

The Magazine for Responsible Horse Owners

HORSE[®]

I L L U S T R A T E D

JANUARY 1995

U.S. \$2.50 • CANADA \$2.95

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Does Your Horse Have Healthy Teeth?

Russia's Own: The Bashkir Curly



A Wave of Brilliance

BY BETSY SIKORA SIINO

Once upon a time, there lived a 13-year-old girl in Nova Scotia who for years had ridden a sweet little pony in 4-H. But now she was outgrowing her faithful mount. It was time for her to move up to a larger horse.

So begins the story regaled by Nevada rancher and equestrian Sunny Martin.

The girl and her mother traveled to the nearby sales yard in search of a new mount, and “up to the girl comes this strange little horse,” continues Sunny. “They didn’t know what it was; it was kind of ratty looking, and it was even lame because its hooves were trimmed too short. The girl looked at the horse, and thought it was funny-looking, and lame besides, so she moved on. But every time she looked at another horse, that little lame horse would come and get in between her and the horse she was looking at. She couldn’t look at another horse. He wouldn’t stand for it. He was not going to let her get out of there without him. He knew he wanted to go home with her. So, finally, she bought him.”

The young girl took the little horse home, cleaned him up, got him sound again, and began riding him English and western for 4-H. In a few months, she proclaimed him ready for show and entered him in 10 English and western events in an open show sponsored by the local Arabian club. “And when she walked away from that show,” says Sunny, “this little horse, trained by this 13-year-old girl, had nine first places and one second out of 10 events. Now that is perfection.”

And not at all unusual for a Bashkir Curly.

Sunny Martin has a vast collection of such stories about the curly-coated breed that captured her heart almost 30 years ago. Each of these tales illustrates clearly that there is far more to this horse than a coat of lustrous curls. Lying beneath that Shirley Temple coat beats the heart of a most unusual animal that has perplexed and enchanted the human species for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

There's a lot more to the Bashkir Curly than just its incredible coat.

FAITH A. URIDEL





RENEE STOCKDALE

Common Bond

It seems an aura of mystery surrounds this capable, good-natured horse. For decades, equine historians have sought the breed's roots, traced its lineage, speculated on its migrations. Few people have had the privilege of seeing these rather rare horses in person, but when they do, they find themselves ensnared in a spell that the Curly has cast on humans for ages.

The launch of Sunny Martin's own passion for Curlies was grounded in this mystery. The year was 1968. She and her husband were visiting with a fellow rancher friend who, remembers Martin, told them he had just caught "the cutest horse you ever saw," a 3-year-old Mustang stallion out on the range who was "curly from his nose to his toes."

"I don't know, something went off like a bright light inside of me, and all of a sudden it hit me," says Martin. "Something told me that sight unseen, I had to have that horse. My husband just sat and looked at me like I was out of my mind."

The Curly has retained the uncanny intelligence typical of its ancient ancestors.

The next day, the Martins went to meet this horse. "Here was this 3-year-old stallion caught out in the wild. They'd been chasing him for two years since he was a yearling. They finally got a rope on him and took him to the ranch and tied him in the barn for the night. When they went out the next morning, he acted like he'd been raised in the barn, he was so gentle. They just saddled him up and rode him away and that was it."

That was it for Martin, too. In the wake of three recent back surgeries, she had been warned by her doctor to give up riding, but the moment she saw that little Curly, those orders were forgotten. "Now, stepping onto a 3-year-old wild stallion is taking a chance, but he was so sweet," she remembers. "So I got up on him, and I never felt safer on a horse in my life. He was as sweet as he could be."

Before Martin knew it, the horse,



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Curly Q, was hers. "I've handled a lot of wild Mustangs in my life, and they just didn't act like this horse," she says. Martin went on to devote her life to the Bashkir Curly, founding the American Bashkir Curly Registry in 1971 for the preservation of the breed, breeding them on her own Nevada ranch, and even riding Curlies in the New Year's Rose Parade year after year to the delight of spectators nationwide.

But some questions may arise in the wake of such stories. Why would a horse called the Bashkir Curly, a horse named for a region within Russia's Ural Mountains, be discovered among a band of wild Mustangs roaming the American West? Well, the answer is rooted in the fact that this just isn't your ordinary horse.

Little is known about the history of the Bashkir Curly. While most will agree it probably hails from Russia's mountain regions, its influence seems to have spread far beyond those reaches. In other words, no one truly knows where the Bashkir

Reportedly easy to train, Curlies make calm and reliable mounts.

Curly came from, but we do know where it seems to have been. Its unusually curly coat has made sure of that.

A Puzzlement

Although the Bashkir Curly is today considered both a Russian and an American breed, historically it seems to have been quite a world traveler. Equine historians have found ancient evidence of curly-coated horses in China, Turkey and North Africa, and even in a stuffed curly-coated racehorse in England. Native American legends also tell of curly-coated horses, which would seem logical considering their presence among the Mustangs, but becomes a mystery in light of the fact that many of these legends span back before the time in which the Spanish brought the horse to the New World.

At the heart of this breed's influence are the obviously prepotent genetics that



have enabled the Curly not only to spread its gifts throughout the world, but also to preserve its own characteristics despite much cross-breeding. It has somehow retained the characteristics typical of ancient mountain horses and ponies: an abiding love of people, an uncanny intelligence, stamina, surefootedness, hard feet, a compact physique, a thick mane and tail, and ease of keeping. The Bashkir Curly, however, offers some interesting variations on this theme.

First, of course, is the coat. Hypoallergenic and usually chestnut, bay or light brown, this unique coat with its feathery, barbed construction, has been proclaimed by evaluators at Texas A & M University to be more akin to angora than to horse hair. In fact, its handlers both past and present, both Russian and American, have been known to harvest it, spin it and knit it into clothing.

The luxurious, curly coat, ranging from tight curls to lustrous waves, was probably of Mother Nature's invention, developed to keep the horse warm during the winters of the breed's homeland. Indeed even today the healthy, well-coated Curly can withstand winter temperatures well below the freezing mark, in the summer shedding their thick locks in favor of a cooler, smoother summer coat. The horse may also shed its mane and tail, creating an effect rather unsettling to those not accus-

Foals born with curly coats often have wonderful temperaments.

tomed to such characteristics.

But such shedding just contributes to the portrait of a most unusual horse. Aside from its curly coat and almost supernatural affection for humans, it has even been kept in Russia as a source of milk for the unusually abundant amounts of the fluid young mares may produce.

The unique, rather un-equine characteristics of the Bashkir Curly seem to come as a package deal. Breeders have found that if a foal inherits the curly coat, the other characteristics come right along with it. One who speaks from experience on this is Sandra Hendrickson of Greycoat Farm in Indiana. In praising this obviously prepotent breed, Hendrickson has seen that when the horses are born curly, they also exhibit the sensible, gentle, people-oriented temperament; the unusual shedding patterns; the short back; the heavy bone; the thick mane and tail; and the forward way of going.

"They just don't fit the norm, and you can't even train them like normal horses," adds Sunny Martin. "When you want to train a Curly, you've got to throw the book away. Most people figure that horses learn through repetition. But our horses hate to do anything more than once or so. You can hook them up to a carriage or



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a sleigh for the first time, and they just go off as though they know what they are doing. They hate repetition. They get so bored. They sit around and think, 'Why are we doing that today? I thought I learned that yesterday.' That's the attitude they have."

"My trainer has worked with warmbloods and Thoroughbreds," says Sandra Hendrickson, who competes with her Curlies in dressage, "but when she started working with my horses she said, 'Sandra, you just don't understand. These are the easiest horses I have ever trained.'"

Although most people are fascinated upon seeing a Curly, the horse has, from time to time, been the victim of misunderstanding. Humans being customarily distrustful of all that is different or unusual, have been known to suspect a horse with a curly coat. This horse must be somehow weak or inferior, best suited only for the slaughterhouse. The case against this is presented by the horse itself and the astounding prepotency that has kept its kind alive for thousands of years.

American Curlies

While Native American legends proclaim otherwise, the first Bashkir Curlies documented in modern American history were discovered in 1898, when an 8-year-old boy named Peter Damele spotted three of the curly-coated horses in central Nevada. From that point on, America

knew Curlies, horses of presumed Russian breeding, had infiltrated herds allegedly made up of Spanish bloodlines. How this happened, no one could say for sure.

"We're not sure if they went from here over to Russia or from Russia over to here," says Martin. "But I figure that since most of them are found in the Northwest, the Russian trappers may have brought them over here when they were settling the West Coast, all the way from Alaska to San Francisco."

Today America's Curlies, most of which are related to those found by the Dameles, are different from those in Russia, but their gifts and abilities bind them as members of the same illustrious family.

For registration, the ABCR offers several divisions for different types of horses exhibiting that curly coat: divisions for full-sized saddle-type Curlies, as well as for ponies, draft horses, miniature horses, and half-bred straight-coated geldings and mares. Equally variegated are their colors and patterns and the disciplines in which they excel.

Sunny Martin has seen Curlies beat Thoroughbreds

Curlies come in several different size types, and in every color imaginable.

over jumps, Arabians on the endurance trail, Quarter Horses in cutting and gymkhana, warmbloods in dressage and Morgans in driving. "This shows what they can do," she says. "They see something once and do it. They use their own intelligence and their own ability, and just do what they have to do."

They also happen to be easy keepers, which can be both a curse and a blessing. "We don't shoe them, we don't grain them, we don't box stall them, we don't blanket them, we don't shave them or anything," says Martin.

As a result, the ABCR helps competitors deal with the inevitable obstacles that can arise from the presence of such an unusual horse in the show ring. "We have

The Curly's thick, wooly coat developed as protection from subfreezing temperatures and icy winds.



JOAN BYRNE

to send out a letter to shows telling them that we do not shave or shear our horses and we do not want to be pointed down for that," says Martin. And just how does this work? "Well, we've won an awful lot of classes. We give 100 percent credit on performance. We think that's what you're in a show ring for. 'Course we want them neat and clean, but we want them appreciated for what they are."

Sandra Hendrickson joined the Curly camp when she was seeking a quiet, affectionate mount following a hip replacement. Given her subsequent success in the very proper, very conservative dressage ring with her Curly stallions, she has obviously overcome any perceived prejudices to a horse with a coat of curls. "I've even had judges come out and ask if they can pet my horses," she says, "and they're amazed at how soft they are and how heavy their bone."

What many also find amazing is the Curly's intelligence, which Sunny Martin describes as "just dog-gone annoying sometimes." Martin, who has spent her life with wild Mustangs, racing Thoroughbreds, gaited horses "and every-

thing in between," has enlisted her Curlies for every type of activity but racing. "We're not trying to breed speed into them," she says. "We want to keep that marvelous disposition, and when you start breeding speed into horses, you usually get hyper horses. We think we're raising the finest all-around family horse you can own."

Yet through modern-day breeding practices, crossing Curlies with Curlies and with other breeds, some enthusiasts worry that the prepotent genetic makeup that makes the Curly both curly and affectionate might be weakened, diluted or lost. Such concerns, just as those expressed by early enthusiasts who mourned the Curlies that were slaughtered after being labeled inferior, are what led to the establishment of the ABCR in the first place. We can only hope they will continue to guide the actions of Curly breeders today.

The object of their passions are certainly worth the effort. "Rarely do you come across a Curly that doesn't have that super disposition," says Martin of one of the remarkable characteristics she has worked

so hard to preserve. "They're born loving people, and they've got to be with people. They don't care if they have to walk into the house to visit; they will do it."

And why are Curlies so friendly? "I think they just haven't been spoiled by man," says Martin. "I think these horses were probably raised with families, and they just have this super affinity for man. I don't know why, because man doesn't treat anything very well. He's really not that good to animals, so I cannot figure it out."

As yet another facet of the mystery that is the Bashkir Curly, perhaps this unusual kinship this horse feels for man is simply something we are not meant to figure out. Apparently, for whatever reason, this horse sees more in us than we see in ourselves.

For more information on the curly-coated horse, contact the American Bashkir Curly Registry, P.O. Box 246, Ely, NV 89301-0246. 🐾

The author is an award-winning writer and a consulting editor to HORSE ILLUSTRATED.