



Origin of the Southern African Horse Breeds

by Dr Frans van der Merwe and Jinnie Martin

Although the name has long ago fallen into disuse, the lineages of the present day SA Boerperd, Cape Boerperd, Nooitgedacht Horse and Basutho Pony can all be traced back to the Cape Horse.

The Cape Horse gained worldwide recognition in the 18th and 19th centuries when horses from the Cape colony proved themselves as outstanding remounts in India and other parts of the British Empire of the time.

The first horses imported into southern Africa were brought to the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 from Java in a Dutch East India Company vessel returning to Holland via the newly established halfway station at the foot of Table Mountain. They were called Javanese ponies. Despite some accounts that the Javanese pony was a mixture of Barb and Arab, authorities in that country are now of the opinion that the Java horses descended directly from Mongolian stock later crossed to oriental horses from Persia.



For almost one and a half centuries the descendants of Javanese ponies, strengthened in size and constitution in 1689 with a very significant importation of good quality Persian horses by Dutch governor Simon van der Stel, formed the foundation stock for large herds of small but exceptionally hardy farm horses. They played an enormously important role in the economy of the colony and in the lives of the settlers as well as the indigenous peoples.

In 1778 a shipment of South American horses, highly esteemed for their gentleness, beauty and

good service, was landed at the Cape. Another introduction of horses of Spanish origin followed in 1807 when, during the Napoleonic wars, two vessels carrying Andalusian horses to Buenos Aires were captured and brought to the Cape. They were eagerly taken up by the local breeders and it is believed that the later famous Melck greys derived from these. It is also assumed that the Barb ancestry of the South American and Spanish horses was responsible for the unmistakable traces of Barb conformation that is still today to be seen in the Nootgedachter and SA Boerperd.



Compare the pair of Nootgedachters (top) with the group of SA Boerperde (bottom)

In 1782 the first English National Horses (later called Thoroughbred) were introduced. During the first British occupation of the Cape (1795-1803) more English horses as well as horses from Boston were imported. These and subsequent importations of Arabian stallions, brought about great improvement in horse stock of the districts where they were standing. In 1803 Lichtenstein (*Travels in Southern Africa*) commented very favourably on the Van Rheenen stud at Groote Toren near the present-day Calvinia in the Hantam, where he found 300 mares with a number of imported stallions.

Lord Charles Somerset, the English governor at the Cape from 1814 to 1827, perhaps did more than any other single individual to promote the horse industry in the South Africa of that time. He personally imported thirty-four Thoroughbred stallions for racing and the improvement of racing stock. Some of these stallions and their offspring found their way to the inland studs of the western-, southwestern- and northern Cape and as far away as Graaff-Reinet and Albany in the eastern Cape.

Through Somerset's endeavours the export trade to India and other parts of the British Empire was greatly increased. It was then that the Cape Horse gained world renown as a cavalry horse, being reported by the Indian army officers and those who later fought in the Crimean War, to have no equal. It was able to stand the extremities of climate and terrain from the arid, dusty heat of India to the bitter cold of the Crimea. It was hardy, docile, willing and surefooted, needing no special care and able to forage for itself on the scantiest of food. It was also in Somerset's time that Cape Horses were taken by ship to Australia where they formed the basis for the development of the famous Waler, of New South Wales, which eventually took over the Indian and Middle Eastern markets for cavalry horses.

Between 1835 and the early 1840's Cape Horses, in large numbers, went along on the Great Trek, the mass emigration of farmers with their families and livestock from the Cape districts to the lands north of the Orange- and Vaal rivers and east of the Drakensberg. Eventually they laid the foundation for large studs, some of them with hundreds of mares kept virtually free-roaming on new farms in what later became the republics of Orange Free State, the Transvaal and the British colony of Natal. Also at that time, actually from 1826 onwards, Cape Horses were taken into Basutholand as war booty and as trade goods. In that mountain kingdom, with its extremely harsh climate, sheep and rocky mountain foot paths and scantiest of food, especially in winter, the famous Basutho Pony developed virtually through natural selection as a descendant of the Cape Horse. The present-day Nootgedacht are direct descendants of the Basutho ponies, which were, strictly speaking, not ponies but small horses with remarkable weight carrying capacities.

The Cape Horse derived from Javanese ponies, Persian Arabs, South American and Spanish Andalusians strengthened with later large infusions of English Thoroughbred and some Arabian blood, developed as a well-adapted, distinct type in South Africa over a period of 200 years.

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