

SIRES & DAMS

Baroque Horses in Brazil

Hundreds of Lusitanos roam the lush 1,500 acre pastures of this scenic South American farm.

Text and photos by Julia Wentscher

With nearly 700 horses, Interagro stud farm in Brazil is the largest Lusitano breeding center in the world. The 1,500-acre farm is near Itapira, about two hours from São Paulo in a setting of intense colors and aromas from the tropical flowers and trees.

The only horses kept in the stables are 16 stallions for breeding—most of these

are also in training—and youngsters ready to be started under saddle, says farm manager Cecilia Gonzaga. “Because of the tropical climate, we can keep the rest of the horses outside on the pastures. They can grow up very healthy and natural,” she says, adding that Interagro’s goal is to produce a modern dressage horse with size and quality of movement from traditional Portuguese bloodlines, instead of the smaller, more compact bullfighting type of horse.



Stallions, mares and foals live in the lush Brazilian countryside at Interagro. The barns house horses in training.



Johan Zagers travels to Interagro six times a year to train their horses, including Pia Aragao and the Lusitano stallion Nirvana (left). When mares are ready to be bred, workers herd them down to the breeding center (bottom right).

Gonzaga heads the farm with her father, Dr. Paulo Gavião Gonzaga, whose personal hobby is driving four-in-hands. He founded the breeding facility in 1975 on a historic coffee plantation. After the Portuguese revolution of 1974, many of the old bloodlines were in danger of disappearing, so he worked to bring this Lusitano heritage to Brazil.

It takes more than 50 people to care for the horses and keep the large farm running smoothly. When the mares are in heat, a worker rides out in the fields and herds them down to the breeding center where the stallions are waiting. "Our stallions cover the natural way," explains Gonzaga. About 150 foals are born each year outdoors. "Mother nature helps them," she says.

An auction of horses from Interagro and other Brazilian Lusitano breeders is held annually. Only piroplasmosis-negative horses are sold. "All offered horses come directly from the breeders so a new owner can be sure he is the first owner after the breeder," says Gonzaga. The average auction price is 30,000 to

35,000 euros (\$39,500 to \$46,000 U.S.).

Most of Interagro's 200 exports have been sold to the United States. Pia Aragao, the Grand Prix dressage rider at Interagro, explains why: "The Lusitano horse is a very kind horse that is normally easy to work with and has a good character. The rideability is high and collected gaits and movements like piaffe and passage are normally easy for them."

Aragao was the first rider to win the Brazilian Championships at the Prix St. Georges level on a Lusitano—Nirvana Interagro. The pair also won at Grand Prix in São Paulo in 2006. Aragao and Nirvana will ride in Florida again this year. "2007 is a very special year," she says, "as I would like to be in a good shape when I return to Brazil for our selection trials for the Pan Am in April."

German-based trainer Johan Zagers flies to Brazil six times a year to train the Interagro horses. "These horses have outstanding quality paces and are really willing to work," he says, adding that

Nirvana's extensions are of the same quality found in international-level warmblood horses.

Florida-based trainer Heather Bender also shows Interagro horses in competitions. With the Noblissimo son Sargon Interagro, she placed at Fourth Level and is preparing for Prix St. Georges and the selection trials for the Pan American Games this year.

Many horses from Interagro have been sold to William Robinson, founder of the shipping company DHL. His ranch, Robinson Lusitanos, is next door to Yellowstone National Park in the Grand Teton Mountains. The story goes that his manager and Peter van Borst (Interagro's U.S. representative) witnessed a Lusitano mare fighting a bear. The brave mare lost her life but saved her foal, so Robinson decided to honor her by breeding them. 🐾

Learn more about training Lusitanos from Johan Zagers on the Web site DressageToday.com. Interagro's Web site is lusitano-interagro.com.