

The Shrinking Straight Egyptian Gene Pool

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<http://www.blenheim-arabians.co.uk/Breeding.html>

In today's "Global Village" the community of Straight Egyptian breeders and enthusiasts is truly international. Thanks to magazines, books written by eminent breeders, comparatively cheap travel, and more recently the internet breeders have a greater knowledge and understanding of the activities and accomplishments of their peers than ever before. The effect of this is a greater flow of information, images and opinions than has ever been possible before. The horses of a very successful breeder in one country are very likely to be known of and appreciated by quite a large percentage of breeders around the world. It is of course not only information that travels from one country or region to another but also horses themselves as breeders import, export and sometimes exchange breeding stock as each tries to breed their ideal horse.

As a result of this almost constant series of exchanges of ideas and opinions there is now (or at least seems to be) a great deal of consensus amongst breeders as to what a Straight Egyptian Arabian should look like so that regardless of origin, one finds breeders appreciating and breeding essentially very similar horses. Regardless of where it was born an exceptional horse is very likely to have a world-wide fan club! This is a very different situation from two or three decades ago when the majority of breeders had little idea of what was happening outside of their own locale.

One other area of consensus is that one finds that breeders around the world admire and desire essentially the same bloodlines. There are a handful of female lines which seem to be particularly sought after whilst the sire line of Saklawi I through descendants of Nazeer is almost completely dominant. One benefit of this consensus of opinion and purpose is that there are and have been some stunningly beautiful horses being bred around the world and in many respects we seem to be in the midst of a golden age of Straight Egyptian breeding. Each generation seeming to surpass the previous one in beauty and type.

The speed with which popular consensus can affect the breeding choices made and thus the population of SE's as a whole in the modern interconnected Arabian horse world could not be more strikingly illustrated than by the case of Ansata Halim Shah. A mere sixteen years after his two-year lease in Germany, the majority of Straight Egyptians in Europe are his descendants. A quite remarkable degree of influence achieved in only a few generations.

Of course there have been extremely significant horses throughout the last hundred years or so whose influence has rippled through the breed as a whole. The change has been that thanks to vastly improved communications and transport the ripples travel very much faster and further nowadays than was the case in the past.

The consensus of opinion and purpose mentioned influences breeders both consciously and unconsciously when making breeding decisions and progressing their individual breeding programs. As a rule breeders don't slavishly copy one another but it is impossible not to be influenced to some degree by the actions and successes of one's peers, especially given the degree of discussion, debate and interaction between today's breeders in all corners of the globe.

To date the net effect of this informal and quite possibly unconscious consensus between breeders on bloodlines, influential horses and broad aspirations has been an unparalleled progression in breeding beautiful horses with each breeder benefiting from the efforts and contributions made by both earlier generations and their peers in a way that has only been possible during the last twenty to thirty years in an international context. As a result one finds like-minded breeders profiting from the experiences of others in what has become a global community of breeders and enthusiasts. International shows, modern telecommunications and the ease of modern travel and transport have made possible an exchange of ideas, ideals and horses that our predecessors could only have dreamed about.

Given that we have beautiful, impeccably bred horses, a broad agreement amongst breeders aiming for essentially the same goals, comparatively easy

transport and communication to anywhere in the world, is the smooth progress of recent years likely to be maintained for the foreseeable future?

This may depend on how far into the future one wishes to look or project today's breeding trends. In the short term the concentration on particular bloodlines will probably result in continued progress though perhaps quite not so dramatic as in the past. Those who have come to the Straight Egyptian Arabian most recently have quite naturally tended to go for those bloodlines which are popular and widely regarded thus tending to increase the dependence of breeders on these lines overall. Whilst each individual breeder may be "doing their own thing" as they see it, the overall effect in recent years has been one of very many (quite possibly the majority of) breeders essentially trying to achieve the same "look" with more or less the same bloodlines. As stated earlier, this is in part what created the horses we have today, however there comes a time when every breeding program needs at least a little new blood usually in the form of an out-cross. If (and this is quite a big "if") one projects the current trends forward then given the concentration of breeders on just a few bloodlines then one wonders where one will find a suitable out-cross two or three generations down the line. In a world where "everyone" is breeding the same thing, who if anyone is breeding the required out-cross assuming of course that every breeding program does eventually require the addition of some outside blood. Will a generation or two's separation in breeding be sufficient as an "out-cross" to allow today's breeding trends to be maintained into the future. It is certain that combining the blood of distant relatives from different parts of the world has been a major contributory factor in producing the horses we see today, will it be possible to go on re-combining these lines in new ways to maintain and develop today's breeding programs for the foreseeable future or will we reach a point of no return and work ever harder just to keep at the same level?

Of course it is perfectly possible that the apparent uniformity one sees from watching shows, reading magazines etc doesn't really exist and that there is far more diversity amongst breeding programs world-wide than is obvious from situations where it is the common ground and instantly recognisable names that get the attention. If so then there is no problem; either potential or otherwise.

These days at least theoretically any breeder can select any stallion anywhere in the world for their mares. Given this theoretically limitless choice and a bewildering array of possibilities perhaps we breeders behave like any other consumers and choose recognisable “brand names” that we are comfortable and familiar with. In doing so does the scale of choice that we potentially have mean that whereas our forebears were limited to those sires that were available locally. And so created a situation of local uniformity but with global diversity which has greatly benefited later generations of breeders. We on the other hand may be in the process of creating something approaching global uniformity with perhaps pockets of local diversity and will these pockets of diversity be sufficient to maintain as wide a gene pool as in the past?

Bred with care and consideration the Egyptian Arabian is remarkably resistant to inbreeding, indeed many of today’s top horses are the result of careful line-breeding over many generations. In a sense all that is happening today is a continuation and possibly an extension of what has long been considered to be good breeding practise. Each of us strives to breed the best possible foal from each of our mares, using the “best” (in terms of those we believe to be the most suitable) sires available to us. The difference today is that we pretty much agree on who the “best” sires are and those sires (or their sons) are very much more available to us than ever before! However for those who don’t wish to line-breed then it may be that as the available bloodlines become more uniform, finding a suitable cross for ones mares (never an easy task!) will become increasingly difficult with each generation.

This apparently general pre-occupation with just a few bloodlines and horses, could of course be less evident “on the ground” than it appears to be when horses and breeding are discussed in the Arabian horse media. After all one only gets a glimpse or an impression of what is happening from articles and written discussions and understandably the horses and breeding programs that are subjected to the most interest and debate are those that are the most widely known. It does however seem to me that there is more “fashion consciousness” and less consistency in breeding programs and philosophies in general than was the case in the past. After all being “well-bred” isn’t necessarily the same as having a pedigree that is chock full of famous names,

particularly if those famous ancestors were all radically different in phenotype from one another. To concentrate entirely on horses being well-known without regard to their qualities and failings is to end up with stock that may look good on paper but will sadly disappoint in the flesh.

The genetic diversity we the present generation of breeders have inherited from our predecessors is a precious gift which we should try where possible to maintain. Though this should not be done at the expense of quality. As without quality even the most stellar pedigree is merely a piece of paper with some names written on it! There is little future in breeding from a poor quality animal simply to maintain a bloodline for another generation. No matter how illustrious that animal's ancestors may have been. Anyone wishing to breed outside of the most popular bloodlines is likely to find that it will become much more difficult to find sires to breed to or horses to add to their breeding programs as time goes by. It could also be the case that such breeding programs may be the ones that others may in the future look to for an out-cross. This would in a sense be a "Catch-22" situation where the possible out-cross to keep the mainstream of breeding viable could come from a breeding program whose future viability is itself uncertain.

It has often been stated that the mark of a successful breeding program is the consistency in type and appearance of the horses produced. Due in large measure to the care taken in the choice of matings and in the selection of breeding stock over several generations. Such programs however seem to be fewer in number these days, perhaps in today's fast paced world, the patience and long term viewpoint required are themselves becoming rarities.

There has of course always been hype and promotion around horses, which the experienced breeder will overlook in favour of the horses themselves. It is perhaps up to those with a wealth of experience and knowledge to guide and nurture the newcomers and less experienced in order that future generations of breeders may continue to build upon the achievements of their predecessors.

I asked some prominent breeders for their thoughts on the present and future of the Straight Egyptian Arabian, and about any differences they perceived in

breeding philosophies Their thoughts are below:-

Marion Richmond – Simeon Stud Australia

I have been asked if Straight Egyptian Breeders are trying to breed a diminished gene pool. For what purpose are the results of this?

Observing the European and American SE Breeders, their philosophies seem quite different. European breeders are very pedigree orientated. An example, I had purchased a horse, sight unseen, a big mistake, and guaranteed to be a certain quality by a very high profile dealer. When the horse arrived in Australia I realised it had not been the type of animal to fit into Simeon Stud's program. The horse was sold to Europe and purchased by a breeder who had seen the animal. I asked why he would buy such a horse – the answer was – a wonderful pedigree. One stallion has had an impact on Europe and the Middle East and almost all animals bred in the last decade have at least one cross to this stallion. As a result – there is severe pigment loss, major leg and feet problems, the horses are becoming smaller and losing movement – a big wrong.

In the USA, due to the excellent marketing of certain farms, one family of horses have been very over used. As a result the Americans have bred a good “stand up horse” with a refined neck and tied in at the elbows and wide when travelling from behind – again the superb Arabian movement has been lost.

In the USA I have been told – This family is to be shown at the “Egyptian Event” and they win almost every class. For performance they will absolutely use other bloodlines and do not seem to think this is a tragedy.

At Simeon Stud, for almost fifty years I have been seeking to incorporate new Straight Egyptian bloodlines BUT I will not compromise on lines that carry bad feet and legs, lack movement, and have temperament problems – These good points are what makes the good S.E. Arabians

the best in the world.

Lorraine Bond, Chaswyck Stud Australia:-

In Australia today we now have quite a vast choice of straight bloodlines to choose from, with all the new imports etc. but most people tend to use the proven and more successful ones. We have imported a couple ourselves from Europe to expand our bloodlines and are looking forward to the resulting foals expected this coming season.

It has crossed my mind as to the limited gene pool, but I now tend to think it is to our advantage at the present time and ensuing years, rather than breeding to too many different origins with the result being so diverse.

Obviously one has to be very patient when breeding straights and I think it is up to the present breeders to try and educate any newcomers, old and new to the wonderful possibilities, rewards and antiquities of the beautiful straight egyptian.

I think the breeding philosophies are more similar than different. Obviously if we all breed the same way and ignore certain lines than it only goes to show that these certain lines will be lost. I think as a whole the straight egyptian Arabian is progressing and will continue to do so. Who knows how long this can be maintained, I don't think we will live long enough to see the overall outcome, maybe some of the younger ones will if we can educate them enough to stay with it.

Willi Poth :- Classic Egyptian Arabians, France

I believe, the gene pool is already so small, that to widen it with the lines we have, is nearly impossible,. It must be the understanding of the serious breeders, to select very strong lines and individuals to have the chance to continue a breeding program which is able to survive for some more generations . For me, there is a large spectrum of philosophies and they are very different, depending on the use and aims of the breeder.

We are in this "world" now for almost 35 years and we had always up and downs and depending on the market, some lines has been "made" by marketing. For sure in the long run we will lose something also because of the change of interest of the breeders. Just recently I would say, we can see a total change in old sometimes well established programs. Maybe we all should be a bit more open-minded

I'm still travelling a lot and judging in many different parts in the world. The top horses are better or let's say more extreme, the rest is mostly as it has been since I can remember. For me, sorry to say so, we losing more and more the classic Arabian type, for a long neck many people going t crazy, they forget the balance, harmony and overall quality. One thing is clear for me, the quality of the pedigrees is not as good as it has been in the seventies or even eighties, we now have a big mix up which is probably the worst part in our SE-breeding.

In conclusion it would seem that whilst the “superstars” of the Straight Egyptian world are more beautiful than ever before and there are some breeders still concentrating on what might be termed the classic straight Egyptian (that is horses with both extreme type **and** riding horse qualities). There are some underlying problems to be faced if the straight Egyptian Arabian isn't destined to become a glamorous poster idol rather than a useable, beautiful and practical riding horse. I have always had an image in my mind of the straight Egyptian as being the Ferrari of the equestrian world. To have the looks without the conformation and structure, is rather like owning the supercar but not having a license or the ability to drive it!

One point is that particularly in Europe, Straight Egyptian breeders don't seem to see their horses from a performance perspective as mounts to be used and ridden. For example, I can count on one hand the Straight Egyptians that are actively competing under saddle here in the UK. Strange in a country where there are very large numbers of Arabians of other bloodlines to be seen at shows and events every weekend. If the riding qualities of our Arabians are ignored or overlooked, then of what practical value are horses that are merely pretty to look at. We are I believe in danger of losing the very things that made straight Egyptians so desirable in the past. In our collective quest for ever more extreme type often at the expense of solid conformation and structure. Glossy and admittedly stunning pictures in Arabian horse magazines portray a dream world of exquisite horses staring intently into the middle distance. Which breeders then try to re-create in real life, whilst ignoring the fact that horses are meant to be riding partners and athletes rather than pampered “super models” to be admired and valued only on the basis of their photographic images.

This is of course all a matter of belief and opinion, based on projecting today's trends into the future and assuming that breeders continue along the same paths more or less unchanged. What will actually happen no-one can know for sure, we can only surmise (based on our own experiences and observations) what the future may hold for the Straight Egyptian Arabian horse. Hopefully the future will be as bright as the past and preferably even brighter! Particularly if the breeders of today and tomorrow are willing to learn from and embrace the experience and knowledge of those who have gone before.