



WHAT IS A STANDARDBRED?

The origins of the Standardbred trace back to Messenger, an English Thoroughbred foaled in 1780, and later exported to the United States. Messenger was the great-grandsire of Hambletonian 10, to whom every Standardbred can trace its heritage. Standardbreds are a relatively new breed, dating back just over 200 years, but it is a true American breed.

The name “Standardbred” originated because the early trotters—pacers would not come into the picture until much later—were required to reach a certain standard of time for the mile distance in order to be registered as part of the new breed. The mile is still the standard distance covered in most harness races.

While Thoroughbred racing has long been known as the sport of kings, the dependable, athletic Standardbred brought racing to the common man, first between neighbors on community roads and later at state-of-the-art racetracks.

Standardbred racing has long been known as the sport of the people, and both the sport and the breed are as much a part of our American landscape as cowboys and apple pie. As it evolved it gave the United States some of its first “sports heroes,” including the great Dan Patch, the legendary Adios and the great gray ghost, Greyhound.

Breed Characteristics

In many respects, the Standardbred resembles the Thoroughbred. However, it is often more muscled and longer in body, and does not stand as tall, averaging between 15 and 16 hands. The head is bigger and may even sport a Roman nose.

Although bay, brown and black are the predominant colors, grays, chestnuts and roans also occur. Very rarely, pintos and whites are also found. The typical Standardbred weighs between 800 and 1,000 pounds. Standardbreds are known for their docile personalities and willing temperaments.

Gaits

Standardbred racing is contested on two gaits, the trot and the pace. Trotters move with a diagonal gait; the left front and right rear legs move in unison, as do the right front and left rear. It requires much skill by the trainer to get a trotter to move perfectly at high speeds, even though the trotting gait is a natural one in the animal world.

Pacers, on the other hand, move the legs on one side of their body in tandem: left front and rear, and right front and rear. This action shows why pacers are often called “side-wheelers.” Pacers, which account for about 80 percent of the performers in harness racing and are the faster of the two gaits, are aided in maintaining their gait by plastic loops called hobbles, which keep their legs moving in synchronization.

Standardbreds off the Track

For all their stamina and speed in harness, Standardbreds make willing and intelligent companions off the track. Because of their training on the track, it is usually an easy task to retrain them for pleasure or show. Standardbreds excel in a variety of disciplines, from barrel racing to dressage, saddle seat to combined driving. They have a heart that knows no limits and versatility to go with it.

In 1996, the USTA instituted the Standardbred Equestrian Program. This program is designed to work with adoption groups and connect people looking for Standardbreds for pleasure or showing with people finding new homes for retired horses. The program also offers much to the Standardbred pleasure horse enthusiast, including the annual High Point awards program for competitors, the Medallion program for non-competitors and C.H.A.M.P. for kids. SEP also offers retraining tips, help with identification of horses (via lip tattoo or neck freeze band), as well as other services. For more information about the Standardbred Equestrian Program, or about adopting or buying a non-racing Standardbred, please contact the USTA at 750 Michigan Ave., Columbus, Ohio 43215; call (614) 224-2291, ext. 3260; or email sep@ustrotting.com. Please visit the Standardbred Equestrian Program on the Internet at www.ustrotting.com/sep/equest.cfm.

