

THE PASO FINO HORSE

*One Fine Step For Mankind,
One Smooth Ride for You*



Lori Ford on
La Reina de La
Fortuna. Photo by
Cheri Prill

If your name means “fine step” in Spanish, you had better bring it! The smooth-gaited, stylish, yet athletic Paso Fino delivers the goods, gliding across the ground with unearthly spirit, grace and dignity. And thanks to thoughtful early explorers, they do it naturally—no enhancements, special shoes or extraordinary measures needed. They just do it. So whether your goal is simple backyard pleasure riding, hitting the show ring, competing on the endurance circuit or some serious trail riding, there’s a Paso Fino para usted (for you).

By Pat Barnhart

According to Oklahoma State University, “The horse has been bred for physical balance, with no exaggerated muscling or size in any portion of the horse. The ideal show horse is at once dramatic, regal, restrained and generates an aura of presence.” I would add that the ideal athlete would be intelligent, compact and willing. Paso Finos generally range in size from 13.2 hands to 15.2 hands; colors run the spectrum from chestnut, bay, palomino, black, grey and roan to pinto.

But the Paso Fino is not just a breed; even a tentative, cowboy boot toe-dipping exploration into the world of Paso Fino horses will send intriguing ripples across the surface of your giddy up world. There is a whole fascinating culture to explore: history, language, terminology, fashion, unique gaits and gasp-worthy beauty. Oh yeah, I was hooked the minute I swung my leg over the saddle and felt the power beneath me. Yee haw! No, wait ... Olé!

Come on. Let’s see what this breed is all about.

HISTORY OF THE BREED

Paso Fino owners sometimes tout their horses as “the horse of the future” and at other times “the horse for today,” but in truth one of the most interesting facets of the breed lies in its colorful history. Turns out, we have more to thank Christopher

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Cheri Prill Photo

Columbus for than the legendary Fountain of Youth. Unless the Paso Fino... could it be?

As most things “American” it all leads back to faraway lands; in ancient Spain there was a mixing of breeds that ultimately engineered one of the world’s smoothest riding horses. Moorish occupation brought with it the Berber horse (Barb), which was interbred with native stock to produce the gaited Spanish Jennet; they were then bred with the Andalusian (hence the lush mane and tail of the Paso Fino).

On Columbus’ second voyage to the New World, he transported horses to Santo Domingo; the stock was a mix of the Berber, Jennet and Andalusian breeds. The small island nation became the ideal locale for a new breed—the best horses were bred to the best without outside influence, and this stock became remounts for conquistadors traveling to Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico and throughout the New World. While the Barb horses were prized for their endurance, and the Andalusian for its beauty and spirit, the Jennet was treasured for its even, smooth gait and was used repeatedly as breeding stock. Even though the Jennet itself became extinct as a breed, its gait has lived on in the Paso Fino.

According to Native American lore, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe had a prized possession. Not gold or the most beautiful wife. Not fertile land. No, he had a very special horse, which bore him in style befitting someone of his stature. He was the envy of the tribal warriors. It is believed that his favorite mount was a well-gaited progeny of the Conquistadors’ remount stock, some of which had become wild herds,

roaming free after the departure of the Spaniards. You can still see a wild mustang now and then with a prancing four-beat gait.



THE GOLDEN GAIT IS NOT A BRIDGE

First of all, you are in for a smooth ride astride a naturally gaited animal that embodies elegance and equine ability. Looking like a carousel horse with its compact frame and long, flowing mane and tail, the Paso Fino has long battled the perception that it is purely an object of beauty, suitable solely for the show ring. Too fancy; too pretty to be a work-horse. Too delicate for endurance competition or serious trail riding. Fact is, nothing could be further from the truth! Paso Finos have been winning competitions and exhibiting their strength and stamina for hundreds of years. They beat up their competitors, not their riders!

Their natural, inbred gait produces a smooth trot-less ride and sets the breed apart from its equine brethren. As the horse moves, its feet fall in a lateral instead of a diagonal pattern as with most breeds. Rather than the familiar butt-bumping trot, the Paso Fino rider remains comfortably seated with minimal effort. No posting, no teeth gritting, no Bengay rubdowns or John Wayne-style walk the day after a long ride.

In addition to a nice walk, lope or rocking-chair canter, the basic gaits of the Paso Fino in order of speed are the *paso fino* (little forward movement, lots of engine-revving power, tight compression, full col-

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LEFT: Calicanto Sin Par, 2 year old colt owned by Hacienda Gasparilla. CENTER: Classic Fino stallion, JLM's Jaranero, Photo by Cheri Prill. RIGHT: Classic Fino stallion, Papillon del Juncal. Photo by Cheri Prill

lection), *paso corto* (this is your basic “drive” speed) and *paso largo* (the powerful, ground-covering overdrive gear). These are not trained movements, but are natural to the horse from the moment of birth. The gait, regardless of speed, is an evenly spaced four-beat rhythm, with each foot hitting the ground independently. Movement (drive) is generated primarily from the hind legs, giving the rider a feeling of power beneath them.

Some Paso Finos are superstars from birth—their skill, conformation, intense gait and presence make them obvious show ring candidates (and probably excellent breeding stock as well). This is especially true for those “fino fino” horses that amaze audiences and become the highlight of horse shows. They will demonstrate the classic fino gait in classes where their footfall is tested as the horse traverses the fino board; as each hoof strikes the board, the quickness and even rhythm can be heard loud and clear.

A champion fino horse produces a rapid staccato rhythm with powerful hindquarter drive contrasting beautifully with amazingly restrained foreleg forward movement. These animals are the stars of the Paso Fino show ring, and their performances lend credence to the perception of “pretty but impractical” so often communicated in the equine world. The true worth of the Paso Fino lies in its ability to perform brilliantly in or out of the show ring.

The most-used gait for riders is the *corto*, a gait that a well-conditioned Paso Fino can maintain for hours. Thanks to the smoothness of the gait, the rider can, too. Need to cover ground more quickly? Shift gears to the *largo*; same footfall with more extension. Now we’re moving—hair flying, smiling and no bouncing. *Muy bueno*.

SHOWING IT ALL OFF

When it comes to Paso Fino horse shows, you’re in for a treat—some unique classes you won’t find anywhere else. There is a standard Paso Fino show costume reflecting the breed’s Spanish legacy, various components of which are required in different classes. Other outfits are worn for, say, Western Pleasure or Costume (see below). As for the horse, the rules state that the horse is to be shown in the most natural state possible, with no artificial enhancements or appliances (not even glitter, so back away from the sparkly stuff!).

Bella Forma (beautiful form) classes exhibit animals that are judged on conformation and gait. With a halter and two long bella forma lines, handlers “drive” the horse from behind, allowing the judge a clear view of the horse’s gait and conformation unobstructed by tack or rider. These classes give spectators a good overall impression of the breed and a unique way to see, from young to mature animals, what

the breed is all about. “Look, Mom, no rider!”

Other distinctly unique classes held in Paso Fino horse shows include costume (a celebration of the Latin American and Spanish heritage of the breed), pleasure driving (exhibiting the versatility of the breed) and equitation (where it’s the rider who is judged on their ability and finesse). Trail and Versatility classes also demonstrate the incredible athletic abilities of the breed, as well as the horses’ adaptability and willingness to tackle obstacles.

SUITABILITY FOR TRAIL RIDERS

Do trail and endurance riders on Paso Fino horses have an advantage over the competition? Their relentless smiles indicate they think so.

Want more proof? Paso Finos have:

- Won the North American Wind Rider Challenge Championship.
- Competed successfully in 100-mile endurance rides, including the Tevis Cup
- Won competitive trail rides
- Won USEF/PFHA sponsored regional, national and international shows
- Won drill team competitions
- Been ridden hours on the trail without rider fatigue. No posting required. Just sit back and enjoy the smoothest ride ever
- Been that perfect equine partner for the youth rider
- Been trained to drive
- Worked cattle
- Graced movie sets, the covers of magazines and strutted their stuff in thousands of parades, including the annual Rose Parade.

And, making this breed choice all the sweeter for trail riders, the Paso Fino Horse Association (PFHA) offers a number of recreational riding programs for activities ranging from pleasure to NATRC, competitive trail, endurance and more.

I leave you with this Cautionary Tail: The Paso Fino can do anything any other breed can do, but it doesn’t work the other way around, making Paso Finos like potato chips; you cannot have just one. Trail life will never be the same!

For more information visit www.pfha.org



Former Paso Fino ranch owner/trainer and avid trail rider Pat Barnhart has traded her years in the saddle for a career that now centers around writing, book editing and travel. She has authored two novels (*Vanderville* and *Throwing Bones*) and lives in central Florida with Belle the Basset Hound, who runs a tight ship.