

= Poitevin horse =

The Poitevin , also called Mulassier (" mule @-@ breeder ") , Poitevin Mulassier or Trait Mulassier is a draft horse from the Poitou area of France . It is a late @-@ maturing breed with strong bones , known for its calm nature . It is found in many solid coat colors , the result of crossbreeding with several other European draft breeds throughout its history , and is the only French draft horse to be found in bay dun . Today , Poitevins are used mainly for driving , although some are used for riding and equine therapy .

Enthusiasts claim descent from the horses painted on the cave walls of Lascaux , though this has not been verified by scientific studies . Horses have been recorded in the area since at least the 10th century , and the regional type was preferred by magistrates and clergy in medieval times . The Poitevin breed as it is known today began to take shape in the early 17th century , as engineers began draining the French marshes and brought with them their draft horses , which were crossed with native horses . Since early in its history , the Poitevin has been used extensively for the breeding of mules , and although commonly called a draft horse , was not favored for agricultural purposes . During the 19th century , the population of the Poitevin increased , reaching 50 @,@ 000 pure and crossbred mares by 1867 . Crossbreeding with other draft breeds led to concerns about the purity of the Poitevin population , but a small group of breeders worked to preserve the remaining purebred population .

A studbook was created for the breed in 1884 , and was closed in 1922 . A breeders ' association was created in 1923 . The first half of the 20th century saw declining populations of horses and mules due to increased mechanization , and , by 1945 , Poitevin breeding was oriented towards the production of meat . The population dropped precipitously , and between 1970 and 1990 varied between 250 and 300 animals , with still lower levels seen in the early 1990s . A genetic study released in 1994 showed genetic bottlenecking and a severe risk of inbreeding , and led to the establishment of a conservation plan . Despite a slight increase in popularity at the beginning of the 21st century , the Poitevin is still in danger of extinction , with a slightly downward @-@ trending population .

= = Characteristics = =

The body of the Poitevin is slender for a heavy horse and longer than other French draft breeds . It stands 15 @.@ 3 to 17 @.@ 1 hands (63 to 69 inches , 160 to 175 cm) high , with stallions averaging 16 @.@ 2 hands (66 inches , 168 cm) and mares 15 @.@ 3 hands . The heavy clay and rich minerals of its homeland help it to develop strong bones , and it is late to reach physical maturity , generally around 6 to 7 years .

The head is long and strong , with a convex profile and thick , long ears . The neck is long and the shoulders are sloping . The chest is broad and deep , the withers prominent , the back long and broad , and the hindquarters strong . The legs are well developed and powerful , with large joints . The Poitevin has large hooves , an advantage in wet environments , as an adaptation to the alternately hard and waterlogged marshes upon which it developed . The lower legs are well feathered , and the mane and tail are long and thick . The Poitevin is gentle , calm and robust . Historically the breed has been known for its slow movement and disinterest in pulling , although it can produce significant power if necessary . The breed enjoys human contact , and shows intelligence , although it can also be stubborn . Prolonged effort is its weak point , as the Poitevin sometimes lack endurance .

The Poitevin is found in a wide variety of colors , which are partly the result of the many breeds that influenced it . It is the only French draft horse that can be found in bay dun , a tan body color with black mane and tail and primitive markings . This color likely comes from the Spanish horses that influenced the Flemish horses that later contributed to the breeding of the Poitevin . The most popular colors are pure black and seal brown (the latter called black pangaré by the breed registry , although these horses are genetically brown , not black with pangaré markings) , which came from the influence of Flemish and Friesian horses . The breed standard accepts all colors , except for

pinto and leopard spotted , and it is common to see gray , bay and bay roan horses , the last probably being inherited from the Brabant breed . Chestnut and chestnut roan are also seen , both being a legacy of Breton crosses in the breed .

= = History = =

The Poitevin breed was created in the marshes of the Poitou region , especially around Luçon , La Rochelle , Melle and Niort . It was developed through a mixture of human and natural selection to the marshy area that it inhabited . Although described as a draft horse , it was not selected for draft purposes , and was never popular for that use .

Remains of prehistoric horses have been found in the Poitou region , with Mesolithic remains (20 000 to 5 000 BC) located near Surgères and Échiré . Some enthusiasts claim that the Poitevin horse is descended directly from these horses , based on physical similarities , and claim a common origin with the Tarpan horse painted on the Lascaux cave walls . However , this has not been confirmed by scientific studies , and numerous claims by other horse breeds of this same relationship have been invalidated by further research . Other horses were probably brought to the area by migrating Celts , and there is a record from the 10th century of a bishop from Rome asking the Count of Poitou for a mare from the region . These horses , like mules , were a favorite among the magistrates and ecclesiastical personnel in the medieval era , and were sold around Niort , Saint Maixent , Auvergne , Dauphiné , Languedoc and in Spain . The number of horses in the area , however , was not well known before the 17th century .

The Poitevin breed as it is known today began to develop in 1599 when King Henry IV of France requested that Dutch and Flemish engineers , led by Humphrey Bradley , begin draining the Poitou marshes . They brought with them Friesian , Brabant and a type of Flemish work horse that was well known in the 13th century . These horses stood under 16 3 hands (67 inches , 170 cm) and weighed up to 1 200 kilograms (2 600 lb) . They were crossed with native Poitou mares , and this crossbreeding created a large , slow type , similar to the Flemish work horses of the Dutch marshes . This type was the forerunner of the modern Poitevin breed .

At the end of the 18th century , the French government tried to impose a system of crossing Poitevin horses with lighter weight Norman and Thoroughbred horses to create cavalry horses . Despite financial incentives , private breeders protested because they felt that the resulting crossbred horses created poor quality mules upon further breeding . The changes also affected the characteristics of the breed that had been developed for work in its marshy homeland , including large hooves and a calm manner . Some sources argue that at this point the breed was employed for agricultural and logging uses . Others state that they were not pulling horses , and were instead used almost solely for the production of mules .

= = = Production of mules = = =

Poitevin mares were crossbred with Poitou donkeys to create the famous Poitou mule , a large , hardy breed . As mules are hybrids , and thus sterile , they can only be created through crossing a donkey and a horse . The industry of mule breeding in Poitou has existed since at least the 18th century , when it was opposed by the government stud farm administration that was attempting to breed cavalry horses for French troops . At the beginning of the 19th century , the government prohibited breeding mules from mares taller than 11 3 4 hands (47 25 inches , 120 cm) , and threatened to castrate all donkeys in the region . In the 1860s , equine historian Eugene Gayot described a horse that he called the " poitevine mulassière " , and stated that the main purpose of this breed was to produce mares from which to breed mules . He added that this breed was also called the Poitevin . Mares of many breeds were used to produce mules at that point in history , but Gayot noted that the heavy mares from the Poitou marshes produced the best mules , likely because the Poitevin mares bequeathed to their descendents the same heavy bone structure .

Although the Poitevin was not the only breed of horse used for the production of mules , the Poitou

mule was known worldwide . They were in high demand in the United States from the late 19th century until the beginning of World War I. During the 1920s , livestock production began to decline . In the Deux @-@ Sèvres region , especially in the district of Melle , near Luçon and Saint @-@ Maixent , mule breeding began to be concentrated in ateliers (workshops) , which were relatively expensive for breeders .

= = = 19th century = = =

Poitevin colts and fillies were sold at fairs in Marans , Nuaillé , Surgères , Rochefort , Pont @-@ l'Abbé and Saujon . In 1867 , there were 50 @,@ 000 pure and crossbred mares . By the early 20th century , there were tens of thousands of Poitevins in France , but this period saw the beginning of the breed 's decline . Poitevin colts , which were not used for the breeding of mules , were considered " soft " and less valuable than the major draft horse breed of the 19th century ? the Percheron . Some horse dealers purchased young gray Poitevin horses , fed them heavily to make them larger and stronger , and then sold them at the age of four as Percherons . These " Percherons " were transported to areas such as Saintonge , Yonne , Nivernais and Gâtinais .

In the early 19th century , the breed was crossed with the Percheron , and with the Boulonnais between 1860 and 1867 . During the same time period , crosses were made with the Breton , a practice supported by some breeders and denounced by others . Farmers in the region also began to add Breton blood into the Poitou mule , giving that animal a more square head and shorter ears . In the Poitevin horse breed , the crosses resulted in the body becoming longer and lighter , the legs longer and with less bone , and gray becoming more common as a coat color . In 1860 , Eugene Gayot called the mares of the breed " heavy , common , soft and of medium size " . Breeders chose horses with large joints , thick coats and a high croup , and had a preference for a black coat color .

In 1861 , there were concerns that the old @-@ style Poitevin was becoming extinct , and questions about whether the Poitou mule retained the quality that it previously had . The large Poitevin mares became rarer , due to large amounts of crossbreeding and a lack of care shown towards breeding stock selection . Thoroughbreds and Thoroughbred crosses , especially at the stud farms in Saint @-@ Maixent and La Roche @-@ sur @-@ Yon , created the Anglo @-@ Poitevin type , a half @-@ blood used by the army . The continued draining of the marshes also influenced the breed . Many Poitevins at this point were actually a mix of Breton and old @-@ type Poitevin bloodstock . However , a distinction persisted between the real Poitevin and mixed @-@ blood horses , and farmers who preferred the former preserved the type , which formed the base for the creation of the breed studbook .

The studbook for the Poitevin horse was created by the Société Centrale d 'Agriculture des Deux @-@ Sèvres on June 26 , 1884 , with a horse section and a donkey section . The first edition was released December 31 , 1885 , setting the physical criteria for the breeding and ending the practice of promoting crossbred horses as purebreds . It also marked the end of government intervention against the mule breeding industry , although bonuses were paid to encourage farmers to breed purebred horses . In 1902 , a breeding syndicate to promote Poitou mules was created , but disappeared after a lack of advertising by stock breeders . On August 6 , 1912 , the French government released a decree officially supporting the mule breeding industry , backed by the purchase of mules by the French National Stud and bonuses given to the best stallions .

= = = 20th century = = =

After several revisions , the studbook was closed in 1922 after registering 424 foundation horses . The closing of the studbook brought about additional purebred breeding and selection based on conformation , color and working ability . In 1923 , an association of Poitevin breeders was founded , but declining livestock production pushed the group to reorganize in 1937 in order to gain more support from the government , through bonuses and subsidies .

In the first half of the 20th century , the mule breeding industry collapsed with the advent of mechanization . By 1922 , Poitevin foals became difficult to sell , and the population dropped

dramatically as there was no economic incentive for breeding . A continued breeding of mules caused the breed to decline faster than other draft breeds , as purebred horses were not bred as often . By 1945 , breed selection was oriented towards the production of meat , as the only remaining economic opportunity for farmers . The conformation of the breed changed slightly to become shorter , but the Poitevin remained unprofitable for horse meat , as breeders preferred to invest in herds of Comtois and Breton horses , which were faster growing and higher yielding .

By 1950 , there were only about 600 mares and 50 stallion left in the breed . Increasing mechanization and competition with other livestock hurt the Poitevin , as did a lack of promotion and protection . Between 1970 and 1990 , the population of the Poitevin varied between 250 and 300 animals , with an average of 20 new horses entering the studbook each year . By the early 1990s , population numbers fell to the lowest in history . Sources are unclear on the number of living Poitevins in the early 1990s , but by 1996 one author says there were 64 newly registered foals and 28 approved breeding stallions , while another gives a total population of 293 horses in 1997 .

= = = Conservation and genetic testing = = =

The breed owes its survival to a small group of enthusiasts , working with the French National Stud . A genetic study performed in 1994 revealed a genetic bottleneck in the mid @-@ 1900s , with the entire modern population of Poitevins tracing to one stallion , named Québec , foaled in 1960 . There is a significant risk of inbreeding , leading the Unité Nationale de Sélection et de Promotion de Race to promote a plan of managed breeding in 1998 . At the same time , crossbreeding with Friesian and Belgian horses was suggested to increase genetic diversity using morphologically and historically similar breeds . The French government distributes bonuses to the owners of the best stallions , a program more important to the Poitevin than to other draft breeds because of the significant possibility of extinction .

The Poitevin had a slight increase in popularity at the beginning of the 21st century , and could count approximately 100 farms perpetuating the breed . The association had around 300 members , as well as 83 stallions and 189 mares registered . However , by 2006 , the Poitevin was still considered the most endangered French horse breed , with less than 100 births per year and a slightly decreasing population . There is almost no crossbreeding done with outside breeds , in order to maintain the numbers of purebred stock . In 2008 , a second genetic study was conducted in partnership with the Institut national de la recherche agronomique ; this study considered the Poitevin and four other French breeds to be endangered . It suggested making these breeds a conservation priority in order to maintain maximum genetic diversity among the French horse population .

The studbook for the Poitevin is based in Niort , and the breed is the subject of a conservation breeding plan , the goal of which is to eventually revive the production of Poitou mules . The conservation plan includes an experimental infusion of blood from the Boulonnais , and is followed by 70 percent of breeders . L 'association nationale des races mulassières du Poitou manages the studbook for the Poitevin horse , the Poitou donkey and the Poitou mule , and is recognized by the French Ministry of Agriculture . Its goals are to ensure the selection of breeding stock that meet the physical characteristics expected of the breeds , to maintain the studbooks , and to promote the breeds . There is a breed show held annually in the Poitou region .

The Poitevin breed has very low numbers . In 2011 , there were 71 new foals registered with the studbook . The same year , 227 mares were covered , with 171 being bred to Poitevin stallions . There were 33 stallions registered and 80 active breeders . These numbers represent a decrease from the previous year . Over the past decade , the highest number of foals registered was 113 in 2008 , and between 80 and 90 foals were registered in the other years . The majority of breeding farms are located in the Poitou area , including Vendée (especially around Fontenay @-@ le @-@ Comte and Luçon) , Deux @-@ Sèvres (especially near Melle) , Vienna and Civray , and some in Charente , near Ruffec . There are National Studs located in Saintes and Vendée . There are a few breeders in Maine @-@ et @-@ Loire .

The breed is accessible to the public at l 'Asinerie nationale de la Tillauderie , an experimental farm

in Dampierre @-@ sur @-@ Boutonne in Charente @-@ Maritime , and at the Saintes National Stud . Members of the breed are exhibited at the annual Paris International Agricultural Show . Approximately a dozen horses are exported each year , mainly to Germany , Sweden and Switzerland . A few breeding stallions have been exported to the United States . Breeders in the US have become interested in the conservation of the breed as a draft animal , as opposed to many Europeans , who are looking for a leisure animal . A stud farm also exists in Sweden , and one in the United States .

= = Uses = =

As the stallions of the Poitevin breed could not be used to produce mules , they were generally sold as two @-@ year @-@ olds at the summer fair in Vendée and the winter fair in Saint @-@ Maixent , as well as to horse merchants in Berry , Beauce , Perche and the Midi . In these areas , they were used for agriculture . In Paris , they were used for pulling omnibuses , and the French military used the Poitevin for pulling artillery . At the beginning of the 21st century there has been a new demand for mules for leisure purposes , but this demand cannot be filled by Poitevin mares until their numbers have recovered to a sufficient level .

Today , Poitevins are used mainly for driving , both in competitions and for leisure use . They are used to pull carriages for tourists . Members of the breed can be ridden more comfortably than other draft breeds due to their slimmer build . They are also used extensively for equine therapy in France . The Poitevin is used for light agricultural work in vineyards , and for maintenance of natural wetlands . The council of Ille @-@ et @-@ Vilaine acquired a herd of Poitevins to maintain the marshes in the area . The Poitevin also has been used in movies , as a mount for forest monitors in Melun , harnessed for urban work in Poitiers and Niort , and for the collection of waste on the island of Ré .