



www.erabc.com

Arabians in the Olympics

Do you have an Olympic Horse in your backyard?

by Monika Smith

For those breeders looking for another means of promoting the excellence of their horses, the Olympics are a possibility through Endurance Riding.

It's a vision of medals, and international recognition of bloodlines beyond the boundaries of the show world.

Endurance Riding is an FEI (Federation Équestre Internationale) sport, at the same level as Dressage, Show Jumping, Three Day Eventing, Combined Driving, Vaulting and Reining. These sports operate under national equestrian body guidelines, which in Canada is Equine Canada. The first three are the Olympic sports, with Endurance and Reining eyeing the Olympics as the next evolution.

The sport is basic, with simple rules that ensure the welfare of the horse. This has been a grassroots value from the very beginning, with a very North American history, that combines the Pony Express, ranching, American Cavalry, and 'horse' power a very important means of going from here to there. The fact that a few Californians decided to have a horse race over a couple of mountain ranges seemed like a great way to spend a weekend. It was simply accepted that they and their horses could do the hundred miles; but whatever happened, they would be ready for it. They weren't worried about clothing or tack, but one would assume, that they did want comfort for both man and beast. This started the endurance revolution, and created the AERC (the American Endurance Ride Conference), now almost 30 years old. And, because this started outside the breed/show show world industry, it branded Endurance as the blue-collar equestrian sport; slightly nutty people, doing very fast trail rides, watching their pennies and not bothering to keep up with the "Jones'", unless it meant an improvement to the horse's health or athletic ability. This was definitely terra incognita—the notion of a horse as an aerobic athlete. It attracted veterinarians very early on and started a trend to look at horses as endurance athletes, and all that entails.

Today, Endurance Riding is an Arabian-dominated sport. It's a first- across-the-finish-line sport, with 'fit to continue' veterinary criteria for completion. This horse must be an efficient mover; conditioned to go quickly at aerobic levels; get in and out of vet gates in the minimum

time; and have the capacity to rest, rehydrate, and refuel under tense conditions. And, then, have some kick left at the end to win. It was also recognized early on, that the first horse across the finish line might have gone too hard, and that horse can and has been pulled at the end, with no completion. It was also recognized that the rider that really took care of the horse, so that it crossed the finish line with ears up and tail flying in the top ten, needed recognition. This created the BC award, or Best Condition. The horse that could come in first and be Best Condition award, was the truly awesome horse.

Most provinces have long distance riding associations; some have both Endurance Riding and Competitive Trail, like Alberta; or an association that combines both sports, like Ontario. The national body, the Canadian Long Distance Riding Association, CaLDRA has the mandate for international-level Endurance Riding and Championship Competitive Riding events. There are about 1000 Endurance riders across Canada, with about 50 either competing at international levels, or working towards it. FEI rules are a global standard, and more FEI rides are being added each year. There has been phenomenal growth globally.

These lower level rides have an Organizing Committee responsible for putting the event on, and various FEI officials who form the Ground Jury who deal with rules issues; the Veterinary Committee who do the vet checks; and Stewards, who keep the event organized. The two outstanding differences at FEI events is weight. All horses must carry 75 kg of rider and tack; and riders must wear helmets, a shirt with a collar and either shoes with heels, or 'baskets' on their stirrups. After that, it's up to the horse to do the job. Riders can change clothing, saddles, pads, shoes, as long as the ground jury knows it and that the weight the horse carries will not be less than the minimum. There are 24 hours of ride and down time and the rider and horse have every opportunity to rest, walk, stop and eat and drink during that time.

Then, there is international-level Endurance which demands that a 100 Championship event is completed in 18 hours with medals for Team and individual performance. The horse must be at least seven years old. The Vet Gates are ruthlessly closed, forcing riders to pay close attention to strategy and managing their horse. It's a fast pace, and, galloping madly to the first vet check and then hopping to dawdle through the rest of the ride doesn't work. Vets pull horses at the slightest excuse, which means fifty percent completion rate on average at these events. It really takes a special kind of equestrian to enjoy riding a horse for the better part of a day. And it takes a very special horse to be able to do it again and again. That horse can do thousands of miles a season is accepted. There are amazing records of American horses—many with over 10,000 career miles. Canada, with fewer rides and a shorter season, have horses achieving over 4,000 miles, such as Larry Handziuk's Misty (Alberta), and riders that have achieved over 7,000 miles, for example, Christy Janzen and Carol Wadey in Alberta. Both Larry and Christy are serious competitive international riders.

But, add speed to that equation and there are fewer of those miles. More rest is required between events and superior care and maintenance is a must.

At the grassroots level, the motto "To finish is to win" is well known around the world. But, at the international level, you go to win. This horse must be an athlete from the bones up. Genetically predisposed, conditioned and trained, and all the available science

and technology to keep that horse red-lined, but not crashing, and using all the technology available. The international Endurance horse is a high-tech animal, with a crew of grooms, farriers, and vets to keep him at his best at the big ride.

The sport is still in its infancy of identifying what will win. And, that's the charm and underlying attraction that Endurance has—those world champions can be found in the oddest places. Endurance riders have had a perverse pride in owning the cheapest horse that did the most—everyone loves an underdog, especially if it can win a World Champion! And, yes that's happened a number of times. The recent Pan American Gold Medal was a horse off to slaughter (Crystal's Charm). The well-known 'Cash' a WEC gold medallist, was a \$500 horse. And arguably, Endurance's most famous horse, "Rio" (RO Grand Sultan), was given to Becky Hart as part of a 'package' as the 'second' horse. With multi-world championship wins, over 10,000 career miles, this 14.3 HH horse is the 'bar' for an international Endurance horse. Wendy Benns and Flirt With Ecstasy the receiving 8th place individual award at the Pan Ammerican Championship in Vermont, 2001

That these diamonds-in-the-rough found internationally acclaimed careers because serious riders took them in hand. In the years since its crazed California start in the 50s, a creeping popularity has gained adherents around the world. Endurance Riding doesn't have the money that Show Jumping attracts, the historical formality and bias of Dressage, the extremism of Eventing or the feeder sports and events that can plot a career of a pony-owning youngster to the Olympics. And nowhere in Canada are the usual economic wheels that help perpetuate a sport—support and money through breeding, sales, training and prize money.

The big change came in 1998, when after a number of years of trying out Endurance Riding, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) took on Endurance Riding as their own, and took on the World Endurance Championship, when the World Equestrian Games were split up, with the other disciplines going to Rome. What more logic and pride for Arab nations to promote and show Arabians at what they do best—move tirelessly and effortlessly across the sands of Arabia?

That catapulted Endurance into a truly global event, with over 40 nations showing up and starting. It was truly remarkable to have Endurance Riding treated so highly, from the signs at the airport, to television and newspaper coverage. Canada sent a squad of six, of which Christy Janzen, riding Tais (Tang), finished ninth, in just over 10 hours, 104 degree temperatures, two percent humidity, and all the desert sands you wouldn't wish for.

Of course with such generosity, that should have put the kibosh on future events. Who could afford to empty their pockets for the next World Endurance Championship? In 2000, the WEC was held in Compiègne, France. Again the UAE, through the Emirates Airlines, provided sponsorship support for meals and accommodation. Amazingly over 30 nations showed up, and what a horse race. Endurance Racing has the largest number of participating nations in any FEI championship event; is the fastest growing FEI event, surpassing Dressage; hard on the heels of Eventing; and expected to become the most popular of the disciplines in very short order.

The crowds overwhelmed the crewing areas and viewing stands; over 130 media were registered; TV, live radio followed the French favourites who won first, second and third place individual medals and Australia winning Team Gold. It was a global event.

And Canada? Leasing horses was the only option, and with excellent management and care of the horses during the event, two riders completed: Christy Janzen and Yvette Vinton.

Canadian riders have done very well over the years, bringing individual or Team medals home from the Pan American events or the World events.

At the 2001 Pan American Championship, Vermont, Canadians (under Canada East and Canada West banners) rode very well: Top finisher, in 8th place, Wendy Benz, and Flirt With Ecstasy. Also completing: Tais and Christy Janzen; JC Quick Quint and Jim Rawski; Kikuyu and Bianca Loseth; Traverston Cob and Nancy Beacon; SCA Dartagan and Myna Cryderman; MX Tio Vivo and Carol Steiner; Galant Legacy and Yvette Vinton; Dakota's Ladyhawk and Eve Comrie; Shahir Ibn Waadal and Kelly Corbyn; XXX Flashman and Karen Badger; Soaring Eagle and Joan Storrey.

Just recently, Yvette Vinton, completed the challenging, World Most Preferred Endurance Ride, in Dubai, on E.H. Malachi.

With the opportunity of the Olympics, perhaps as soon as 2008, the challenge to stand on the podium has become more difficult for Canada.

Canada has good riders and horses; but need funding and support to get all the tools and technology, conditioning and training techniques that other nations have been doing for years. The U.S.A is fully funding their WEG Endurance horses through USET, to the tune of \$200,000 (US). They have a tough selection process to make sure that the best of the best goes to Spain.

Canada? No government funding available. Each rider is self-funded, and the cost to fly a horse to Spain, is around \$20,000. Endurance is looking for alliances, sponsors and donations to get our best to Spain.

Endurance needs to be brought 'out of the bush' and into the limelight. It has an amazing popularity in Europe, in spite of the lack of trails that Canada has in abundance. Riding through towns, on cobblestone roads, around castle walls, or through state forests, are taken in stride. And slowly, with a lot of work, Endurance is starting to become a bit better known.

But, to get to the Olympics, riders and horses need to be prepared. If 2008 is a goal, the horse born this year is not eligible!

This is the challenge! Do you have an Olympic champion in your back forty? And, what it is going to take to get him there?