," Bender said. "I am really excited with the persistent quality of the Interagro Lusitanos this year."

Bender, who is also the head trainer and owner of Treasure Coast Dressage based at Martin Downs Equestrian Center in Palm City, Florida, said all of the horses that will take part in the prestigious auction are potential sport horses or FEI horses. "This year we have quite a variety of horses, from different colors – bays, grays, buckskins and isabels – to horses of all different sizes and ages," Bender said.

The horses that are offered in the auction make up a collection of the most sought after and well-bred Lusitanos from Interagro Farm. "After many years of doing this – seeing the newborn colts and following them as they mature and initiate training - I have a better understanding of how to choose the horses that will come to the auction," Bender said. "Interagro Farm is home to 800 of the finest Lusitanos in the world and I have to help narrow it down to the horses that will come to the auction in February."

Bender not only travels to Brazil to ride the prospective horses, but also to help train, evaluate and decide on the appropriate training program to prepare the horses for the auction. "I love working with Interagro," Bender said. "When I evaluate the horses I'm not just looking at what we're going to use this year, but what we're going to sell next year as well. I look at them before they are ridden. While Lusitanos mature mentally at an early age they tend to grow slower than Warmbloods, which is something a lot of people don't realize. They don't really reach full height and size until they're eight years old."

Selecting horses for the Lusitano Collection™ International Horse Auction is a process. "We'll start the ground work on about 70 horses," Bender said. "Then we'll start 35 horses under saddle and out of that we pick the ones to present at the auction. One of the things I enjoy about working with

Interagro is that I get to use all the things I've learned over the years about working with horses. I was a USDF judge for over 20 years and have ridden Grand Prix on a number of horses that I've brought up. I've worked in Germany, Holland and England. When I go to Interagro, I get to use all of this experience."

Bender said she tries to bring a variety of horses suitable for both amateurs and professionals to the auction. "Every horse must have three correct gaits, show trainability and also have something very special about them," she said. "I've been working with Interagro Lusitanos for over a decade and continue to encounter many owners and professionals in the US who are so happy with their horses and are 'sold' on the Lusitano. That really makes it a lot of fun."

For more information about Lusitano Horses or the Lusitano Collection International Horse Auction scheduled for February 2011 in Wellington, FL, visit <http://www.lusitanocollection.com> ^[1].

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