

The Cévennes National Park: the cradle of endurance-horse breeding



flourished. In 1983 Krempolis, a first-generation offspring of Persik's, became French champion at the age of 7 years, winning the grand slam of French races. As a result, Persik's fame among breeders and endurance riders spread well beyond the limits of the National Park. He was put at breeders' disposal in the Park, in neighbouring regions and all over southern France, and mainly used to crossbreed "endurance horses", before switching to purebred production in 1988. After the 2000 world championships in Compiègne, where two of his offspring took the individual gold and silver medals and the team gold, Persik was named "the world's best endurance-horse stud". The achievements of his son Melfenik, produced by the Cévennes National Park, illustrate this: he was world vice-champion in The Hague in 1994 (ridden by Denis Pesce), and he finished his career aged 19 with a third place in Florac. Persik died aged 32 on 24 August 2001. As of 1 January 2011, 152 of his 328 progeny – over 46% of his production – are ranked on 120 to 160 km or 2x100 km rides. This is what has made him legendary. By 2010, 32 of his direct descendants had won at least one major race. ●

SEBEECC/Persik's Land

In 1976 breeders, supported by the Park, understood the benefits of joining together in a union to promote, via the Florac ride, horses intended for leisure and equestrian tourism. These founders quickly specialised in producing endurance horses specifically for races. Today these breeders are based on the Great Causses

(limestone plateaux) and their periphery, a zone categorised as the "cradle [berceau] of endurance-horse breeding". The Union of Breeders of the Cradle of Endurance Riding Causses-Cévennes (SEBEECC) groups them together under the trade name of "Persik's Land", registered with the French National Intellectual Property Institute, in honour of their legendary stallion.

A collective territorial contract has been drawn up, with a breeding charter and terms and conditions. Breeding, which is extensive, is carried out entirely in the open on large natural pastures at mid-altitude (500 to 1,200 m). Reared this way, the horses are very hardy, have great cardio-respiratory capacity and the ability to run on uneven ground. These horses, whose genetic origins must be from the Berceau, are recognised in the "Authentiques" range of the Cévennes National Park and, for those who are on its territory, by the Great Causses Regional Nature Park's mark of quality. The regional mark "Sud de France" is currently being sought for some of the horses. ●

Endurance riding as a selection process for Arabians

The breeders produce Arabian horses, both warmbloods and purebreds. In fact, although endurance riding is a discipline open to all breeds, Arabians largely dominate top-level events. Thanks to endurance riding, the Arabian purebred has thus been given a new lease of life. A selection based on endurance performance is surely the best way of safeguarding the essential qualities of this breed, honed over centuries by Bedouins for hunting and

warfare. As an unexpected consequence of the breeding programme launched by the National Park 30 years ago, French endurance-horse breeders are currently regarded as the best in the world.

Top-level foreign riders from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Malaysia, Brazil, Argentine, China and all European countries come to buy their mounts here.

In Uzès, the seat of the State Stud Farm of Languedoc-Roussillon, the French Horse Society finals for 5 and 6 year olds have now been established, and are considered the French championships for these classes. Over three days, 600 horses meet each other in different trials, making this the most important commercial event for the young endurance horse. The event is completed by the world championships for 7 and 8 year olds, which take place every year in Compiègne. ●

Useful addresses:

SEBEECC/Persik's Land
(Berceau Breeders' Union)
Mas Lavayre
Chemin de Lavit, lot 7
34700 Le Bosc
Tel.: 06 73 06 31 76
Website: www.persikland.com, then click on British flag
Contact person: Yves Richardier

Lozère Endurance Equestre (LEE)
(Association organising the "Florac 160 km")
Le Bouquet
48400 Barre-des-Cévennes
Tel.: 04 66 45 13 69
Website: www.160florac.com, then click on British flag
Contact person: Jean-Paul Boudon

Cévennes National Park
6 bis, place du Palais
48400 Florac
Tel.: 04 66 49 53 00
Website: <http://eng.cevennes-parcnational.fr/>

Bibliographie
Yves Richardier and Loïc Trébaol (1995), "L'élevage du cheval d'endurance en France, origine et enjeux", Cévennes National Park (out of print)

Ever since the Cévennes National Park was created, it has given the horse an important role, and in the process founded the first “green cavalry”: as a mode of travel for park rangers, a vector of economic development, and a means of agricultural-ecological management that preserves open spaces.

The Park, having organised the first European endurance ride, the “Florac 130 km”, in 1975, has been both the creator and the promoter of contemporary endurance riding, a discipline that is extremely popular today.

The Park was a pioneer in endurance-horse breeding in its area, then in the Region of Languedoc-Roussillon, and finally at a national and European level (a role that was later assumed by the French State Stud Farms and the French National Association for the Arabian Horse). This was due to a breeding programme developed by the Park’s technical advisor on equine matters in 1974 with the support of the Lozère authorities – and thanks to the stallion Persik. ●

The development of horse breeding

In 1974 the Park, responding to the agricultural decline, decided to encourage the breeding of leisure horses. This activity, which is compatible with the objectives of a national park, was also seen as helping to support the local economy. Horse tourism, the premier nature sport since 1968, has been growing rapidly in the region, and sturdy horses adapted to the open air, with bloodlines and breeding papers are much in demand.

The Park’s development plan for horse breeding consisted of two parts:

1. Introducing the hardy Mérens horse, which originated in the Ariège département in the Pyrenees and was an endangered species, to serve as a mount or draft animal.
2. Producing Arabian warmblood leisure horses by crossing local mare stock, which was heterogeneous and had no breeding papers, with Arabian stallions

(Persik, Sirocco Sky, Gosse d’Avril), and, secondly, to produce purebred Arabian “long-distance horses”. ●



Page 1. Shaman (Persik x Mebarka by Nichem) ridden by Cécile Demièrre, 2007 winner in Florac.

1. 2000 world championships, 2 offsprings of Persik take the individual gold and silver medals and the team gold.
2. Orpin by Sirocco Sky ridden by park ranger Dominique Foubert wins the Gap 130 km’ s ride in 1991.
3. Persik (Kankan x Pamiatka by Arax) at the age of 29, named the world’s best endurance-horse stud in 2000.
4. Melfenik (Persik x Belle).

The Florac ride

Simultaneously, in cooperation with breeders’ unions and representatives of equestrian tourism, the National Park organised a horse fair in Florac, as well as an endurance ride to show the value of leisure horses through their achievements. This marked the birth of a new equestrian discipline in Europe: modern endurance riding. Since then, the Florac ride has become a legendary benchmark event for riders. Its 160 km circuit through the Cévennes, Mont Aigoual and the Causse Méjean is renowned for its beauty and level of difficulty. The discipline’s specialists say that a horse which ranks among the best in Florac can finish well in any 160 km race in the world, or even win it. ●

Modern endurance riding

Modern endurance riding is a competition that calls for stamina, but also speed. It recalls an age-old way of using horses. What did mounted tribes-people ask of their mounts during raids if not to carry “heavy loads far and fast”?

Modern endurance was born in the US in 1955 with the Tevis Cup (the transposition of the Pony Express into a sport), and introduced into Australia with the Tom Quilty in 1965 and into Europe with the first Florac ride in 1975.

In 1976 a national body was founded: the National Committee for Equestrian Endurance Rides (CNREE). But it was not until 1984 that endurance was recognised by the International Federation for Equestrian Sports (FEI) as a high-level discipline on a par with show jumping, eventing or dressage, and that the first European championship was created with the Florac ride. The CNREE no longer exists, and endurance has now been completely integrated into the French Horse-Riding Federation (FFE).

In the past 20 years, endurance riding has grown greatly in France. It has become the second equestrian discipline after show jumping in terms of the number of subscribing

members. At the same time, French riders have reached the highest ranks internationally using horses from the Berceau, both as individual riders and as part of the French national team. Today riders from countries all over the world are enjoying success on horses produced in the Berceau, including for the period 2006-2010 (see below):

- 1 world champion in the 7 / 8 year class, 2006 (Kedjari des Serres),
- 1 world champion in the 8 year class, 2008 (Mediatik Larzac),
- 1 world vice-champion in the 7 / 8 years class, 2007 (Indian Eskalonik),
- 1 world vice-champion in the 8 year class, 2009 (Nefertiti Larzac)
- 1 European champion, 2007 (Hanaba du Bois),
- 1 European vice-champion, 2010 (Favela),
- 1 French champion, 2006 (Hanaba du Bois),
- 4 gold medals and 1 silver in the French national team, 3 silver medals in the Bahraini and Qatar teams, 1 bronze medal in the Swiss team,
- 2 “Best Condition” in world championships (Hifrane du Barthas and Hanaba),
- 25 winners, 42 second- and third places, and 47 fourth and fifth places. ●

Persik: the world’s best endurance-horse stud

In 1974, to implement the second part of its breeding programme, the National Park bought the stallion Persik, born in 1969 on the Tersk Stud Farm (former USSR) from the best Polish, English and French bloodlines of Arabian purebreds. Persik immediately proved his worth by winning the two first “Florac 130 km” in 1975 and 1976 (and is still the only stallion ever to do so). He also began to produce Arabian “long-distance” warmbloods as part of the breeding programme, by natural covering in the field of local mares. In the early 1980s, endurance riding as a discipline