

The North American Curly Horse

Coat

All colors, including spotted and pinto markings

Height

Generally medium sized (there are also pony- and draft-horse-sized individuals)

Characteristics

Coats sport varying degrees of curliness (hair inside the ears always remains curly)

BREED DESCRIPTION

By Kara Stewart

With hair coats that range from crushed velvet waves to tight ringlets a hair stylist would envy, the Curly Horse stands out in a crowd. However, there's nothing artificially styled about those curly coats—it's all natural. In addition to its unique coat, the Curly Horse has other prized characteristics, including hardiness and a steady temperament.

A Little Curly History

The main breed associations in the United States for Curly Horses—the American Bashkir Curly Registry (ABCR) and the International Curly Horse Organization (ICHO)—agree that it's pretty much a mystery how the Curly Horse came to be in North America.

What is known is that, through the centuries, curly-coated horses have existed in a number of breeds and in a number of places around the world. According to D. Phillip Sponenberg, DVM, Ph.D., professor of pathology and genetics, Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, Virginia Tech, "Curly coated horses have occurred throughout the Americas in old Spanish lines. In the United States, the Curly Horse seems to mostly have come from feral horses"—possibly Spanish horses brought over during the conquest.

In North America, horses with curly coats, manes and tails were documented in the Native American tribes' pictorial winter count of wild horse herds as early as 1800, and the horses were thought to be especially prized by the Crow and Sioux. Ranchers also captured wild horses with these coat variations and crossed them with their own stock to produce valued ranch horses. One of the early preservationists of the Curly Horse was the Damele family in Nevada, starting in the 1930s. The Skonsberg family in Canada began breeding Curly Horses in about 1900.

Today, breeders continue the curly haired trait in their breeding programs, and Curly Horses are still found in wild herds of North America.

A Rare Gem

The two main Curly Horse registries estimate that about 4,000 Curlies exist worldwide, with most of them in North America. However, their popularity continues to increase here and abroad. According to the ABCR, the number of horses selling now is much higher than past years, as evidenced by an increase in transfers of ownership as well as registrations.

What's a Bashkir? Where Did it Come From?

Some early breeders in the United States saw an image (from a cartoon in the syndicated newspaper feature *Strange As It Seems*) of a curly haired horse with a caption saying that the horse came from the faraway Bashkir region of the then Soviet Union. Thinking the curly coated horses they'd found in the wild herds of the West were therefore related to this Bashkir horse, some early devotees started calling their horses "Bashkir Curly" horses.

Ironically, however, the native horses from the Bashkir region don't have curly coats. "In 1992 the C.S. Fund contracted Dr. Ann Bowling of the University of California at Davis and Dr. Phillip Sponenberg to do a large study on the history, origins and biology of the Curly Horse," explains Greg Oakes, president of the ABCR. "It concluded that the Bashkir name is incorrect. There is no Bashkir horse in Russia with curls." Even so, the name stuck and continues to be used by the ABCR.

Two Registries, Different Approaches

Today, two main registries exist for Curly Horses, and a Curly may be registered in both if eligible.

The American Bashkir Curly Registry was founded in 1971 and began recording lineage and pedigree of curly coated horses. In 1999, the ABCR voted to close the registry's studbooks so that it could contain the gene pool and move toward bloodline preservation and breed status requirements. Horses now eligible for registration with the ABCR are those with sires and dams that are also registered with the ABCR. These horses are known as American Bashkir Curly Horses.

Greg adds, "A horse registered with the ABCR is more likely to have a known pedigree, since the registry has been recording them since 1971. To many, the name 'Bashkir' signifies a registry that concentrates on purebred pedigrees. The pedigree is a genetic key to the breeding merit of the horse, and is supported by objective data."

The International Curly Horse Organization was founded in 2000 and provides registry opportunities for all curly haired horses, including offspring from registered and unregistered Curly parents, horses found in wild horse herds and horses of other breeds that display the curly coat characteristic. Curly Horses display curls from birth or at least with their first winter coat. Straight-haired offspring of Curly parents are registered as straight in the registry. Horses registered with the ICHO are known as North American Curly Horses.

According to Sandra Hendrickson, ICHO board member and past president, "One reason we have retained an open studbook and offer registration to all curly coated horses is that some Curly bloodlines and breeding programs are putting an emphasis on specific traits, such as high-level dressage potential or soft gaits. Allowing judicious crossbreeding to quality horses of other breeds helps strengthen desired traits."

Lene Jensen, ICHO board member and manager of the European member support office, adds, "The organization also believes it is beneficial to continue offering registration to curly coated horses from the Bureau of Land Management and wild Mustang lines, as they have provided the foundation for the Curly Horse. The ICHO also seeks to work with the BLM to preserve the curly gene in some wild horse herds."

Because of various interest groups, the ICHO has set up associations within the organization, including those devoted to the gaited horse, stock horse, pony and Miniature, as well as the international sporthorse types.

Hair Patterns

Curlies can sport degrees of curliness in their coats, varying from a crushed velvet look and feel to one with deep, soft waves known as "marcel" waves. Horses can also grow ringlets up to several inches long.

Manes and forelocks can grow with ringlets or corkscrews. Tail hair is preferably kinky or wavy, and can also develop ringlets.

The Curly Horse is most curly in the winter months, and then typically sheds both his winter coat and at least some of his mane and tail in the summer. In the summer months, a Curly will have a smoother, sleeker coat, which may or may not show evidence of curl. Some Curlies keep strongly curled hair all year long, although the summer coat is not usually as thick or long. The hair inside their ears remains curly no matter the season.

The Amazing Hypoallergenic Horse

Many would-be horse owners who previously had to forgo their passion due to severe allergies are able to coexist with a hypoallergenic Curly. This doesn't mean that an allergic person will have no allergy attacks around Curlies, but the symptoms are usually less severe, and sometimes are absent entirely.

The structure of the Curly's coat hair, which appears feathered or barbed under a microscope, more closely resembles mohair from the Angora goat than horsehair. Research continues on exactly why Curly Horses cause fewer allergic reactions. An ICHO-sponsored study was conducted by the University of Aachen, Germany, in 2002 to determine if Curly Horse hair has hypoallergenic properties. The research has been completed, and the Curly Horse community is awaiting the official findings. Among the preliminary comments are that, indeed, the Curly Horse is hypoallergenic, and one explanation appears to be that these horses have a protein structure in the skin that is different from other typical horse breeds.

Curlies Can Do

The endearing traits of the Curly Horse don't stop at the unique hair. "Most Curly owners will tell you they have very special horses, and anecdotes abound about their antics, friendliness, calmness and intelligence," says Tina Estridge, ICHO president.

"They are very calm," Greg Oakes agrees. "They tend to freeze rather than flee in stressful situations." In general, Curlies are known to be brave and thinking horses, easy to train and suitable to new or young riders.

Overall, Curly Horses are hardy, sturdy and versatile. Originally used for hunting by Native American tribes and ranching by white settlers, today's Curlies participate in many disciplines. Like any

versatile breed, the Curly may not excel at every equine endeavor, but they are game partners for their riders.

To showcase the quality, versatility and talents of the Curly Horse, the ABCR offers a circuit of three breed shows that form the basis of its national awards. The shows are held in Indiana each March, Illinois every October and Missouri every August.

Some Curly Horses have excelled in endurance riding. In fact, Curlies have been crossed regularly with Arabians, and the Damele family's early breeding program contained many crosses to their sire Nevada Red, a well-bred Arabian. Prominent Arabian breeder Bazy Tankersley crossed her Arabs with the Curly Horse to enhance abilities for the rigors of endurance competitions.

Some lines of Curlies are gaited, and about 10 percent of Curly Horses will do a foxtrot, running walk or a gait called the "Curly shuffle."

Conformation and Breed Standard

Over the years, various cross breedings occurred, though these crossings weren't to any single breed in particular. Among breeds crossed with Curlies were Arabians, Morgans, Saddlebreds, American Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, Missouri Fox Trotters and others.

This outcrossing to other breeds has resulted in Curly Horses of nearly every possible color, including solid colors plus spotted and pinto markings.

The practice has also resulted in a wide variety of sizes. While most Curlies are medium sized and range from 800 to 1,000 pounds, there are also pony- and draft-horse sized individuals. Regardless of their size and lineage, Curly Horses seem to continue the traits of being hardy, sound and well-proportioned.

The myth that Curly Horses' coats require special care is not

true. The curly and wavy coats are cared for just as any smooth coat would be. Curls are cherished as a signature characteristic, but are just one of the many qualities of the breed.

For more information, contact the American Bashkir Curly Registry, PO Box 151029, Ely, NV 89315; (775) 289-4999; www.curlyhorses.org; or the International Curly Horse Organization North American Curly Horse Registry, 2690 Carpenter Rd., Jamestown, OH 45335; (937) 453-9829; www.curlyhorses.org.

Breed Characteristics

According to the American Bashkir Curly Registry, a Curly Horse should have a medium-size head with a well-defined jaw and throatlatch; wide set eyes with eyelashes that curl up; ears that are short to medium in length with curls inside (the ears do not totally shed out in the summer); a medium-length neck, deep at the base where it joins the base of the shoulder; a noticeably short back, deep through the girth; an appearance of a long underline and belly cut high in the flank; heavy boned legs and short cannon bone as compared to the forearm; supple yet well muscled forequarters and hindquarters; medium withers; the croup should have a flat or shallow slope to the base of the tail. The Curly Horse should travel easily and smoothly.

Curly X Curly = Curly?

The curly gene is dominant, so Curly-to-Curly breeding results in a foal that has a 75 percent chance of being Curly. If one of the parents is homozygous for curls, the foal will always be Curly.

Breeding a heterozygous Curly Horse with a non-Curly horse results in a 50 percent chance of Curly offspring that would be heterozygous for curls, and a 50 percent chance of straight-haired offspring that would not carry the curly gene.

Crossing a homozygous Curly Horse with a non-Curly horse will

result in a 100 percent curly offspring that is heterozygous for the curly gene.

There is no test yet available to determine if a horse is homozygous, heterozygous, dominant or recessive for the curly gene.

When a newcomer to the Curly Horse looks at a pedigree, it can be confusing. Here's a brief explanation of the letters and symbols before a horse's name.

"Curly" or * = curly coated

SC = smooth coated but from Curly-bred parents

CC = Curly cross that is curly coated

SCx = smooth-coated Curly cross

Extreme = extreme trait Curly Horse, often with tight curls

Curlies in the Spotlight

Because of their rarity, Curly Horses don't have the number of famous names that other breeds do. However, some Curlies are paving the way for future generations.

* Perhaps the most well-known Curly belongs to clinician GaWaNi Pony Boy. Warrior Lynx, or "Trouble," accompanies Pony to his training clinics, demos and expos.

* Q-Card was inducted into the International Side Saddle Organization Hall of Fame in 1995.

* The smooth-stepping gelding Yellow Storm carried his team to win the 2001 American Vaulting Association U.S. National Trot Team championship. (This division of vaulting has the horse trotting rather than cantering.)

* A group of Curly Horse owners in California—The Classic Curly Riders—have been frequently invited to ride in the Rose Bowl Parade, which is held annually in Pasadena, Calif. They made their 18th appearance at the parade in 2004.

* One particular line of Curly Horse, founded by the stallion Spartacus, is especially talented in the dressage ring. Owned by Sandra Hendrickson, this gray pinto stallion has been named to the United States Dressage Federation's prestigious list of stallions that have produced two or more offspring that have earned USDF Horse of the Year awards.

Kara Stewart is a freelance writer and horse owner in Colorado.