

Ride the Wave

BY AUDREY PAVIA

BREED PROFILE

The American Bashkir Curly is a **willing** and personable mount.

The air is dry and the landscape stark in the desert regions of Nevada's Great Basin. Above the desert, mountains tower with snowcapped peaks. Below it, the wind whistles through canyons created by mineral-laden creeks. More than 100 years ago, in this rugged land, a very special breed was born. It was here that rancher Peter Demale first discovered the horse that would come to be known as the American Bashkir Curly.

The year was 1898, and Peter and his father John were riding the remote Peter Hanson mountain range one day when the pair spotted three wild horses. The Demales had seen plenty of Mustangs before, but the vision of these three animals stopped them in their tracks. Instead of having a straight hair-coat like other horses, these three had coats made up of tiny ringlets that covered their entire bodies.

Taken with the uniqueness of the horses' appearance, the Demales did not forget them and went back to their homestead with stories of the amazing curly horses.

While the Demales may have been among the first settlers to notice this curly-coated horse, the Sioux and Crow Nations had known about curly horses for many years before this. In the tribes' pictorial Winter Count, a calendar of 1801 to 1802, a sketch appears of a curly horse among the Indian ponies. Also, that same winter was known among the tribes as the winter the Sioux stole curly horses from the Crow.

Tougher Than the Rest

The winter of 1932 was terribly harsh on the Nevada range. Consequently, almost all of the Demale's horses and livestock perished. Only a few horses were found alive during spring roundup, and among them were a few curly coats. The Demales used these survivors to start their herd of saddle horses all over again.

Twenty years later, another killer winter struck the range, but this time, only four curly horses were left alive. Impressed by the Curlies' ruggedness, the Demales decided to use these four horses—three mares and a colt—as the foundation of their saddle horse stock from then on, deliberately breeding for the traits of curly coats and hardiness they saw in this horse. The mares were bred to an Arabian stallion and a Morgan stallion, and the curly-haired colt became the foundation American Bashkir Curly stallion, Copper D.

In the world of American Bashkir Curlies, the horses of the Demale family make up the bedrock of the breed. While Curlies were also found on Indian reservations in South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming, a great many of today's American Bashkir Curly horses can be traced back to those four curly-coated horses that survived the Nevada winter of 1952.

Beyond these American horses, however, the origins of the American Bashkir Curly remain a mystery. Early breeders struggled to discover European origins for the Curly horse and supposed the breed was derived from the Russian Bashkir. However, it was later proven that Russian Bashkirs do not feature curly coats, and so this assumption was shown to be incorrect. Since the name "Bashkir Curly" had already been in use for some time, the moniker stuck and the breed remains the American Bashkir Curly Horse.





Photo courtesy of American Bashkir Curly Registry

The curly hair of the Bashkir Curly has been shown to be very similar to that of mohair, a type of coat found on a certain breed of goat.

A Registry Born

The Demale family continued to breed Curly horses well into the 1960s, with other breeders joining in. Because the gene pool was so small, breeders regularly outcrossed Curly horses, mixing their blood with that of Arabians, Morgans, Appaloosas, Saddlebreds, Quarter Horses and draft animals. A later addition to the Curly outcrossing was the Missouri Fox Trotter, a breed that was added to produce a gaited horse with a curly coat.

In 1971, a group of Curly fanciers got together and started an organization they called the American Bashkir Curly Registry (ABCR). Designed to preserve and promote Bashkir Curlies, the ABCR became the first group to register Curly horses as a breed. Founders of the registry wanted to preserve the traits that they had come to associate with curly-coated horses; namely, a distinct personality and physical hardiness that came along with the curly hair coat.

The crossing of American Bashkir Curlies to horses of other breeds continued for decades as breeders attempted to broaden the Curly gene pool. Since the gene for curly coats and the characteristics that come with it are readily passed along, Curly

crossbreeds often were born with curly-haired coats.

To accommodate the various levels of Curly horse breeding that resulted from all the outcrossing, the ABCR established five different Curly horse divisions: Full Bashkir Curly; Three-Quarters Bashkir; Half Bashkir; Straight; and Curly Cross. In the last few years, the Full Bashkir Curly division has contained the most horses: 2,595 of the approximately 3,000 Curlies registered with the ABCR.

In 1999, the board of directors of the ABCR voted to close the registry's stud books to horses of other breeds, virtually eliminating the practice of crossbreeding within the registry. Currently, the only new horses that can be registered with the ABCR are those whose sire and dam are also registered American Bashkir Curlies.

Curly Characteristics

The American Bashkir Curly's most obvious breed characteristic is its curly coat. Readily visible to the eye, this curly coat resembles that of a poodle and is only present during the winter months. Bashkir Curlies shed their curly coat in the spring, along with the majority of their curly manes and tails, only

People who own Curlies describe their horses as being exceptionally people-oriented.



Dusty Perrin

A Question of Outcrossing

It's not unusual in the horse world to find breed registries that allow outcrossing—the mating of horses outside the breed. In registries that allow outcrossing, the offspring of crosses may be registered and so will go on to contribute their half-bred genes to the breed.

The subject of outcrossing is one of debate within the American Bashkir Curly breed, where the practice was allowed by the American Bashkir Curly Registry (ABCR) until 1999. "The majority of our members wanted the ABCR to be a closed registry, and the board responded," says Nancy Scott, vice president of the ABCR. "People were concerned that all the outcrossing going on was diluting the Curly's characteristics. By closing the books, we are trying to reclaim the characteristics of the Curly horse."

To help promote the idea of a "purebred" Curly, an organization called the Early Curly Breeders Association was also formed in 1999. "We are a group of breeders who are trying to breed Curly to Curly only," says Denise Conrad, a founding member. "We want to promote the Full Curly and support what the ABCR is doing with the closed books."

However, not everyone within the Bashkir Curly breed is in agreement with the ABCR action. Last year, a new registry was formed called the American Curly Horse Association (ACHA) designed to give those who wish to continue outcrossing the Curly horse a place to register their horses. "Many Curlies have poor conformation and still need the input of other breeds to improve it," says Wendy Saursmith, secretary of the ACHA, who disagrees that the majority of ABCR members wanted the books closed. "Also, not everyone wants the typical 14.2-hand western type typical of the Curly. Right now, there is a big demand for gaited and sporthorse Curlies, and these are hard to find."

The ultimate question of whether American Bashkir Curlies should be outcrossed is one of intense debate within the breed. But despite the controversy, one thing is for certain: Those involved with this breed have a tremendous passion for these horses, regardless of what side of the fence they are on.



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—W.C. Fields

to grow them back the following winter season.

The curly hair of the Bashkir Curly has been shown to be very similar to that of mohair, a type of coat found on a certain breed of goat. Like mohair, Bashkir Curly coats can be woven and spun into yarn. In fact, a number of Curly aficionados make an assortment of handmade clothing items out of the curly coats their horses shed every year.

Another unique aspect of the curly coat is its propensity to be nonallergenic. Most people who are allergic to horses have no problem being around Curly horses—even those horses that have shed out their ringlet coats for the summer.

Greg Oakes and his wife Sonja breed American Bashkir Curlies in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, and have found many buyers who are allergic to horses. "The majority of our buyers in Canada are people with allergies to horses," says Oakes. "They come to our farm with their medication in hand, but so far, nobody has had to use their needles or inhalers. People with medical problems are happy to finally own a horse. In fact, one 50-year-old woman had tears in her eyes from happiness—not allergies—as she made her girlhood dream of owning a horse a reality."

Another bonus to the hypoallergenic coat of the Bashkir Curly is that comes in just about any horse color imaginable, including pinto, Appaloosa-pattern, palomino, buckskin and white.

While the Curly's coat is its most obvious characteristic, those who love the Bashkir Curly are also quick to point out that the breed has another aspect that is as unique to the breed as its hair: its disposition.

People who own Curlies describe their horses as being more like dogs than horses. They say their animals are exceptionally people-oriented. "They always want to be involved with whatever you are doing," says breeder Denise Conrad of Cedarville, Michigan. "They can't stand being left out."

Sue Wolfe-Walters, a breeder in

Nearly all Curly horses share the same woolly, hypo-allergenic coat.



Photo courtesy of Greg Oakes

Seymour, Indiana, describes the breed's personality as truly special. "My favorite thing about the breed is the way they take to people," she says. "They are the most friendly and loving breed of horse I have ever had. They train faster and quicker than other breeds, and are more willing to do new things without a fuss."

Nearly every Curly breeder interviewed for this article had a true-life story to prove this aspect of Curly personality. Breeder Wendy Saursmith of Whitesville, Kentucky, tells the story of a Curly that followed her around one day as she used a motorized weed-cutter to trim the edges of her horses' paddock. "I put the cutter down so I could move some fallen branches out of the way, leaving the motor running. When I turned around, one of my Curlies had the running weed-cutter in his mouth and was walking around with it!"

Conrad reports that she and her daughter decided to take a trail ride through the pasture one day, only to have one of her Curlies pull a hilarious stunt. "Usually, my daughter, husband and I go out together, but this time, my husband wasn't coming along, so it was just me and my daughter," she says. "As we rode through the pasture, my hus-

band's Curly, Ziggy, came running over and started running around us in a circle, bolting, going crazy and just creating a commotion. He wouldn't leave us alone! Finally, I said to him 'Ziggy, stop doing this, you are scaring me!' All of a sudden, he fell in line in front of my mare—his usual spot when we trail ride—and started leading us, just as if my husband was sitting on top of him. He ended up taking us on a trail ride all around the pasture that day!"

Another aspect of Curly disposition seems to be an unerring willingness to do whatever task is required. "Curlies are very willing animals," says Nancy Scott, vice president of the American Bashkir Curly Registry. "They make great all-around family horses because they will do whatever you ask of them. The ABCR has members whose Curlies participate in 4-H, dressage, competitive trail and endurance, even driving. In fact, one man has trained his Curly for cutting and reining, and is doing very well at it."

As if all this wasn't enough, owners of American Bashkir Curlies report that their horses have extraordinarily tough hooves, the ability to withstand extreme cold, and endurance and surefootedness to beat the band.

Dedicated Followers

Every breed of horse has its devotees, people who have dedicated their lives to furthering the breed. Those who love the American Bashkir Curly seem particularly taken with their breed of choice and can't say enough good things about their animals.

Jackie Davis, a Curly breeder in Collinsville, Texas, has a mare named Kota Kurl who she thinks is a very special horse. "Kota is our wise old lady of 15 years and is a pretty no-nonsense horse," says Jackie. "Once, she was due to foal and was in the pasture. I decided she should be put in the birthing stall as she was showing signs of foaling. She had other ideas—there was no way she wanted to go into the stall as she had found a perfect spot under a tree on a bed of

soft leaves. I would have preferred to have her in the safety of this beautiful birthing stall we designed, but true to form she did it her way. However, she actually seemed to invite me to stay right there—there was a message in her beautiful dark eyes. I sat down next to her and watched the entire process, and Kota seemed to appreciate my presence. It was close to being a spiritual experience and something made all the more special since Kota is the independent lady that she is.”

Another Curly mare who impressed her owner with her attitude around foaling time is all-white Sugar, who belongs to Jackie Richardson, a breeder in Woodburn, Iowa. “Sugar was due to foal and we had her in a stall. She laid down and pushed against the stall wall and somehow got her foot through it,” says Jackie. “My husband went to check on her and there she was caught by the foot, laying there very patiently waiting for him to come help her. He had to get a drill to unscrew the boards, and he literally had to stand between her legs to do this. She stayed calm and quiet, and let him do it without even a twitch. An ordinary mare would have either damaged herself trying to get loose or kicked you while you were trying to help.”

Although Sugar has incredible sense and a calm nature, she can also be a real pistol, according to Jackie. “She loves blueberry bagels and she remembers everything!” says Jackie. “She’s also very mischievous. Sugar takes the halters off of the other horses and removes their saddle blankets while you are trying to saddle them up. She will also untie them—or herself—and can open doors and latches. She is a real character.”

Those who love the American Bashkir Curly Horse say that once you become involved with this breed, you never go back to whatever horse you had before. Sue Davis of Lebanon, Illinois, tells the story of how she switched to the Bashkir Curly: “In 1995, we read an article in *Horse Illustrated* about the Bashkir Curly. At the time, my husband Jeff and I were involved with Quarter Horses. I was very impressed by the article and mentioned to Jeff how interesting the breed sounded, and that perhaps at some point we could acquire one. A short time after that, we were traveling to Arkansas to pick up a Quarter Horse filly we had purchased, and on the way found an ad in a small-town newspaper for a herd dispersal of registered Curlies! We found ourselves purchasing four Curlies, ranging in ages from yearling to 2 years old, and rescuing one old

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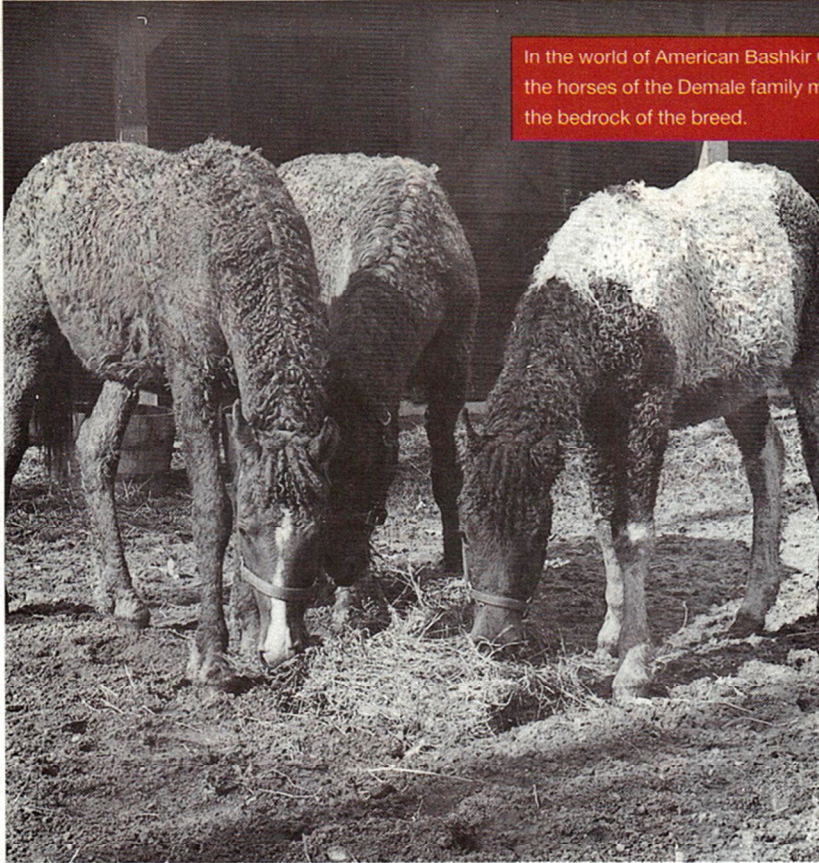
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Photo courtesy of American Bashkir Curly Registry



In the world of American Bashkir Curlies, the horses of the Demale family make up the bedrock of the breed.

broodmare that was near starvation. Subsequently the old broodmare delivered our first Curly filly who we named Wishes Granted."

One of the most amazing things about the Curly is that nearly all Curly horses share the same wooly, hypoallergenic coat and distinct personality that their owners love. "This is a wonderful and unique animal," says Davis. "They are intelligent, curious, eager to please and very responsive." And on top of that, they have that amazing curly coat.

For more information about the American Bashkir Curly, contact the American Bashkir Curly Registry, P.O. Box 246, Ely, NV 89301-0246, (775) 289-4999, www.abcregistry.org; The American Curly Horse Association, P.O. Box 167, Whitesville, KY 42378, (270) 275-9347, web: hometown.aol.com/curlyhorse/curlyhorse.index.html; and the Early Curly Breeders Association, 484 S. Prentiss Bay Rd., Cedarville, MI 49719, (775) 289-4999, web: members.tripod.com/~earlycurly.

Audrey Pavia is a freelance writer and author of "Horses for Dummies."

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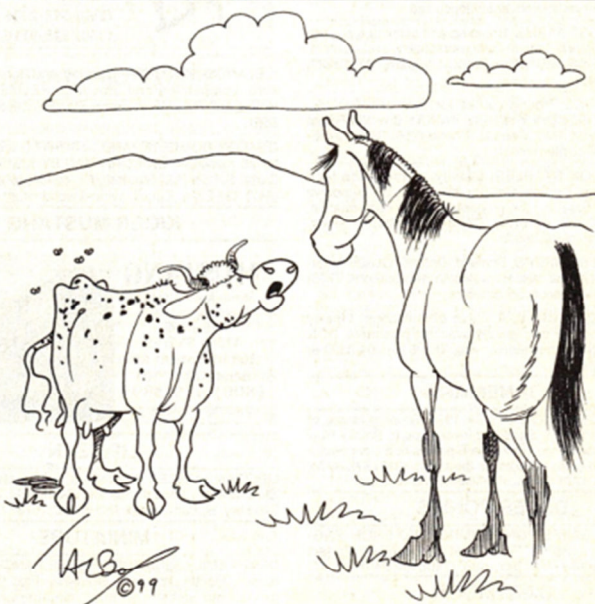
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