HORSES—

HAULERS, RACERS, AND HEALERS

by Phyllis McIntosh

At a farm in Virginia, children with physical and mental disabilities undergo therapy with an assortment of specialists. For each child, however, the most important therapist has four legs and a mane. By riding horses, the children gain strength, learn to speak, and acquire important life skills.

Providing healing support for everyone from an autistic child to a wounded veteran is just the latest addition to the horse's 5,000-year-old résumé. No animal has played a greater role in human history. Horses have carried us into war, pulled our loads, plowed our fields, and transported us over all kinds of terrain. Freed of such drudgery by motorized devices, horses now provide companionship and entertainment.

According to the American Horse Council, there are more than nine million horses in the United States. Almost three-quarters of them are used for recreational riding or participating in horse shows. With some 200 breeds to choose from, horse lovers can find animals with the temperament and natural abilities to suit any purpose, from companionship to competition, on the racetrack or in the show ring.

A team of Clydesdales, a breed known for its size and strength and massive feet, pulls a wagon in a parade.

Horse History

The earliest ancestors of the horse, about the size of dogs, evolved in what is now North America. Some 10 million years ago, up to a dozen species of horses of various sizes and shapes roamed the plains and forests of the continent. But 10,000 years ago, horses vanished from both North and South America, victims, perhaps, of environmental change, disease, or hunting by early humans.

Horses as we know them arrived in North America with Spanish explorers in the 1500s. Wild herds found today on open ranges of the American West and on Assateague Island along the Atlantic coast are descendants of those early horses that escaped or were turned loose by their owners.

All modern horses fall into three major categories—hot-blooded, cold-blooded, and warm-blooded. Fast and high-spirited, hot-blooded breeds are best suited for experienced riders. The most popular hot-blood in the United States and around the world is the Arabian, whose Middle Eastern bloodline dates back thousands of years. Known for their beauty, intelligence, and endurance over long distances, Arabians can be somewhat excitable yet affectionate in temperament. Many are kept as family horses and entered into horse shows and competitions.

Another famous hot-blood is the classic racehorse, the thoroughbred. Although the term is often thought to refer to a purebred horse, the thoroughbred is actually a specific breed developed to reach speeds of up to 40 miles per hour over intermediate distances. Trained to begin racing as two-year-olds, most are retired by the time they are five. Though nervous in temperament and prone to health problems, thoroughbreds also participate in horse shows and sports such as polo.

The large, stocky cold-blooded breeds, often known as draft horses, were bred as calm work ani-

(left) Quarter horse

(below) Appaloosa

mals. Largely replaced by machinery, they are now used for pulling carriages or participating in competitions of strength. The most famous cold-bloods in the United States are the Clydesdales, which star in television commercials and are popular attractions at parades and shows. Derived from Scottish farm horses, these gentle giants weigh a ton, stand more than six feet high, and have massive feet (their horseshoes are the size of dinner plates) with distinctive hair that hangs over their hooves.

Warm-blooded breeds combine the agility of the hot-bloods and mild temperament of the cold-bloods. Numerous warm-blooded breeds are common in the United States. Good-natured and easy to handle, these horses make excellent family pets and show horses. Originally the cowboy horses that herded thousands of cattle across the American West, these breeds are now considered ideal for riders of all levels and even for introducing children to the joys of horseback riding. Some of the most well-known warm-blooded breeds originated in America.

All-American Horses

Favorites among the American breeds include:

- **American quarter horse.** According to horse registries, this is the single most popular breed in the country, memorialized in its own American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame & Museum in Amarillo, Texas. Developed in colonial America as a general-purpose animal for both riding and farm work, this compact steed is still an all-around favorite. Its name derives from its quickness at running quarter-mile sprints.
- **Appaloosa.** Celebrated for their spotted coats, Appaloosas were bred by the Native American Nez Perce tribe of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Named for the Palouse River, which runs through the region, these horses are admired for their beauty, endurance, and surefootedness in rugged terrain. They are popular for trail riding and Western shows.
- **Morgan.** This breed originated in Vermont in 1789 with a stallion originally called Figure and later known by his owner's name, Justin Morgan. Sturdy and quiet but with a flashy gait and head held high, Morgans are popular for riding and as show horses, especially in carriage events. At one time, the Morgan was the official horse of the U.S. Army.
- **American saddlebred.** Developed in the southern states in the 1800s, this horse looked especially elegant pulling a carriage. Sometimes known as the peacock of the horse world, this breed has a long, arched neck, high tail set, and flashy gaits and is most at home in the show ring.
- **Tennessee walking horse.** Originally bred in Tennessee as an all-purpose plantation horse, this breed has perfected a gait called a run-

Wild horses in a Bureau of Land Management corral in Wyoming are being temporarily held for exams and treatment before being put up for adoption.

ning walk that makes it especially smooth and comfortable to ride. Skilled at an assortment of other gaits, these horses are also great performers in the show ring.

- **American miniature horse.** Despite *American* in its name, this tiny breed, which stands less than three feet tall, is actually the result of nearly 400 years of selective breeding in a number of countries. American miniatures are thought to trace their bloodline in part to small horses brought to the United States in the nineteenth century to work in Appalachian coal mines. These gentle and affectionate animals make excellent pets and are used as service animals for people with disabilities.

Though not a specific breed, the nation's free-spirited wild horses hold a special place in the hearts of Americans. Some 33,000 feral horses, known as mustangs, along with 5,500 wild burros, roam on public lands in 10 western states. Another 47,000 wild horses and burros live in short-term corrals and long-term pastures. Protected by law as "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West," all the animals are under the care of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), an agency of the U.S. government. To help stabilize the population, the BLM runs an adoption program, which has placed more than 225,000 wild horses and burros in private ownership since 1971. Many of these animals become excellent pleasure, show, or work horses.

Enjoying Horses

Owning a horse can be costly. But people who cannot afford to own horses, or choose not to, have many opportunities to take pleasure in being around them. Ways that Americans enjoy horses include:

- **Trail riding.** Even in suburban areas, riding trails are plentiful. Horseback riding lessons, as well as horses to ride, are available at stables, parks, summer camps, and many vacation spots. Those who simply want an afternoon's enjoyment can take advantage of escorted trail rides that require no previous riding experience.

  People seeking more adventure can go on horseback riding trips in various regions, from the rugged back country of Arizona and Utah to the winding trails of the southeastern Appalachian Mountains. Western dude ranches allow vacationers to relive the days of the cowboy by participating in a variety of riding activities, such as cattle drives and roundups and camping trips into scenic wilderness areas.

- **Horse shows.** Shows typically run for a few days and include a series of events, or classes, in which horse and rider compete for awards and prize money. Some organizations, such

A group of people of various ages enjoys an afternoon trail ride in Colorado.

as the American Quarter Horse Association, sanction shows for specific breeds. However, in many shows horses of different breeds compete against one another. There also are competitions for draft horses and horses driven in harness, as well as Western-themed events with cowboy activities such as cattle herding and penning.

Major categories of horse show competition include:

- **Pleasure classes**, which evaluate a horse's performance, manners, and ridability—how "pleasurable" the horse is to ride.
- **Equitation classes**, which judge riders on their riding skills and ability to command the horse effectively. Events in this class include jumping and dressage, sometimes called horse ballet, in which the animals perform a series of prescribed movements that are scored by a panel of judges.

  Dressage is one of three equestrian events in the Olympics. The others are show jumping—a timed event judged on the horse's ability to clear a series of obstacles in a given order—and eventing, which combines dressage, jumping, and cross-country riding.

A horse and its young rider take a jump during a cross-country equestrian event.

Horses and Healing

Perhaps the most rewarding role for horses is as therapy partners for people who need help adapting to the world around them. Known by a variety of names—equine-assisted therapies and activities, equine-facilitated learning, therapeutic riding, and hippotherapy (from the Greek word *hippos*, meaning horse)—such treatment connects horses and people to improve life skills for those with physical, mental, and emotional challenges.

The rhythmic motion of a horse walking moves a rider's body in a manner similar to a human gait, which enables people with physical limitations—a child with cerebral palsy, perhaps, or an adult with a spinal cord injury—to experience the natural rhythm of walking. Riders often improve in flexibility, balance, and muscle strength and gain a sense of self-control and confidence.

Horses also have a calming effect on people who have communication and social disorders. Therapists point out that a horse reacts as a mirror to the person with him. The horse is looking for a leader and reacts to simple, clear, and calm commands. A child with autism may speak for the first time or use new words and gestures when communicating with a horse. Likewise, youngsters with attention deficit disorder, who typically have great difficulty concentrating, often focus for longer periods when grooming or leading a horse.

By interacting with a horse, individuals with emotional issues learn patience and gain self-esteem

and confidence that can lead to more meaningful relationships with other people. Equine-assisted psychotherapy has proved especially valuable for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as for other trauma victims, such as abused women, who may avoid talk therapy because their memories are so painful. Working with horses teaches victims to relax and respond to the animal's behavior and body language. Feedback from the horse can help the person learn to be more authentic emotionally, therapists say.

The success of equine therapy, as well as the popularity of riding, showing, and simply enjoying horses, confirms what people have known for centuries—that, in the words of an old proverb: "There is nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse."

Horse Talk

broodmare – a female horse used strictly for breeding
colt – a male horse under the age of four

Colt

equestrian – a person who rides horses; usually refers to someone who competes in some manner with horses
farrier – a person who trims hooves and shoes horses
filly – a female horse under the age of four
gait – one of several speeds a horse can travel; a horse has four natural gaits: walk, trot, canter, and gallop.
hand – unit of measure for the height of a horse. One hand is four inches, so a horse that is 15 hands is 60 inches tall. (See *withers*.)
light horse – the average riding horse of any breed, as opposed to a heavy, or draft, horse
paddock – a fenced enclosure to hold a horse
tack – all the equipment used for riding and training a horse, such as bridle, halter, saddle, stirrups, and lead ropes
withers – a ridge between the shoulder blades of a horse. A horse's height is measured from the tallest point of its withers.

Websites of Interest

American Museum of Natural History
www.amnh.org/exhibitions/horse

Based on a 2008–2009 exhibition on the horse at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, this site contains fascinating details about the biology, evolution, and history of horses and their role in human history.

Discover Horses
www.discoverhorses.com

This website provides information about horse breeds, horse care, basics of riding, and competitive equestrian events. Special features include how-to videos, a section for kids, and a "find it here" guide to equine organizations and how to find a horse and professional care for it.

Horses and Horse Information
www.horses-and-horse-information.com

Geared primarily to horse owners, this site contains dozens of useful articles about horse breeds, horse care, equine health, horse-related equipment, and even how to get your horse's portrait painted.

PATH International
www.pathintl.org

This official website of the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International explains how horses are used in therapy for people with physical and emotional disabilities. The site includes a guide to finding a treatment center and information on how to volunteer at a center or become an instructor.

The Triple Crown—An American Tradition

I'll Have Another, a thoroughbred raised in Kentucky, won the 2012 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes but did not run in the Belmont Stakes because of an injury. In this photo I'll Have Another works out with Jockey Mario Gutierrez at the Santa Anita racetrack in California two months before the 2012 Kentucky Derby.

Even Americans who rarely follow horse racing turn their attention every spring to the three races that make up the Triple Crown of Thoroughbred Racing. The first leg of the Triple Crown is the Kentucky Derby, a 1¼-mile race run the first Saturday in May at historic Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky. Called "the run for the roses" because a blanket of red roses is placed atop the winning horse, the Derby is steeped in tradition. Revelers party in the infield, while elegant ladies in long dresses and large fancy hats gather in the expensive box seats. For refreshment, spectators enjoy mint juleps (iced drinks made with bourbon, mint, and sugar) and burgoo, a thick lamb and vegetable stew served from huge iron pots. As horses parade in front of the grandstand, a band plays Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home."

The Derby is followed two weeks later by the Preakness Stakes, a $1\frac{3}{16}$-mile run at Pimlico Race

Course in Baltimore, Maryland. As horses are called to the post, the U.S. Naval Academy Glee Club from nearby Annapolis sings "Maryland, My Maryland." As soon as the Preakness winner is announced, a painter climbs a ladder to the top of the Old Clubhouse cupola and paints the horse and rider weathervane in the colors of the winner's silks (cap and shirt of the jockey). Meanwhile, the winning horse is draped with a blanket of what appear to be Black-Eyed Susans, the state flower of Maryland. In reality, the flowers are yellow daisies daubed with a center spot of black lacquer, because actual Black-Eyed Susans do not bloom until later in the summer.

The final leg of the Triple Crown is the 1½-mile Belmont Stakes, run in early June at Belmont Park on New York's Long Island, the longest dirt track in thoroughbred racing. Although the Belmont is the oldest of the Triple Crown races, its traditions have changed more over the years than those of the other two races. The recent theme song is "New York, New York," popularized by Frank Sinatra. The winning horse is blanketed with white carnations, and its owner is presented with a silver trophy dating from 1869.

Since 1919, 11 horses have won all three races. The most recent Triple Crown winner was Affirmed in 1978. Probably the most famous is Secretariat, who won in 1973, shocking the horse-racing world by winning the Belmont Stakes by an astounding 31 lengths.

The finish line at Belmont Park is the goal of the thoroughbreds competing in the Belmont Stakes, the third leg of the Triple Crown.

Horses IN POPULAR CULTURE

From the pages of books and from the movie screen, some unforgettable horses have galloped into the hearts of Americans.

Classic novels include *The Red Pony*, the John Steinbeck tale of a young boy on a California ranch who learns about love and loss when he is given a pony. *My Friend Flicka*, a novel by Mary O'Hara, tells the story of Ken McLaughlin, a shiftless Wyoming boy whose parents hope he'll learn responsibility when they let him pick a horse from their herd to care for as his own. Ken chooses a spirited horse that is part mustang. She injures herself trying to jump a barbed-wire fence, and Ken takes care of her all summer, creating a strong bond with the animal.

Generations of children have enjoyed the more than two dozen books about horses by author Marguerite Henry. The most famous is *Misty of Chincoteague*, which tells the story of a wild pony on Assateague Island that becomes a pet after being sold to a brother and sister at the annual pony auction in Chincoteague, Virginia. Another book by Henry, *Justin Morgan Had a Horse*, memorializes the stallion that founded the Morgan breed of horses.

Horses also play central roles in some popular movies. *The Horse Whisperer*, directed by and starring Robert Redford, tells the story of a trainer with a remarkable gift for communicating with horses who helps nurse a traumatized teenager and her horse, Pilgrim, back to health. *Seabiscuit*, nominated for seven Academy Awards, presents the heartwarming story of a small colt that became a racing legend and an inspiration to Americans during the depths of the Great Depression.