

BELGIAN DRAFT HORSE CORPORATION OF AMERICA

America's Favorite Draft Horse - The Belgian

DID YOU KNOW ...THAT BELGIAN DRAFT HORSES OUTNUMBER ALL OTHER DRAFT BREEDS COMBINED IN THE UNITED STATES?

The Belgian is no "overnight success." Its popularity has been hard won over the last century on thousands of farms and ranches, in countless pulling contests and show rings, and on the streets of America with hitches pulling the freight wagons that once fed the people.



History shows that Belgians are the most direct lineal descendants of the "Great Horse" of medieval times.

The Belgian, as the name implies, is native to the country of Belgium. This little country is blessed with fertile soil and abundant rainfall providing the thrifty farmers of Belgium with the excellent pastures and the hay and grain necessary to develop a heavy, powerful breed of horse.

Belgium lies in the very center of that area of western Europe that gave rise to the large black horses known as Flemish horses and referred to as the "Great Horses" by medieval writers. They are the horses that carried armored knights into battle. Such horses known to exist in that part of Europe in the time of Caesar. They provided the genetic material from which nearly all the modern draft breeds are fashioned.

Stallions from Belgium were exported to many other parts of Europe as the need to produce larger animals of draft type for industrial and farm use was recognized. There was no need to import into Belgium for she was the "mother lode." It remained only for this ancestral home of the "great horse," by whatever name, to refine and fix the type of the genetic material she already had at hand.

The government of Belgium played a very energetic role in doing just that. A system of district shows culminating in the great National Show in Brussels, which served as an international showcase for the breed, was established. The prizes were generous. Inspection committees for stallions standing for public service were established.

The result was a rapid improvement into a fixed breed type as the draft horses of Belgium become regarded as a national heritage and, quite figuratively, a treasure. In 1891, for example, Belgium exported stallions for use in the government stables of Russia, Italy, Germany, France, and the old Austria-Hungary empire. The movement of horses out of Belgium for breeding purposes was tremendous in scope and financially rewarding for her breeder's decade after decade.

The American Association was officially founded in February of 1887 in Wabash, Indiana. The breed offices still remain in Wabash. It was slow going for the Belgian until after the turn of the century.

In 1903 the government of Belgium sent an exhibit of horses to the St. Louis World's Fair and the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago. While this effort was attended by plenty of

controversy over which type of horse best suited Americans, it also generated a great deal of interest in the breed.

From that point forward the breed's acceptance grew steadily. Nearly every major importer in the country included Belgians in their offering. In terms of importing seed stock and establishing new breeders it was none too soon, for the onset of World War I in 1914 brought all importations to a halt.

Suddenly, American Belgian breeders were on their own. Fortunately, they had plenty of the "right kind" with which to develop their own style of Belgian horse.

It was during the draft horse decline in the 20's that the Belgian moved into a very solid number two position in this country. Thus, it should not be surprising to know that during the 20's there was a resumption of importing from Belgium on a small scale. With the dramatic upturn in draft horse fortunes in the mid-30's, the importation of horses from Belgium again assumed major proportions for a few years. The last importation was landed in New York by E.F. Dygert, Iowa importer, on January 15, 1940, four months after World War II had started and four months before the German invasion of Belgium.

It was about that time that a number of things conspired to nearly end draft horse breeding of any kind. The labor shortage of World War II, the introduction of small, rubber-tired row-crop tractors, and the tremendous push for mechanization in the wake of World War II put all draft breeds under severe pressure. The decline of interest in draft horse breeding was precipitous, obituary notices were a dime a dozen. The number of annual registrations even dropped under the 200 mark for a couple of years during the early 50's.

Then slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the return of the draft horse got underway. As the price of horses recovered so did the breeding. Registrations and transfers made slow but steady gains until, in 1980, they surpassed the all time high set in 1937. An average for the next five years was over 4000 registrations and close to 6000 transfers...easily the greatest five year period in the breed's history.

That is where you find the Belgian horse today...way out in front. Looking at the following reasons will explain the resurgence in draft horse fortunes and the reasons for the remarkable success of the Belgian in particular.

REASONS FOR THE DRAFT HORSE RENAISSANCE

1. A growing ecological awareness that some of the tools and methods of modern agriculture is destructive, causing many to seek alternatives, among which is the draft horse as a source of power
2. An economic crunch that makes home grown power, that runs on home grown fuel, which in turn enriches the soil in the form of manure, reproduces itself plus providing surplus for sale, and appreciates rather than depreciates for the first half of its life, look better and better.
3. Their beauty. The draft horse at his best is a spectacular beast. Once booted out at some fairs for being behind the times, they are now welcomed back as crowd pleasers. More increasingly big commercial firms are also looking to the Belgian hitch as an advertising vehicle.
4. Nostalgia plays a role, albeit a minor one. Increasing numbers of horse-minded people are finding their pleasure horse in the form of a team of Belgians. Their good disposition and willingness to work make them great favorites on some of the small part-time "sundowner and weekender" type farms that continue to increase in number.

WHY THE BELGIAN SUCCESS?

Many of the breeds first imports were roundly criticized for being too thick, too low headed, straight shouldered, and round boned. There was even an expression for it..."the Dutchman's type." But even with his faults, those early Belgians made friends because they were easy keepers and willing workers with amiable disposition. The American farmer decided that the breeds' assets far outweighed its faults and the American breeder set out to retain what was right and remedy what was wrong.

The success of that effort has been one of the great success stories in animal breeding. Today's Belgian is a big, powerful fellow that retains the drafty middle, a deep, strong foot, a lot of bone, the heavy muscling and amiable disposition possessed by the early Belgians. His qualities as an easy keeper, a good shipper, and a willing worker are intact.

The changes made by American breeders have developed a horse with far more style, particular in the head and neck, with more slope to both shoulder and pastern, and the good clean, flat bone that goes hand in hand with such qualities.

The modern Belgian is still a great worker...and has become a great wagon horse. The fact that the Belgians are equally effective in pulling competition as in a hitch competition says it all.

The fact that Belgians are by far the most numerous of all draft breeds in this country, plus the fact that they are much a one-color breed makes it easier to mate a horse when you need to and offer you a much bigger market when you wish to sell.

This versatile breed did not become AMERICA'S FAVORITE DRAFT HORSE by being second-best.
GO WITH A WINNER-GO WITH BELGIANS.