

Ancient Warhorse To Ideal Pleasure Mount: Lusitano Breed Available At Florida Auction

By Sarah Eakin

At first, the Olympic dressage arena of Hong Kong may have seemed a far cry from the bullfighting arenas of Europe. But as testimony to the success of breeders in adapting to modern-day requirements, seven Lusitano horses were entered in the dressage competition at the 2008 Beijing Olympics representing Brazil, Portugal and Australia.

The Lusitano, an ancient breed native to Portugal, has its past inextricably linked with bullfighting, cavalry, royal ménages and classical equitation. Typically the breed is powerful in front — a significant factor in its suitability as a warhorse, with riders able to rely on their legs to steer, freeing their arms to take on the enemy.

Interagro Farm, located outside São Paulo, is the world's largest breeder of the Lusitano horse. Interagro founder Dr. Paulo Gavião Gonzaga took on a mission to preserve the bloodlines of the breed and to combine them carefully to produce horses that are becoming increasingly popular among amateur dressage riders and pleasure riders. Armed with the knowledge that the Lusitano is a highly versatile animal and capable of success in many different fields, Interagro is also breeding horses for competition driving.

"The Lusitano has a huge heart, great stamina, wonderful reflexes and impulsion for driving," explained Interagro US representative Peter Van Borst, who is currently training Lusitanos for competition. "Interagro has the luxury of being able to put together a chemistry of bloodlines."

The Lusitano has a proven track record in driving. A team of Lusitano horses won the 1996 World Championship in the four-in-hand class in Belgium.

The Lusitano was first imported to Brazil in the 1970s, and there the history of the breed took a new turn. The Interagro breeding program originally consisted of four mares and one stallion. In the 1980s they expanded, bringing in a large shipment of Lusitanos from Portugal.

Shortly after, the borders were closed for four years due to quarantine restrictions, and no horses could be imported to Brazil. At the time, Gonzaga was laying the foundations for the breed's future outside its traditional roles.

"It was possible and we took the time to look really carefully for the good breeders and the good bloodlines that still ex-

isted in Portugal," he said. "As soon as the ports were open, we imported about 70 mares — not all at once. At that time we had about 100 — the horses we had in Brazil were already producing and some mares came over pregnant."

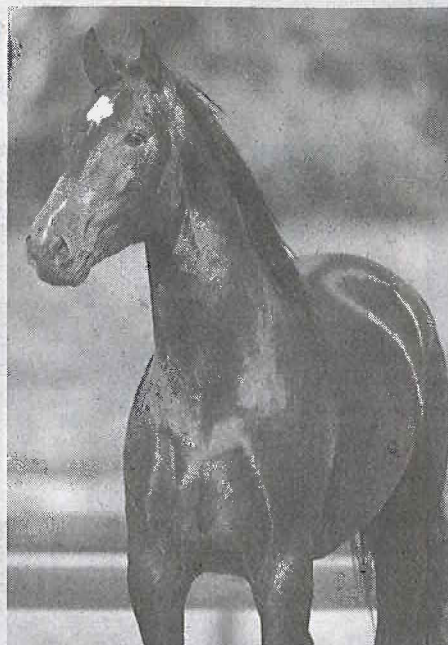
Interagro now boasts about 600 horses. "The breeding season in Brazil is from August to June," Gonzaga said. "Each year we have a new generation."

Gonzaga is passionate about preserving precious bloodlines while creating a Lusitano horse that can compete and be enjoyed in a modern equestrian setting. "You have a universe of amateurs and very few professionals," he said. "Amateur riders constitute the mass market, especially in dressage. Some riders may have difficulty mastering the Warmblood, which does not have the same characteristics that the Lusitano has, including a strong desire to please."

Gonzaga extols the Lusitano's versatility. "The Lusitano can go to the Olympics, but they can also be ridden by children," he explained. "It is the best horse on which to learn to ride. Training with a Lusitano is much easier, much safer. It is a horse that can do everything a Warmblood can do, but it's easier to ride and more affordable to someone looking to buy a horse that is already under saddle."

Now those interested in discovering whether a Lusitano is right for them need travel no further than South Florida. In 2008, the Lusitano Collection made its debut in the United States, the first time such a collection had been sold on U.S. soil. The Lusitano Collection is a trademark established by five of the most important Lusitano horse breeders in Brazil and Portugal. Their combined experience represents more than 300 years of excellence in the selection of the best animals and genealogies in the breed. The 2009 Lusitano Collection takes place on Feb. 19 and 20 at Palm Beach County's Jim Brandon Equestrian Center and gives clients the advantage of acquiring horses without the necessity of importing them from Portugal or Brazil.

In order to ensure each guest is given proper attention, the 2009 Collection has elected to limit the event to 400 attendees. Interested buyers may view, examine and test-ride over two dozen horses during the week prior to the auction. Veterinarian records, including x-rays and tests com-



Arges Interagro (above) and Alter Interagro (below) are examples of the unique Lusitano breed available at a February auction in South Florida.

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pleted prior to the event will be available for guests' viewing. At the end of the testing period, guests will enjoy cocktail receptions, entertainment and networking events culminating with the gala dinner and auction. For more information, visit www.lusitanocollection.com.