

recreating the

REAL FRENCH PERCHERON STALLION

by Virginia Kouyoumdjian, France

For many years, the conventional wisdom on French-bred Percheron horses has been that they are big, lumbering creatures with too much bone and no gait, products of a sad focus on breeding horses for the meat market. There is no doubt that this came very close to being the truth, although it never was the entire truth. Excellent bloodlines and outstanding horses have always been bred in France but they were rather thin on the ground for a long while.

It was after the Second World War that things began to turn sour for the Percheron in France. To start with, there was very little good breeding stock left. A few breeders had managed to hide their best stallions, but they were few and far between. And to make matters worse, tractors took over farming in a big way and the draft horse no longer had a use on the farm. At the same time, buses had replaced coaches which had mainly been pulled by Percherons. In a harsh economic climate, old-time breeders had to face the reality that nobody wanted their horses anymore. Fortunately, there was an outlet that was thriving: the meat market. Although the consumption of horse meat had not traditionally been part of the French diet, it had gained in popularity as a cheaper and nutritious alternative to beef. It is widely said and probably true that the meat market saved not just the Percheron breed but all the nine breeds of draft horse in France. The problem initially was that the Percheron was no longer the perfect meat horse, having over the ages, developed the finer lines and bone structure of a working horse. And so the focus turned to fattening them up to increase value. This was often done in a rather indiscriminate fashion, the purpose being to develop mass rather than looks or gait.

This is not to say that the breeding of Percherons went totally to pot in the post-war years. The existence of France's national stud system meant that the very best young stallions were purchased by the state each year, and their sperm was available to all breeders. There was in fact a system in place whereby the staff of the stud would do the rounds of farms with one or two stallions in a van to inseminate mares. This system continued, in one way or another, until the mid-2000s. The semen was sold at very low prices and technicians were available to make sure all was done properly. Breeders simply needed to think about what kind of horse they wanted to breed, which often seemed irrelevant when the bulk of the production went for meat.

A FEW STALLIONS OF GREAT INFLUENCE

During the dark years of the 1950s to the 1980s, the Percheron horse grew heavier. However, according to Gérard Vendel, keeper of the history of the breed in France, a few stallions appeared who would put their stamp on the rebirth of the breed. These include SENATEUR, born in 1962, NEUBOURG, born in 1979, SERGENT, born in 1984, and URBAIN DU GUE, born in 1986. According to Gérard Vendel, "SENATEUR is the leader of the modern Percheron breed in France with outstanding products, both in terms of colts going on to become national stallions and fillies who made outstanding broodmares. SERGENT, on the other hand, has been called the real reformer of the breed and has, in particular, produced outstanding results in combination with the bloodlines of URBAIN DU GUE. NEUBOURG has had an enormous impact on breeding in the department of the Mayenne."

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SERGENT



RAVISSANT

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One thing that immediately catches the attention when looking at these horses is that they are all grey. This was a trend that developed heavily in the post-war years. Early in the 20th century, there had in fact been a majority of black horses. A quick perusal through one volume (out of 16!) of the French Percheron Stud Book for 1909 shows, out of 300 horses, 61% were black. For some reason, this had shifted in a major way so that grey had become the preponderant color in France by the second half



ORGUEIL DE PRAINVILLE

Virginia Kouyoumdjian photo

of the century. According to breeder Patrice Biget "In the 1980s, the fashionable look for the Percheron was light grey, verging on white, with no dappling and a few black stallions that often did not conform to the breed." Those who remember the shows back then reminisce that black horses would generally end up last in any competition. There were just a couple of black stallions who made their mark in those years, including RAVISSANT, born in 1983. Either he or his son FARCEUR, born in 1999, can be found in the origins of many of the current crop of black stallions who also have American bloodlines.

TURNING TO AMERICA

A turning point in the history of the Percheron horse in France came in 1989 with the organization of the first French Percheron World Congress. For the first time, a clear determination was shown to bring the Percheron back as a working horse, starting with the return of the driven horse. The issue at the time was that

the Percheron had lost the morphology best suited to that kind of use and something had to be done. There were still some of the lighter horses in France, but finding those lineages was hard work that required time and much dedication. The solution appeared to be elsewhere. Thousands of Percherons had been exported to North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the breeding there had evolved very differently from Europe, with no meat market that fattened the horses up. North American Percherons had retained their lighter, elegant look and many were strangely reminiscent of the old photographs of Percherons in France.

The new adventure started in 1993 with the import by the French National Stud at Haras du Pin of a black American stallion, SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK, a son of Lo Lynd Joe Laet and Margo Lee Lismore, by South Valley Did-It. Reactions to his arrival were very mixed and many of the breeders who had grown up and worked knowing nothing other than

Old postcards reproduced courtesy of Claude and Gwénaëlle Hamelin from their book Les Chevaux Percherons, published by the Fédération des Amis du Perche.



This historical postcard shows Tirailleur, a popular French stallion from 1919.



Astrologue was five times a class winner in 1924.



Yet another "modern" looking horse from the history books.

Sergent & Ravissant photos courtesy Berno Sidke archives.

the Percheron-for-meat truly believed that these were no Percherons. Guy Mérel, an unusually visionary older breeder, says, "They all told me he looked like a monkey and that I was crazy to use him." Fortunately, there was both a lot of curiosity and a fairly quick realization that "Silver" produced outstanding foals with the heavier French mares. During his career in France, he sired 295 registered foals, and it is now not at all unusual to find his name in French pedigrees. His most outstanding son, GALLIEN, whose dam was a daughter of NEUBOURG, in turn sired 282 registered foals. Another son, INGAO, is still active at age 15 and sired both the 2011 Heavy Draft Champion, VAL CENIS DE NÈSQUE and Diligencier (coach horse) Champion Stallion, UT DE LA VANDE.

LOOKING TO BRING BACK THE WORKING HORSE

One breeder whose start in the business broadly coincided with the arrival of Silver Shadows Sheik is Sylvie Martz. She initially took advice from more experienced breeders in her area and François Chouanard, President of the French Percheron Horse Society, told her "If you want to succeed in the Percheron business and produce horses that will sell, don't produce heavy horses. Rather, orient yourself towards the lighter "diligencier" (coach) model." She followed this advice but made sure the broodmares she acquired had impeccable French origins, often going back to the stallions that figure in Gerard Vendel's master list. The result has been not only lighter horses but also a focus on working horses, and her own stallions are all ridden, driven and worked. She clarifies her philosophy: "The great success for me was to rediscover the functionality of the Percheron horse. They never used to be over one ton and had to have a certain suppleness in movement. You still hear from some of the older breeders that the "diligenciers" have no strength but they mistakenly confuse mass with strength. The opposite is in fact true and strength is a combination of morphology and state of mind." Her stallion, ORGUEIL DE PRAINVILLE would seem to be proof of this.

The same is true for another horse bred by Martz, SCIPION DE PRAINVILLE who is a son of CZAR OF LIVINGSTONE VALLEY and

descended from the NEUBOURG lineage on his mother's side. Although he has been classified as a heavy draft model, showing a recent shift in thinking towards lightening even the heavy category, he still has the more elegant lines inherited from his American sire. He too works for a living, in addition to being available for reproduction through frozen semen.

In the years that followed Silver's arrival, several other stallions were imported from the United States and Canada. STOREY CREEK KNIGHT CRUISER, CZAR OF LIVINGSTONE VALLEY, B&L HANSON'S RUBY'S CHARLIE, DONAMERR'S TITAN and HANNAH HILL KEMO SABE have all made their impact on French Percheron breeding. By carefully selecting which mares to breed them with, it has been possible to produce horses that have excellent conformation with a lighter overall look but good bone, better tissue quality and sounder legs, and often black or dark dappled grey. Breeders in France are wary of increasing size too much and risking a loss of overall harmony and power. Their aim is to produce once more a horse that is capable of doing almost anything in terms of work, as well as suited for the newer leisure applications of riding and sports driving. In 1998, the French Percheron Horse Society divided the classification into two types: the heavy draft ("trait") and the light coach ("diligencier"). It is



INGAO

Valérie Gesbert photo



SCIPION DE PRAINVILLE

Pauline Vica photo

often the case that the horses in the lighter category have a high percentage of North American blood but not always so. Some French breeders, such as Davy Gesbert in the department of the Orne, go out of their way

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TOM DE PRAINVILLE

Recreating the Real French Percheron Stallion continued

to find the old lighter French strains and revive them. He spends hours pouring over old volumes of the stud book and has traced his core broodmare's origins back to the 1880s, in the very area that he lives in. His greatest concern is that the French Stud Book remains open, "It should have been closed 30 years ago so that we know exactly what the origins of every horse are." He also notices that there is a trend towards lighter horses, even in the heavy draft category; "Perhaps the two-category classification will even-

tually become redundant."

AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH

According to Jean-Jacques Léon, Percheron breeder and also Acting President of the French Percheron Stud Book Commission, "around 40% of registered foals nowadays have some American blood, with some 1,100 registrations in 2011." A quick calculation of the newly approved stallions for 2012 shows a similar percentage of American blood. Changes are also being seen in the availability of stallions. For many years, the national stud represented an important part of breeding programs. With the system now being dismantled by the French government, private stallion owners are once more coming to the fore. This makes for a much broader availability of bloodlines and Jean-Jacques Léon emphasizes that "In France, on average, a stallion will cover ten mares which prevents too much interbreeding."

It is interesting to take a look at what the inflow of American blood does over several generations. Take for example, SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK. One of his offspring is ORGUEIL DE PRAINVILLE who, on

his mother's side, has origins going back to the stallions PAULO and IGORD. He has 50% American blood and is both a breeding and working stallion, who mainly does logging.

His son, TOM DE PRAINVILLE, has 25% American blood and, on his mother's side, comes from the lineage of NEUBOURG. He is heavier while still keeping an elegant form and he is driven and ridden, as well as having frozen semen available.

Diluting the American blood even further can also produce outstanding horses in combination with the right French bloodlines. One such example is SEIGNEUR DES HATES whose 12.5% of American blood comes from SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK and who is outstanding both in conformation and gait. He was Champion in the Diligencier (coach horse) category in 2009.

It is also interesting to consider the direction taken by those breeders who prefer to stick with 100% pure French origins. Here too, there is something of a move afoot towards darker colors, even black, as well as lighter models. A good example of what is being produced here is VLEDOR DEL MOTTE. He is

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE BROODMARES!

Stallions may be photogenic and attention-magnets but, let's face it, the broodmares do play a serious role in bringing forth the next-generation! In France, they have played a particularly crucial part in that they have been the guardians of the traditional French bloodlines as they have been bred to imported American stallions in the quest to recreate a more elegant horse that has the work capacity of the Percherons of old.

Let us first take a look at a trio of broodmares, a mother and two of her daughters, who have had a considerable impact on the Percheron breed in France in the past two decades. The mother was TOSCANE (1985-2010) who was a daughter of the legendary NEUBOURG, and of the lineage of VAUTOUR on her dam's side.

During her 16 years as a broodmare, she gave birth to nine foals. The most famous was GALLIEN, the first son born in France of Silver Shadows Sheik, in 1994. He was the stallion who truly broke the ice in

how French breeders saw American imports and was purchased by the National Stud from his breeder, Patrice Biget. He sired 282 registered foals during his career, and his presence in any pedigree is seen as a sign of great quality.

Toscane also produced two outstanding daughters, KORE 4, born in 1998, and MYCENES DE LA VANDE, born in 2000, both daughters of Silver Shadows Sheik.

To date, Kore 4 has produced eight foals, the most outstanding being QUINTUS DE LA VANDE whose sire is STOREY CREEK KNIGHT CRUISER, and who now belongs to the King of Morocco. Another son, RHESOS DE LA VANDE, also by Cruiser, is an approved stallion. So far, Mycenes de la Vande has only produced three foals but her first born, RIVULUS DE LA VANDE, by B&L HANSON'S RUBY'S CHARLIE, had a brilliant career, winning almost every competition he entered, culminating in the title of World Champion Stallion, as chosen by an international



TOSCANE



KORE 4



VOLGA DU LOGIS



TITUS DE VANOISE

Catherin Renou photo



SEIGNEUR DES ILATES

Virginia Kouyoumdjian photo



VLEDOR DEL MOTTE

Chantale Masson photo

descended from URBAIN DU GUE and SERGENT on his sire's side, and QUARTE and QUIRINAL on his dam's side.

Still, for many French breeders these days, something around

the 12.5% to 25% mark in American blood seems like the perfect number. But it is interesting to see how, even with 75% of American blood, some stallions keep outstanding

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jury, at the 2011 Percheron World Congress in France, and siring 118 registered foals, before also being acquired by the King of Morocco in late 2011. Another foal, UPSILONE DE LA VANDE, is also an approved stallion. The Neubourg/Vautour bloodlines of Toscane, in combination with well-selected American stallions, have truly produced outstanding results.

Another outstanding broodmare of the past two decades is VOLGA DU LOGIS, born in 1987, a daughter of PAULO.

She produced a total of nine foals over her career, three of which have been outstanding. Her second foal, INGAO, was by Silver Shadows Sheik. Born in 1996, he was approved for breeding in 1998 and is enjoying a distinguished career as a sire. In fact, the two winning stallions at the 2011 Percheron World Congress in France, VAL CENIS DE NESQUE in the heavy draft category, and UT DE LA VANDE in the light coach category, were both sons. Volga's next foal, a filly by the name of JADE is renowned in Percheron circles for her dressage aptitude. And her 2006 foal, SOLEA D'EGEE, was champion in the young draft mare category at the 2009 French Percheron National Championships.

Volga's owner, Davy Gesbert, is proud to have traced back her

origins all the way to the 1880s, in the very same area where the mare is now living a well-earned retirement.

And the final broodmare in this series is BELLE DES CHOUX, born in 1989, also a daughter of PAULO, and legendary in Percheron circles in France as a true representative of the small coach horse ("Postier") of old.

Belle has produced only four foals during her breeding career but they all stand out for their aptitude as leisure and work horses. Of particular interest is ORGUEIL DE PRAINVILLE, a 2002 son of SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK, who splits his time between stallion duties and logging. Also in the annals of recent Percheron history is NOTREDAM DE PRAINVILLE, born in 2001 and a daughter of CZAR OF LIVINGSTONE VALLEY. A pure-bred Percheron with a 50-50 mix of French and American bloodlines, NotreDam has always made headlines for her looks and her sporting achievements. Over the past few years, she has been the winningest ever horse on the French Percheron (gallop!) racing circuit, has proved an able jumper, and is more than competent at dressage. NotreDam is perhaps the ultimate proof that good breeding can produce Percherons who can do absolutely anything!



SOLEA D'EGEE



BELLE DES CHOUX



NOTREDAM DE PRAINVILLE



Recreating the Real French Percheron Stallion continued

bone structure. One example of this is TITUS DE VANOISE, champion stallion in the Diligencier (coach horse) category in 2010. He is a son of DONAMERR'S TITAN and his mother, IXIA is a daughter of SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK.

PERCHERON "ROYALTY"

One French breeder who was both an architect and instigator of North American imports and has been outstandingly successful in his breeding program is Patrice Biget.

In 2004, he bred a colt by the name of QUINTUS DE LA VANDE, a son of STOREY CREEK KNIGHT CRUISER and KORE 4. The dam combined the bloodlines of SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK and NEUBOURG. The colt was approved as a breeding stallion and, in 2008, was purchased by the King of Morocco. Aside from being collected for breeding, Quintus is ridden, driven and has even tried farm work.

Biget's stallion RIVULUS DE LA VANDE is a son of B & L HANSON'S RUBY'S CHARLIE and, on his dam's side, has some SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK (great grandsire) and the

NEUBOURG lineage. He was champion stallion in the Diligencier (coach horse) category in 2007 and 2008, and declared World Champion Stallion by an international jury at the 2011 Percheron World Congress in France. He now also belongs to the stables of the King of Morocco.

The big question now is "where do you draw the line?" Having brought in American bloodlines that have given them lighter, sounder and more elegant horses, there is now concern among French breeders of going too far in the other direction. Perhaps this consideration is born of the difference in how the Percheron is now used in North America and Europe. In the former, there seem to be two clear categories, the show horse and the farm horse, with some consideration given to the riding horse. In the latter, the uses seem to be developing in wider and more numerous directions. The growing interest in environmental issues and ecologically-friendly living have led to more demand for horses used in everything from market gardening to vineyards to logging to collecting recyclables in small towns, taking children to school or even delivery meals on wheels. At the same time, there is growing interest in driving although there is no equivalent to the American show circuit and there are virtually no six or eight-horse hitches in Europe, as well as riding, even for uses such as dressage. Breeders therefore need to produce multi-purpose horses that are prized for their sturdiness, good nature and willingness to work.

Patrice Biget reflects on the legacy of SILVER SHADOWS SHEIK, having been part of the delegation that went to the States in 1993 to choose him: "In going to America, our goal was to revitalize the breed in France, bringing back darker coats, healthier legs, better tissue quality and lighter gaits. The arrival of Silver Shadows Sheik was quite an event here. Even more than the genetic contribution he made, his presence here provoked a sea of change in the way of thinking of the Percheron microcosm, both among breeders and judges, even though it took some years. In fact, the sons and grandsons of Silver Shadows Sheik have played an even more important role, especially if their dams came from good traditional French stock, as they have been better accepted by traditionalist breeders. GALLIEN was the best

example of this. Our aim was never to switch to the American show model which, in our eyes, can tend towards an extreme morphology, and we feel that cross-breeding with French stock is indispensable. I think that we are close to the time when we will no longer need to add any more American blood to have the horses that we want and require in France." 