

Growing Arabian Champions

one foal at a time

By Mary Minor Davis



Images of Arizona's wild west are often accented by the cowboy atop a horse in a desert or mountain setting. In film and in print, the American Quarter Horse has stood as the preferred mount of the rancher, while Indians rode their Paints bareback through the lore of the wild frontier.

Perhaps not so well known is the Arabian and its significant contribution to Arizona's equine industry. Arabians represent a significant economic attraction for the state, home of one of the largest Arabian shows in the world. Many of the champions crowned at the elite Scottsdale Arabian Show were bred and trained in Southern Arizona.

There are nearly a dozen Arabian breeding farms and training facilities in the region, ranging in size from just a few head up to hundreds of horses. Collectively, this network of farms has earned their owners thousands of cham-

pionship titles at all levels in competitions around the world. The Arabian industry represents millions of dollars in revenue for Arizona, and brings a significant economic impact to Southern Arizona through the investment of owners, trainers, breeders and boarders alike.

Perhaps the most well known of these farms is Al-Marah, located on Tucson's eastside. The dream of Bazy Tankersley, the farm is responsible for breeding more than 3,000 horses. Tankersley has spent 65 years perfecting her crop of top-of-the-line competitors – one foal at a time. With hundreds of championship titles to her credit, Al-Marah's line has been exported to states around the country, where farms get their start from the Al-Marah line.

Tankersley began her love of Arabians with her first three-quarter Arab as a child. In college, she was fascinated

by genetics. "I was the only girl in my dorm breeding fruit flies," she said. Her passion for understanding what to look for in a good horse ultimately led her to breeding her own line of Arabians, a process that she perfected over the years and which recently was captured in a book about Al-Marah, "A Field of Arabians."

At 90 years of age, Tankersley said she is "most proud of the quality of the horses that we have bred. There are many people who have started their own farms in other places from our horses."

The quality of the breeding is the key to a successful farm, coupled with trainers who understand the unique characteristics of the Arabian. For all breeders, the standards that define a "quality" horse are pretty universally agreed upon.

"Quality equals desire – whether or not you have someone

who wants that line," said Jerry Hamilton, general manager at Al-Marah. "For the horse, it means correctness – straight legs, pretty head, a manageable temperament."

"The Arab is such a special horse," added Trish Nelson, owner of Nelson Farms. "People who don't like Arabians have never been around a good Arabian. They're athletic, social, kind. They're a type of horse you just ask." They're that responsive.

It is the consistency in possessing these qualities that has put Southern Arizona's breeders and trainers on the map, and that has led to the growth of Arizona's reputation as a premiere Arabian capital. Each February, more than 2,500 horses compete for more than \$1 million in prize money. The 11-day event attracts more than 250,000 attendees from around the world.

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Nelson got her start as an apprentice working the Scottsdale show in the 1980s and has seen the Scottsdale show become one of the top “triple crown” events in the world – second to the Canadian Nationals and the U.S. Nationals. “This was the time frame when Scottsdale really became a mecca for Arabians,” she said. “We had horses selling for millions of dollars.”

Although the economic downturn has taken its toll on the Arabian market, Scottsdale remains a leader in championship showings and the higher-end foals can still bring top dollar.

Colin Bamford owns and operates Summerhill Arabians on Tucson’s east-side with his wife Sharon. With foals starting at \$10,000 a head and going higher, he has spent years making sure that his farm produces the highest quality horse for the right buyer.

“If you can produce quality foals with two mares to a good stallion, you can make money,” he said. “So much has to do with the individual who is interested

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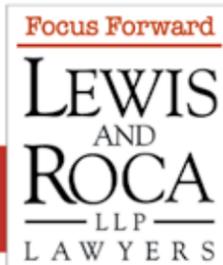
Dick & Nan Walden, Owners of the Green Valley Pecan Company

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“These are horses that you can have a relationship with. They’re sensitive and will do anything for you.”

– Nan Walden, Arabian breeder

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in getting into the horse business.”

Those likely to be highly successful are people who have been interested in and active in the equestrian world all of their lives, Bamford said.

“Those individuals that are particularly successful often have developed their interest as children or have been born into families that have been active in various horse-related businesses.”

Sometimes it just takes good instincts. Nan and Dick Walden, owners of the Green Valley Pecan Company, found themselves getting involved with the Arab world when they purchased their first horse in 2003. Now with 12 head, including two they’ve bred and raised, the Waldens have integrated their Arabian lifestyle into the pecan farm and their ranch life at home.

“We breed very selectively,” Nan said, choosing to breed only those horses they can sell or want to raise on their own. Careful planning has paid off. In addition to winning a number of championship titles in her own right – including competing for the first time in 2010 at the Scottsdale show – the Waldens received the 2010 Arabian Horse World’s selection as fifth among the top 25 Arabian owners nationally.

What type of horse is driving the market today?

Good champions still dominate demand, but with the creation of a new competitive division – the Sport Horse – in recent years, sound athletic horses are also in demand. The world of jumping and sport horse is strong. And there are always the niche markets that the Arabian breeder can explore – Warmblood crosses, Quarabs, National Show Horses and Anglo-Arabs, to name a few.

“Interestingly enough, mule fanciers do love a pretty mule and there is no way that one can ignore the exquisite beauty of the Arabian when crossed with any other breed,” Bamford added.

The size of the farm doesn’t necessarily define the kind of financial success a breeder can have. For instance, Bamford said a small farm over time can generate a small profit or a small loss. A small breeding farm should expect to produce a profit two years out of seven years, as long as expenses are kept under control and much of the labor is performed by family members including grooming, conditioning, showing, preparing websites and free or low-cost advertising.

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Larger farms, “unless superbly managed,” will be likely to generate large losses because the larger facility requires more employees, some of whom have to be highly skilled. A large breeding farm should expect to promote one or more stallions with the ability to collect and transport semen, boarding outside mares and have the right facilities for breeding and veterinary activities.

Some farms concentrate on breeding, some owners and trainers concentrate on showing, some on training, and some on teaching students. “Some degree of specialization becomes essential,” Bamford added.

Hamilton said the real profit center is in the services offered – training, coaching and caring for horses – because products can’t be successful until the ages of the horses are right for breeding, and a stallion has to have a couple of successes before word gets out and you can charge a premium price. At the end of the day, the foal that comes from the “perfect match” doesn’t always turn out to be a champion.

In looking at pricing stud fees, Hamilton said you need to be smart. “Anything less than \$20,000 and you’re buying yourself a fancy gelding,” he said. Nelson charges between \$800-\$850 per month to train – and it can take six months or longer before a horse and rider are ready for the ring.

One thing stands out above all else with Arizona’s Arabian tradition – the breeders who are doing it well are those who understand the unique characteristics of these horses and the rich history that lies in this loyal and majestic breed.

“These are horses that you can have a relationship with,” Nan Walden said. “They’re sensitive and will do anything for you.”

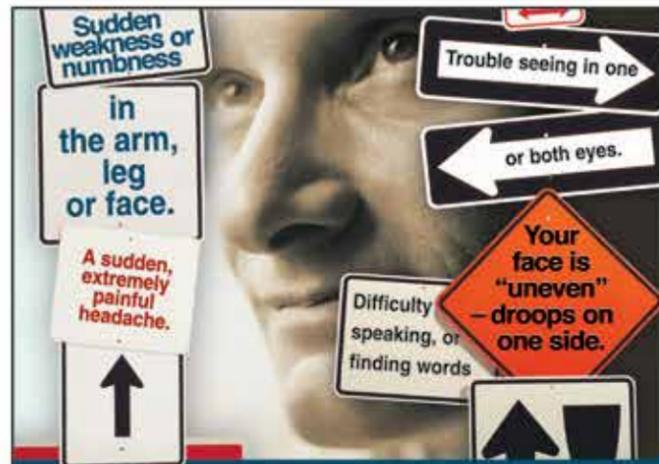
Hamilton said, “I’m tickled that I’m able to make a living doing this.”



To learn more about the Arabian breed, visit www.arabianhorses.org.

Arabian Horse Farms in Southern Arizona

- Rancho Sonado LLC
- Al-Marah Arabians
- El Moro Arabians
- Fable Arabians
- Misty Mountain Arabian Sport Horses
- Mystery Ranch
- Nelson Farms
- Summerhill Arabians



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