

= Icelandic horse =

The Icelandic horse is a breed of horse developed in Iceland . Although the horses are small , at times pony @-@ sized , most registries for the Icelandic refer to it as a horse . Icelandic horses are long @-@ lived and hardy . In their native country they have few diseases ; Icelandic law prevents horses from being imported into the country and exported animals are not allowed to return . The Icelandic displays two gaits in addition to the typical walk , trot , and canter / gallop commonly displayed by other breeds . The only breed of horse in Iceland , they are also popular internationally , and sizable populations exist in Europe and North America . The breed is still used for traditional sheepherding work in its native country , as well as for leisure , showing , and racing .

Developed from ponies taken to Iceland by Norse settlers in the 9th and 10th centuries , the breed is mentioned in literature and historical records throughout Icelandic history ; the first reference to a named horse appears in the 12th century . Horses were venerated in Norse mythology , a custom brought to Iceland by the country 's earliest settlers . Selective breeding over the centuries has developed the breed into its current form . Natural selection has also played a role , as the harsh Icelandic climate eliminated many horses through cold and starvation . In the 1780s , much of the breed was wiped out in the aftermath of a volcanic eruption at Laki . The first breed society for the Icelandic horse was created in Iceland in 1904 , and today the breed is represented by organizations in 19 different nations , organized under a parent association , the International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations .

= = Breed characteristics = =

Icelandic horses weigh between 330 and 380 kilograms (730 and 840 lb) and stand an average of 13 and 14 hands (52 and 56 inches , 132 and 142 cm) high , which is often considered pony size , but breeders and breed registries always refer to Icelandics as horses . Several theories have been put forward as to why Icelandics are always called horses , among them the breed 's spirited temperament and large personality . Another theory suggests that the breed 's weight , bone structure and weight @-@ carrying abilities mean it can be classified as a horse , rather than a pony . The breed comes in many coat colors , including chestnut , dun , bay , black , gray , palomino , pinto and roan . There are over 100 names for various colors and color patterns in the Icelandic language . They have well @-@ proportioned heads , with straight profiles and wide foreheads . The neck is short , muscular , and broad at the base ; the withers broad and low ; the chest deep ; the shoulders muscular and slightly sloping ; the back long ; the croup broad , muscular , short and slightly sloping . The legs are strong and short , with relatively long cannon bones and short pasterns . The mane and tail are full , with coarse hair , and the tail is set low . The breed is known to be hardy and an easy keeper . The breed has a double coat developed for extra insulation in cold temperatures .

Characteristics differ between various groups of Icelandic horses , depending on the focus of individual breeders . Some focus on animals for pack and draft work , which are conformationally distinct from those bred for work under saddle , which are carefully selected for their ability to perform the traditional Icelandic gaits . Others are bred solely for horsemeat . Some breeders focus on favored coat colors .

Members of the breed are not usually ridden until they are four years old , and structural development is not complete until age seven . Their most productive years are between eight and eighteen , although they retain their strength and stamina into their twenties . An Icelandic mare that lived in Denmark reached a record age of 56 , while another horse , living in Great Britain , reached the age of 42 . The horses are highly fertile , and both sexes are fit for breeding up to age 25 ; mares have been recorded giving birth at age 27 . The horses tend to not be easily spooked , probably the result of not having any natural predators in their native Iceland . Icelandics tend to be friendly , docile and easy to handle , although also enthusiastic and self @-@ assured . As a result of their isolation from other horses , disease in the breed within Iceland is mostly unknown , except for some kinds of internal parasites . The low prevalence of disease in Iceland is maintained by laws

preventing horses exported from the country being returned , and by requiring that all equine equipment taken into the country be either new and unused or fully disinfected . As a result , native horses have no acquired immunity to disease ; an outbreak on the island would be likely to be devastating to the breed . This presents problems with showing native Icelandic horses against others of the breed from outside the country , as no livestock of any species can be imported into Iceland , and once horses leave the country they are not allowed to return .

= = = Gaits = = =

The Icelandic is a " five @-@ gaited " breed , known for its sure @-@ footedness and ability to cross rough terrain . As well as the typical gaits of walk , trot , and canter / gallop , the breed is noted for its ability to perform two additional gaits . Although most horse experts consider the canter and gallop to be separate gaits , on the basis of a small variation in the footfall pattern , Icelandic breed registries consider the canter and gallop one gait , hence the term " five @-@ gaited " .

The first additional gait is a four @-@ beat lateral ambling gait known as the tölt . This is known for its explosive acceleration and speed ; it is also comfortable and ground @-@ covering . There is considerable variation in style within the gait , and thus the tölt is variously compared to similar lateral gaits such as the rack of the Saddlebred , the largo of the Paso Fino , or the running walk of the Tennessee Walking Horse . Like all lateral ambling gaits , the footfall pattern is the same as the walk (left hind , left front , right hind , right front) , but differs from the walk in that it can be performed at a range of speeds , from the speed of a typical fast walk up to the speed of a normal canter . Some Icelandic horses prefer to tölt , while others prefer to trot ; correct training can improve weak gaits , but the tölt is a natural gait present from birth . There are two varieties of the tölt that are considered incorrect by breeders . The first is an uneven gait called a " Pig 's Pace " or " Piggy @-@ pace " that is closer to a two @-@ beat pace than a four @-@ beat amble . The second is called a Valhopp and is a tölt and canter combination most often seen in untrained young horses or horses that mix their gaits . Both varieties are normally uncomfortable to ride .

The breed also performs a pace called a skeið , flugskeið or " flying pace " . It is used in pacing races , and is fast and smooth , with some horses able to reach up to 30 miles per hour (48 km / h) . Not all Icelandic horses can perform this gait ; animals that perform both the tölt and the flying pace in addition to the traditional gaits are considered the best of the breed . The flying pace is a two @-@ beat lateral gait with a moment of suspension between footfalls ; each side has both feet land almost simultaneously (left hind and left front , suspension , right hind and right front) . It is meant to be performed by well @-@ trained and balanced horses with skilled riders . It is not a gait used for long @-@ distance travel . A slow pace is uncomfortable for the rider and is not encouraged when training the horse to perform the gait . Although most pacing horses are raced in harness using sulkies , in Iceland horses are raced while ridden .

= = History = =

The ancestors of the Icelandic horse were probably taken to Iceland by Viking Age Scandinavians between 860 and 935 AD . The Norse settlers were followed by immigrants from Norse colonies in Ireland , the Isle of Man and the Western Isles of Scotland . These later settlers arrived with the ancestors of what would elsewhere become Shetland , Highland , and Connemara ponies , which were crossed with the previously imported animals . There may also have been a connection with the Yakut pony , and the breed has physical similarities to the Nordlandshest of Norway . Other breeds with similar characteristics include the Faeroe pony of the Faeroe Islands and the Norwegian Fjord horse . Genetic analyses have revealed links between the Mongolian horse and the Icelandic horse . Mongolian horses are believed to have been originally imported from Russia by Swedish traders ; this imported Mongol stock subsequently contributed to the Fjord , Exmoor , Scottish Highland , Shetland and Connemara breeds , all of which have been found to be genetically linked to the Icelandic horse .

About 900 years ago , attempts were made to introduce eastern blood into the Icelandic , resulting

in a degeneration of the stock . In 982 AD the Icelandic Althing (parliament) passed laws prohibiting the importation of horses into Iceland , thus ending crossbreeding . The breed has now been bred pure in Iceland for more than 1 @,@ 000 years .

The earliest Norse people venerated the horse as a symbol of fertility , and white horses were slaughtered at sacrificial feasts and ceremonies . When these settlers arrived in Iceland , they brought their beliefs , and their horses , with them . Horses played a significant part in Norse mythology , and several horses played major roles in the Norse myths , among them the eight @-@ footed pacer named Sleipnir , owned by Odin , chief of the Norse gods . Skalm , a mare who is the first Icelandic horse known by name , appeared in the Book of Settlements from the 12th century . According to the book , a chieftain named Seal @-@ Thorir founded a settlement at the place where Skalm stopped and lay down with her pack . Horses also play key roles in the Icelandic sagas Hrafnkel 's Saga , Njal 's Saga and Grettir 's Saga . Although written in the 13th century , these three sagas are set as far back as the 9th century . This early literature has an influence today , with many riding clubs and horse herds in modern Iceland still bearing the names of horses from Norse mythology .

Horses were often considered the most prized possession of a medieval Icelander . Indispensable to warriors , war horses were sometimes buried alongside their fallen riders , and stories were told of their deeds . Icelanders also arranged for bloody fights between stallions ; these were used for entertainment and to pick the best animals for breeding , and they were described in both literature and official records from the Commonwealth period of 930 to 1262 AD . Stallion fights were an important part of Icelandic culture , and brawls , both physical and verbal , among the spectators were common . The conflicts at the horse fights gave rivals a chance to improve their political and social standing at the expense of their enemies and had wide social and political repercussions , sometimes leading to the restructuring of political alliances . However , not all human fights were serious , and the events provided a stage for friends and even enemies to battle without the possibility of major consequences . Courting between young men and women was also common at horse fights .

Natural selection played a major role in the development of the breed , as large numbers of horses died from lack of food and exposure to the elements . Between 874 and 1300 AD , during the more favorable climatic conditions of the medieval warm period , Icelandic breeders selectively bred horses according to special rules of color and conformation . From 1300 to 1900 , selective breeding became less of a priority ; the climate was often severe and many horses and people died . Between 1783 and 1784 , around 70 % of the horses in Iceland were killed by volcanic ash poisoning and starvation after the 1783 eruption of Lakagígar . The eruption lasted eight months , covered hundreds of square miles of land with lava , and rerouted or dried up several rivers . The population slowly recovered during the next hundred years , and from the beginning of the 20th century selective breeding again became important . The first Icelandic breed societies were established in 1904 , and the first breed registry in Iceland was established in 1923 .

Icelandics were exported to Great Britain before the 20th century to work as pit ponies in the coal mines , because of their strength and small size . However , those horses were never registered and little evidence of their existence remains . The first formal exports of Icelandic horses were to Germany in the 1940s . Great Britain 's first official imports were in 1956 , when a Scottish farmer , Stuart McKintosh , began a breeding program . Other breeders in Great Britain followed McKintosh 's lead , and the Icelandic Horse Society of Great Britain was formed in 1986 . The number of Icelandic horses exported to other nations has steadily increased since the first exports of the mid @-@ 19th century . Since 1969 , multiple societies have worked together to preserve , improve and market these horses under the auspices of the International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations . Today , the Icelandic remains a breed known for its purity of bloodline , and is the only horse breed present in Iceland .

The Icelandic is especially popular in western Europe , Scandinavia , and North America . There are about 80 @,@ 000 Icelandic horses in Iceland (compared to a human population of 317 @,@ 000) , and around 100 @,@ 000 abroad . Almost 50 @,@ 000 are in Germany , which has many active riding clubs and breed societies .

= = Uses = =

Icelandic horses still play a large part in Icelandic life , despite increasing mechanization and road improvements that diminish the necessity for the breed 's use . The first official Icelandic horse race was held at Akureyri in 1874 , and many races are still held throughout the country from April through June . Both gallop and pace races are held , as well as performance classes showcasing the breed 's unique gaits . Winter events are often held , including races on frozen bodies of water . In 2009 such an event resulted in both horses and riders falling into the water and needing to be rescued . The first shows , focused on the quality of animals as breeding stock , were held in 1906 . The Agricultural Society of Iceland , along with the National Association of Riding Clubs , now organizes regular shows with a wide variety of classes . Some horses are still bred for slaughter , and much of the meat is exported to Japan . Farmers still use the breed to round up sheep in the Icelandic highlands , but most horses are used for competition and leisure riding .

= = Registration = =

Today , the Icelandic horse is represented by associations in 19 countries , with the International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations (FEIF) serving as a governing international parent organization . The FEIF was founded on May 25 , 1969 , with six countries as original members : Austria , Denmark , Germany , Iceland , the Netherlands , and Switzerland . France and Norway joined in 1971 , and Belgium and Sweden in 1975 . Later , Finland , Canada , Great Britain , USA , Faroe Islands , Luxembourg , Italy , Slovenia and Ireland became members , but Ireland subsequently left because of a lack of members . New Zealand has been given the status of " associate member " as its membership base is small . In 2000 , WorldFengur was established as the official FEIF registry for Icelandic horses . The registry is a web database program that is used as a studbook to track the history and bloodlines of the Icelandic breed . The registry contains information on the pedigree , breeder , owner , offspring , photo , breeding evaluations and assessments , and unique identification of each horse registered . The database was established by the Icelandic government in cooperation with the FEIF . Since its inception , around 300 @, @ 000 Icelandic horses , living and dead , have been registered worldwide . The Islandpferde @-@ Reiter- und Züchterverband is an organization of German riders and breeders of Icelandic horses and the association of all Icelandic horse clubs in Germany .