

The Conquistadors and the Iberian Horse

“For, after God, we owed the victory to the horses.” Bernal Díaz 1569

By Sarah Gately-Wilson

When Spain claimed the New World, the Iberian horse was there to help. These original Iberian horses are not the Andalusians and Lusitanos as we know them today, but their ancestors, a little smaller, stockier, but with the same inherent traits that today make the Iberian horse so desirable! On his second voyage in 1493, Christopher Columbus brought the Iberian horse to the Americas. Every subsequent expedition also contained Iberians in its Cargo. Breeding farms were established in the Caribbean to provide mounts for the Conquistadors as they explored and settled the New World. These original Iberians became the foundation stock for all American breeds of horse to follow. The Mustangs, Pasos, and Criollos still strongly resemble their ancestors, but few realize that the Morgan, American Saddlebred, and the American Quarter Horse, to name a few, are also descendants of the Iberian horse.



A grulla American Quarter Horse. The Conquistador's Iberians came in many coat colors.

Many of the Conquistadors that traveled to the New World came from Extremadura, a section of Spain just northwest of Andalucia. The men and their horses were used to the dry hard land of southern Spain. The horses survived the four month voyage across the Atlantic, cramped into tight areas and with restricted diets. Upon arrival, the horses had to swim to land before starting out on their next voyage over rugged terrain to carry the men through jungles and swamps into uncharted territories.

Hernando Cortés, whose reputation for ruthlessness was well justified, had a soft spot for his horses. Bernal Díaz, who accompanied Cortés, kept notes on all of the horses, their strengths and weaknesses and who rode them. In letters home to the King, the importance of the existing horses and the need for additional mounts was always emphasized. In Mexico, the black stallion Morzillo who was greatly loved and highly prized by Cortés, was wounded and Cortés left him with an Indian chief as the stallion could not go on. In a letter, Cortés shows his regret, “I was obliged to leave my black horse (mi caballos morzillo) with a splinter in his foot. The chief promised to take care of him, but I do not know that he will succeed, or what he will do with him.”

Cortés intended to return for the horse, but as chance had it, he never heard the wondrous story of Morzillo, as Cortés barely escaped the country with his life. Morzillo was left at the lake of Peten Itza in 1525, entrusted to an Indian chief. It was over 100 years later before another set of Spanish Conquistadors traveled this land to Yucatan. The Spanish missionaries that returned to the village of the Indians that had Morzillo, found many idols to burn before turning to face something that left them in awe.

Entering the last island, the missionaries came to stand before a rudely carved statue. On a platform about the height of a man they saw the figure of a horse carved from stone. The horse sat on his quarters with his forefeet stretched before him. When Cortés left his horse all those years ago, the Indians, knowing he was ill, stabled him in a temple to care for him. Knowing nothing of this animal, they brought him chiefly banquets of almonds and raisins, fruits, chickens, all delicacies! All unsuitable for a horse! The poor horse eventually died. The Indians, fearing Cortés would return and be angry, carved the figure of El Morzillo and placed it in the temple on the lake.



Morgan mare. One of the breeds that originated from the blood of the first Iberians to land in the Americas.

These brave and hardy horses served purposes greater than carrying the men. The native tribes were in awe of the magnificent beasts and feared them. The Conquistadors used this to their advantage by charging and stopping short, spinning, and then retreating quickly to charge again. Initially the Indians thought the man and beast to be one, a Centaur of sorts. There are several accounts of using the horses to frighten or subdue the natives. In one story, the Conquistadors under Cortés were aware of Indians encircling their camp. They brought out a stallion into plain sight, and then close by but hidden, they stood a mare who was in season. The

stallion screamed and danced at the scent of the mare as expected, but the Indians saw a wild beast mad out of his mind and were frightened away! Few remained, but those that did returned with the story of the great man that could calm the wild beast with his touch. Cortés, knowing he had the Indians full attention, walked forward to the anxious stallion and placed a hand on his bridle and began to speak quietly. At the same time, his men secretly removed the mare from the stallion's presence and he was calmed.



The Conquistadors rode and bred the mares! Some of the best mounts were mares carrying foals.

As the Spanish conquistadors headed further south through Colombia and Ecuador and eventually into Peru, they encountered many different native tribes. The Incas were of great interest with their golden cities and grand hospitality. However, it was Pedro de Valdivia, famous for conquering Chile with his paramour Doña Ínes de Suárez, who encountered the infamous and bloody Mapuches. Traveling to Chile, and once settled in Santiago, Valdivia had native slaves. One of these was a young teenager named Laútaró. Laútaró was set to work in the stables, and though he hated his Spanish master, he masked his true feelings in order to learn the Spanish methods of breaking and handling horses. Laútaró later escaped and returned to his tribe where he became a tóqui, or tribal leader. When he eventually faced his former master, Valdivia, in battle, he not only captured the governor and tortured him to death, he also captured 10 of the soldiers horses. He later parleyed with the Spaniards for more horses. The Mapuches proved to

be some of the fiercest warriors and developed into magnificent horseman and were a tribe never subjugated by the Spanish!

Later, with these same horses, the American Indians reinvented riding and became famous as “the best light cavalry in the world.” On the back of the Iberian Horse, Mexico merged into the American South west and, over time, the vaquero became the American Cowboy. The descendants of the Conquistador’s Iberian horse, the Creole, vary in name and some characteristics due to where and how they were bred. The Colombians breed their gaited Paso Finos which a man can comfortable ride from dawn to dusk. The Venezuelan Llanero horses are flat-bodied and slab-sided, characteristics that help them survive the heat. In Guatemala, the Creole is heavier bodied, more like the traditional charro horse, whereas those in the hotter tropical climates are smaller. Of all of these great breeds, the Argentine Criollo and the caballero who made the legendary three year journey are included.



BLM Mustang mare. North American descendant of the Conquistador’s mounts!

In the 1930s, a former history teacher by the name of Aime Tschiffley trekked from Buenos Aires to New York on descendants of the horses of the Conquistadors: two Argentine Criollos, Mancha and Gato. It is an unlikely tale of a man who took two unbroken horses who had been running free on the pampas said to be “the wildest of the wild.” The horses, Mancha (the spotted one) 16 years old who was said to attack and kick anyone who came near, and Gato (the cat) 15 years old who was only slightly less mean. Tschiffley and his two horses traversed the roughest parts of South America and Mexico as well as the U.S. Many parts of his journey followed the routes of the old Conquistadors, over treacherous mountain passes and across the boiling sands of the infamous Mataballo (horse-killer) desert of Peru. After enduring limited food, extreme heat, extreme cold, and treacherous terrain, the mad man made his way to Washington D.C. and then on to New York where he was received by a welcoming party!

The natives lived in awe and fear of the magnificent Iberian horses. The Conquistadors depended upon them for survival. Without these horses, Cortés would not have progressed through the jungles and terrain of Mexico. The Pizarro brothers would have been at a great disadvantage founding Peru. Pedro deValdivia would likely not have made it through the frozen mountains and scalding deserts on his way to Chile. The Conquistadors victory was owed to their Iberian equine partners. Without these horses history would not be as it is and the American breeds we know today that are descendants of these original Iberian horses would be considerably different, if they existed at all.



The Spanish Andalusian, today's Iberian horse!