

## Driving for Perfection

### *Lusitanos come to Aiken*

By SARAH EAKIN

Where training horses is concerned, Peter Van Borst has covered more ground than most. His achievements include unusual projects, from working with horses on movie sets for films such as *Excalibur* and *The Lion in Winter*, to training a performance horse for Las Vegas entertainers Siegfried and Roy – Masters of the Impossible. He has also pursued traditional equestrian routes, working with dressage horses in the United States and consulting for Grand Prix riders. Now Peter has arrived in Aiken, and he's on a new mission – presenting a team and a pair of Lusitano horses to the world of competitive combined driving.

Peter moved his stable of Lusitanos from the east coast of Florida to Aiken “to take advantage of the many recognized driving experts in the area,” he says from his new base on Farmer Road in the heart of Aiken's 302 horse country. Aiken is a far cry from southern Ireland where Peter grew up absorbing knowledge from a community where horses were seen as purely functional.

“People didn't compete with their horses at that time,” he says. “It wasn't necessary. Whether it was agricultural, pleasure or for show, it was all functional. Horses were used for transport and many members of the community would own a horse that could be driven.”

Peter says his own equestrian education consisted of gleaning as much knowledge as possible from the weathered Irish horsemen of his childhood. “Growing up, every ‘old man’ I met was a mentor,” he explains. “They wouldn't ‘teach’ you. You would learn by working for them. I went to work for people because they were good at what they did.”

Today in Aiken, Peter is training a four-in-hand team and a pair of Lusitanos, talented driving horses owned by William Robinson of Robinson Lusitanos. Robinson Lusitanos is based in the U.S.A. and boasts bloodlines that trace to Interagro Lusitanos of Brazil, the largest breeder of Lusitanos in the world.

The Lusitano, the native breed of Portugal, was once used for cavalry warfare, bullfighting and high school dressage. Although Lusitanos are not common in modern-day driving competition, the breed has been successful. Most notably, a team of Lusitanos (driven by Felix Brasseur and owned by Jose Manuel de Mello, president of the Portuguese Lusitano Association) won the 1996 World Championship in the four-in-hand class in Belgium. Peter, who is the US representative for the Interagro stud farm, hopes to further demonstrate their suitability in the discipline, a project founded on the knowledge that Interagro

Lusitanos is a unique source.

“Interagro is using the wonderfully diverse gene pool that they have to produce driving horses,” he says. “We are hoping these horses we're working with now will bear witness to the fact that the Lusitano has the ideal characteristics for a competitive driving horse.”

“The Lusitano has a huge heart, great stamina, wonderful reflexes and impulsion. While you can play with the external appearance you can't breed heart and intelligence so easily into a horse. The Lusitano has the advantage of possessing these qualities naturally. That said, Paulo Gaviao Gonzaga [founder and breeder of Interagro Lusitanos] has been able to produce slightly bigger horses with a longer stride for dressage. His reputation in Portugal and among traditional Lusitano breeders enabled him to acquire and preserve many of the valuable bloodlines of the breed. He is able to employ the resources of such a depth in bloodlines to produce the right chemistry for individual disciplines such as dressage and now driving.”

Interagro Lusitanos initiated a comprehensive driving program in Brazil 10 years ago. But much as the horses at Interagro are bred for competition, it is the love of driving and its practical contribution to the daily running of the 850-hectare Interagro farm that is in evidence on a daily basis. “Mr. Gonzaga loves driving,” says Peter. “It gives him great pleasure to drive horses that he has bred and trained around the farm, and that is one of the best reasons to drive.”

Each year Interagro Lusitanos presents the Lusitano Collection in partnership with other world-renowned breeders of the Lusitano horse. In 2008, the Lusitano Collection made its debut in the United States at a highly successful auction held concurrently with the Wellington, Fla. international Winter Equestrian Festival. This was the first time that such a group of Lusitanos had been sold on U.S. soil and allowed clients to acquire horses that are rare outside of Portugal and Brazil. The 2009 exclusive auction of the Lusitano Collection, scheduled for February 19 and 20 at the Jim Brandon Equestrian Center in Wellington, will include driving horses.

The Lusitano bloodlines that produce exceptional driving horses are unique, according to Cecilia Gonzaga, manager of Interagro Lusitanos.



“Experience has shown that the best driving horses should have some Andrade or Coudelaria Nacional [two of the three major Lusitano bloodlines] ideally not less than 50 percent,” she says. “This mixture will normally produce tall, strong horses with progressive movements indispensable for the sport.”

Peter Van Borst's new base in Aiken will enable him to continue training Lusitano horses as a U.S. extension of the Brazilian Interagro program. Another group of horses is currently training in Southern Pines, North Carolina with Scott Padgett.

“A major part of my decision to move to Aiken is to meet the growing demand of people who want to continue training their Lusitanos in the same philosophy as Interagro,” says Peter. “Interagro Lusitanos and Mr. Gonzaga have a deserved reputation as one of the premier breeders of the Lusitano. This reputation is founded on knowledge, a passion for the breed and a respect for its heritage and well-preserved bloodlines.”

It is this respect for tradition that has largely steered Peter to Aiken.

“I am moving to Aiken because it is one of the very few places left in the US that has a great empathy for high quality horses and the presentation of them. The town accommodates horses first and people second. There could not be a better proving ground to demonstrate the flexibility and versatility of the Lusitano. We are not trying to impose the breed on anybody but we are keen to promote awareness of the Lusitano and welcome anyone who wants to know more about this breed to contact us.”

For more information, please contact Peter Van Borst at 817.368.9447 or email [capall9336@aol.com](mailto:capall9336@aol.com). For information on the Lusitano Collection, go to the website: [www.lusitanocollection.com](http://www.lusitanocollection.com).