

***Little-known history of our native breeds reveals great sport horse genes.***

*by Kathleen Kirsan*

For those of you who have been immersed in the Warmblood and sport horse culture of the last 30 years, I have a surprise for you. America has excellent sources of sport genetics in our native breeds. Huh?

I know it is a shocker, but it is true nonetheless.



During the research process for my first book, *North American Sport Horse Breeder*, I discovered America has had a sport horse breed continuously from the early 1600s, and that breed, the Running Horse, is the root source of our domestic breeds that succeed at sport today, which includes the American Thoroughbred (different from every other Thoroughbred population because it contains American Running Horse lines), American Saddlebred, Standardbred, Morgan, Quarter Horse and our own domestic “Warmblood” which is the Hunter Horse (a breed we have been selectively breeding in this country for 300 hundred years).

I must be kidding, right?

How come you have never heard of this equine history before if it is true? First, we were never told about our domestic sport heritage, a legacy that is as old as our country: America has always bred sport horses. And we did not understand the genetics of the modern sport horse, nor did we remember we have been breeding this same type of horse since colonial times.

I uncovered this history through study, of course, but also being a Tesio methods breeder, I built up an extensive database of pedigrees and, in so doing, I was able to trace the origins of our domestic horses all the way back to the colonial era. What I found both astonished and delighted me.

One result of this education is that I have a newfound admiration for the genetic essence of our domestic breeds. I ascertained our original Running Horse breed arose from the same root source as that of the English Thoroughbred—at the same time.

### American Running Horse



Our American Running Horse was a small race-saddle horse that possessed prodigious amounts of speed and stamina along with natural gaits and a friendly disposition. Through studying the import of horses to our colonies, I found the majority of our race-riding stock came directly from Ireland, a breed known as the Hobby, an ancient Celtic breed—Ireland has been racing horses for 2,000 years.

I'll bet you were never told that America had its own racing breed that was every bit as fast as the Thoroughbred, all 100 years before the first Thoroughbred got here. I know you didn't hear about it because neither did I in all my years reading and listening about horses. Further, as far as I can trace pedigrees back, all modern sport ability arises from that ancient root, not some mythical European horse, but the ancient Celtic horse of Ireland.

At the time of its existence, it was the only horse breed that had true speed in the world, and it gave its athletic gifts to its direct descendants the English Running Horse and Scottish Galloway, and surprise: the American Running Horse. The concentrated dose of speed and true athleticism into our earliest stock is why our upstart nation has the three greatest racehorse breeds in the world: American Thoroughbred, Quarter Horse and Standardbred.

Written by Kathleen Kirsan  
Friday, 30 December 2016 01:18

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Our colonial Running Horse was a sport horse of the highest grade, able to run races at all distances from quarter-mile sprints to four-mile heat races, several times a day, both at the pace and the gallop, all 100 years before its cousin the English Thoroughbred got off the boat onto our shores. And it was an excellent saddle horse and superb Hunter; it was tough and durable, friendly and comfortable, surefooted, courageous and able to jump well—they were prized possessions of our forebears.

### Racing & Hunting

The racing and hunting branch of the breed was first established in Virginia, and 50 years later in the Massachusetts Colony (Narragansett) and New York (Hempstead racetrack on Long Island). Horse racing and the breeding of fine racehorses quickly spread to all the colonies for both race, hunt and saddle use. (A detailed account of this history is provided in my new book, *Standardbred Sport Horses*—out this spring).

The breeders of these sport horses were the Plantation owners, and they imported the best sport stock directly from Ireland and England. The horses were bred not just to race, but they were expected to be comfortable saddle horses (gaited—posting had not been invented) and talented hunt horses. The early colonies had a terrible problem with the native eastern wolf, so hunting on horseback was not just a sport but also a necessity.

Hunting on horseback was a way of life; it was part of the culture, as was the breeding of fine hunters and racers, a culture imported from England and Ireland along with its horses. And scheduled hunts were an occasion for celebrating with feasts and dances as well.

Our modern light horse breeds of Thoroughbred, Morgan, Standardbred, Saddlebred, Quarter Horse, Missouri Fox Trotter and Tennessee Walker all directly descend from this same sport horse, which means our native breeds all carry the best sport genetics in the world. So, no matter how you are using those breeds, they have the innate ability to perform in all manner of sports—they are sport horse down to their roots.

A few years ago I would have had trouble swallowing this knowledge, for one thing I had no understanding about naturally gaited horses and how the fastest and most agile horses

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descend from them; but not now, for after years of research I have amassed the evidence that the best sport bloodlines in the world today come from these early sport horses both in the British Isles and on our continent. The equine historian and breed organizer John Wallace (1800s) and the more modern scholar Alexander MacKay-Smith (1900s) were onto this truth and both determined that speed both at the trot and the gallop originate with the bloodlines of those Hobbies.

### **Not Arabians Afterall**



The recent advances in genetics, such as mitochondrial DNA studies, have confirmed what the scholars' research taught them: that speed and sport ability come from these ancient horses. Just in the last few years continued mapping of the equine genome has surprised the researchers again by showing them that the sport base of the Thoroughbred was not Arabian horses, but what they call "native" English and Irish mares, these mares we know from research were Irish Hobbies and their immediate descendants: Scottish Galloways and English Running Horses, that were the base of the pre-Thoroughbred racehorse studs in England.

These same breeds of horse were the base of the American colonial racehorse as well. And this colonial racehorse became the foundation of our domestic race, saddle and sport horse breeds.

Further, the sporting breeders of our colonies specifically selected for speed, stamina, soundness, correct gaits, courage and good disposition, thereby solidifying the most cherished characteristics of the original Hobby.

Because many of our American breeds have common ancestors in those early sport horses they also have a natural genetic affinity for each other in proven sport genes. Certain populations of these racers were bred to excel at heat-racing, and by the early 1800s our native breed had exceeded all previous world distance records. The level of speed, stamina and soundness required for their performance ability demonstrates they carry the finest sport genetics ever developed anywhere. Those same extreme genetics are sitting right there in the

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background of all our domestic sport breeds which presents an enormous opportunity for the enlightened line-breeder.

### **Impact On Modern Breeding**

How can a horse from the 1800s affect the performance of our horses today? By carefully creating a “critical mass” in those superior genetics you will begin to see the type of those long ago super stars present in your foals.

Dr. Bowling taught that, normally, genes do not change, and they travel down the generations in clusters. When we build up the back ground lines in superior stock, there is a point where the genetic balances tip to the components of those stars of yesteryear. This means by selective breeding we can reactivate and concentrate the best genes for our goals (Tesio methods).

This information on the superb genetic base of our native horse breeds is far too important for us as breeders to not explore and exploit. It is now my goal therefore to change all that, to help us discover the hidden gold in our domestic sources and to demonstrate how to unlock that potential. This will require identifying the key bloodlines in our breeding designs that are potent sources of the sport talent which will give us the sport success we have been searching for.

We have the greatest concentration of true sport genetics right in front of us in our domestic breeds. We have only to identify and make dominant those bloodlines in our foals to see success in our quest for talented sport horses.

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*Author Kathleen Kirsan operates [www.sport-horse-breeder.com](http://www.sport-horse-breeder.com). For more information on the amazing sport resources that are in our domestic breeds, how to understand and interpret pedigrees, learn our true equine history and place in the international arena, and read reviews of my books and where to find them for ordering visit [www.sport-horse-breeder.com](http://www.sport-horse-breeder.com).*