

The Versatile Shagya

By Nancy R. Skakel

What are the qualities we, the equestrian public, look for in a horse? Of course, this question has as many answers as there are horse enthusiasts, but for the majority of us who are average riders, what we want is a horse we can be proud of. We want a horse that is lovely to look at, a pleasure to ride and handle, and that will stay sound and be easy to keep. We want a horse that we can work with confidently, without requiring a full time professional trainer, and that can take us as far as our own talents allow us to go. Though many of us have particular areas of interest in equestrian sports, most of us participate in a variety of activities. We want a horse that can take us through a challenging dressage lesson one day, a pleasurable trail ride the next, and perform well at the local show on another day. Or ride a 50-mile endurance race and take a teenage daughter through 4-H. Maybe you would like a horse that could be competitive in combined driving, help you learn to jump, and be worthy of giving you a quality foal. Well, I have the horse for you!

The Shagya breed was developed over 200 years of careful selection for just these characteristics. Originally, it was the Austro-Hungarian cavalry that was looking for a horse that would be thrifty, hardy, and with heart for battle, yet steady enough for the average cavalry rider to manage. Through many generations of careful selection and performance testing, the Shagya breed was created, based on Arabian bloodlines. Shagyas were used as outcross improvements for other thoroughbred-based breeds. The Shagya contributed its wonderful character, soundness, and nobility to the foundations of many of today's sport horse breeds. The romantic history of this rare breed is just frosting on the cake.

During peace times the Imperial Studs sent their stallions into the countryside to cover mares for the farmers. In those days the Shagya cross was the ideal family horse. It could pull a wagon in the field, the carriage to church on Sunday, and be a quick and dependable mount whenever it was needed, whether for transportation or friendly competition. When war came again the cavalry had a wide selection of quality halfbreds to purchase from those farmers.

So what are the characteristics that make up a versatile breed? First and foremost, a kind, willing, and intelligent mind. Temperament and character were the number one traits considered for selection in developing the Shagya. Second, general harmony and balance in conformation. Shagyas have longer, more sloping croups than purebred Arabians, with good muscling over the loins and generally shorter backs. These are the basis of improved riding gaits and self-carriage. Third, the Shagya has more bone and overall substance. The result is a horse that is very sound and suitable for a broad variety of equestrian sports.

All of this translates to a uniquely versatile horse in today's Shagya. There are those star athletes that demonstrate the wide range of talents in this breed. The 2006 FEI World Endurance Champion is a Shagya gelding by the name of *Hungares*. *Ghazzir* has been highly successful in cross-country jumping in Germany, and is approved for Trakehner breeding. *Bahadur* has been doing very well at the "M" level in dressage in Europe. *Bajar* sired a number of show jumpers, including the Olympic contender *White Girl*. *Bajar's* son, the Holstein stallion *Bachus Z*, is in great demand across Europe as a sire of jumpers. Shagyas have excelled in driving, including driven dressage, combined driving, and distance driving competitions.

The stallion **Oman* embodied the versatile and kind nature of the Shagya. He and his owner, Carolyn Tucker, competed in endurance, competitive trail, and eventing. Working with Ashton Moore, Carolyn and **Oman* competed at Dressage in the Wine Country in Sonoma County, California. **Oman* received his lifetime ISR/Oldenburg breeding license after successfully completing the 1998 ISR Stallion 100-Day Test. **Oman* was the only completely amateur owner/rider trained stallion in his group, and the only one that had competed successfully in endurance. He was also the only one out of 28 who remained 100% sound during the entire 100-day test. He free jumped 5', and performed very well in the stadium jumping, dressage, and cross-country. His recovery rate after the speed gallop section astounded the judges. At the awards ceremony at the end of the Test, Mr. Wassmann, chairman of Hanoverian Keuring Commission and of the Oldenburg Riding Horse Association, and "I" rated judge in dressage and jumping, stated, "This [Shagya], **Oman*, is one of the best Arabians I have seen in the past few years. Today he was very good on the cross-country course with very good canter and good jumping. This [Shagya] stallion is such the type that we could use more of in Germany!" Sadly, **Oman* died in 2002, but he left many pure and part Shagya progeny, and frozen semen. Four full brothers and a son stand at stud in Germany today.

There are only about 2500 Shagyas worldwide, with about 220 registered Shagyas scattered across the United States and Canada. From the northwest to the southeast, Shagyas are gaining recognition in endurance circles. The 2004 Tevis Cup winner was the half Shagya, *Fayette de Cameo*. *Blixten*, with owner Holly Beach, is competing at Fourth Level dressage, leading a group of rapidly advancing amateur dressage talents. Shagyas have done well at preliminary and intermediate levels in combined driving. Half Shagyas have shown wonderful talent in jumping, eventing, and fox hunting. For several years running, halfbred Shagyas have won in the West Coast Arabian Sport Horse half Arab classes.

You might not have ever seen one of these rare jewels, but Shagya owners are eager to share their enthusiasm for this unique breed. Once you have known a Shagya, you will understand the devotion and pride we feel for the legacy of our special horses. To learn more, or to contact a Shagya owner in your area, please check our web site at www.shagyaregistry.com © Nancy R. Skakel 1/07