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Lusitano auction introduces breed to locals

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The silence in the massive barn at Jim Brandon Equestrian Center was unusual.

One side of the stable was occupied by a dozen Lusitano mares. Across the aisle, regal stallions stood nibbling on hay and watching the activity in the barn with thoughtful, gentle eyes. Keeping mares and stallions in the same quarters often lends itself to chaos. The peaceful atmosphere in this barn was a testament to the breeding and temperament of the Lusitano breed.

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about the breed he loves.

"The breed is not well known," he said. "There are only 10,000 mares in production in the whole world. We want to give people knowledge of the horse. It's better to bring the auction to people than for people to have to come to Brazil. It's about exposure."

Gonzaga's devotion to the Lusitano breed was passed on to his daughter Cecilia, who heads the stud farm at Interagro.

"The breed is incredible," she said. "They try very hard to please the rider. They understand what

The Lusitano Collection arrived in West Palm Beach from Interagro Lusitanos, a 1,200-acre estate just outside Sao Paulo, Brazil. Paulo Pompéia Gavião Gonzaga founded Interagro on a former coffee farm in 1975. His passion for the Lusitano breed started with a handful of imported horses and has expanded into a successful breeding and training program. He has written five books about the breed and made it his mission to promote Lusitanos. This is the second year the auction has taken place in West Palm Beach. Gonzaga uses the auction as a way to educate people

you want and they give you that."

The Lusitano breed is one of the oldest. Closely related to the Andalusian, the breed originated in Spain and Portugal. Lusitanos are famed for their courage and willingness. They were once war horses and still serve as bullfighting mounts. Their gentle nature makes them the perfect horse for an amateur, while their athleticism and grace make them a worthy partner for a seasoned competitor.

Another fan of the breed is Interagro's American consultant, Heather Bender.

"I never dreamed I'd be working for an auction," Bender said. "I'm a trainer. I was in Minnesota teaching at a dressage clinic. I had a client whose husband was Portuguese. They announced that they wanted to buy a Lusitano. I'd heard of them and I had a lot of respect for Iberian breeds. I helped them pick two horses. I went down to Interagro as a buyer, and I was introduced to the family. "

Bender soon realized how well-suited the Lusitano breed was for her amateur riders.

"I came from the warmblood world. I fell in love with Lusitanos seven or eight years ago when I realized that they filled a huge void for my amateur riders. The majority of the horses that we bring are for amateurs, because that is the biggest market."

Interagro sells 150 horses each year. This year's auction on Feb. 19 and 20 at Jim Brandon Equestrian Center welcomed dozens of new owners into the Interagro family. Those that buy an Interagro Lusitano at auction begin a relationship with the Brazilian breeder that could potentially last a lifetime.

"We have a very strong after-sale program," Cecilia Gonzaga said. "I don't want you to buy my horse, and then I never hear about the horse. I want you to send me pictures and reports about how your horse is doing. We want to follow up. It's a way of improving our breeding and learning."

The Lusitano Collection will return to West Palm Beach next year with a new set of beautiful horses. The Gonzagas and their staff appreciate the city's accessibility and its status as the winter destination for many of the world's best equestrians. A portion of the ticket proceeds will benefit the JBEC as a way for Interagro to give back to the community.

Gonzaga hopes the auction will heighten awareness of the breed he adores so much.

"This is an easy horse," he said. "They are very calm. They talk to people. They like people. They're social. They're different."

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