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Lusitanos of 'the finest breeding stock' up for sale at auction

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They are training in Palm City before a grand entrance to be held at the Jim Brandon Equestrian Center, 7500 Forest Hill Blvd., today through Saturday. This will be the fifth Lusitano event, the third being held in the U.S. Brazilian breeders Dr. Paulo Gonzaga and his partner Manuel do Vouga have untied their brands for the event that will include a Quadrille demonstration climaxing with an auction of the horses Saturday evening during a formal champagne dinner.

Just getting 30 horses from the breeding farms outside Sao Paulo, Brazil is a major undertaking. It meant flying the horses to Miami, keeping them in quarantine for a week, then transporting them to Martin Downs Equestrian Center in Palm City where they remain for a month before the event.

"This is where the breed is so fantastic. The horses are a primitive breed so handle well. I joke that if a vet had to make a living on these horses the vet would go out of business," Maria Cecilia Gonzaga, manager of Interagro Farms in Brazil, laughed.

Her good humor and love for the horses is so evident it seems a wonder, as she walks through the stable, scratching and kissing the horses, that she will sell any of them.

Heather Bender is Interagro's U.S. trainer. Originally from Ventura, Calif, she has spent her lifetime riding, competing and training show and competition horses. She is currently riding in the Grand Prix, Open Division. Bender has been working with Interagro six years.

"I went to the first auction as a buyer. It was held at the farm in Sao Paulo. It was a good way to start since I could look at the operation from the outside and judge objectively. I do a lot of selecting for people. People competing at any level in dressage. I understand the horses. We work as a team. We have the same vet, Pia Aragao is the trainer in Brazil and we are close friends. We can manage the horses from both sides."

"We have 11 workers that came here with the horses. We have 65 in Brazil. It's like a big family," Gonzaga said.

Many aspects of horse behavior must be addressed. One was the Lusitano's reaction to mounting blocks. "We don't have mounting blocks in Brazil. We use them here and our horses went 'wow.' I called Heather and told her to bring mounting blocks to the farm so we can train the horses with mounting blocks. We made one of course out of wood and it was so heavy, trying to lift it was difficult," Gonzaga laughed.

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Bender was waiting for riders that would participate in the Quadrille. Some were amateur riders that purchased Lusitanos at last year's auction. Some riders were pros that train and compete at high levels of dressage. The first thing she planned was to get the riders on the ground and talk through the maneuvers they would practice when mounted.

Even the music chosen for the Quadrille was specially composed by Eric Bikales for the Pan Am Games. Despite the formal setting when the Lusitano horses will perform in [Wellington](#) on the night of the event, behind the scenes as they were being groomed, prepared and taken out of their stalls they were calm and alluring.

"Our goal is to get the horses placed and get them a good home," Bender said.

"Interagro farms has its doors open to visitors. The horses' X-rays are evaluated by a board of veterinarians. The stallions are already registered in the Lusitano Stud Book. All the boring part is done," Gonzaga said.

Bender goes to Brazil and selects a group of 75 to 80 Lusitanos that have the potential to be brought to the U.S. and offered for sale at the auction. "That group is narrowed down to those we feel are prepared to come to the U.S. It is not a fire sale. We are not getting rid of a whole herd. We plan to do this for many years to come and come back every year," she said.

About 150 foals are born on Interagro Farms every year. Dr. Paulo Gonzaga has been breeding them for about 30 years. He selected the finest breeding stock from Portuguese horses he originally imported to Brazil.

"These horses are born in our house. They have never before been owned. They are not pre-owned horses. We know their food and care. When you buy a horse from somebody you never know their training. We also have post-sale care. Heather knows these horses since they are 3 years old. An owner can get on the phone with Heather and she answers their questions," Gonzaga said.

The names of the horses are chosen by Dr. Gonzaga. Some are named for fine Portuguese wine. "It's not easy to name 150 horses each year starting with the same letter."

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For more information about the Lusitano event, auction and Quadrille and to obtain tickets to the events at the Jim Brandon Equestrian Center, visit <http://www.lusitanocollection.com> or call 877-546-7393.

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