Heritage of the white stallions

by Theresa Odendaal
Grace, fluidity and beauty coupled with military precision and regimental flair, are terms that come to mind when one thinks of the beautiful performing white stallions. Born of the Renaissance, these noble and courageous horses embody all that is a symbol of that time of splendour in Europe’s history.

One merely has to look at paintings of the time by some of the world’s most famous artists to see that all the horses depicted on canvas, have the same characteristics of the Lipizzaner – the noble head with the prominent Roman nose and large, wide-set eyes; short crested necks and strong rounded hindquarters.

**History and origin**

In days gone by, Spanish horses were considered the best mounts for fighting men and the equestrian skills of the Spanish were legendary. The Spanish style of riding, *A la jineta*, later called *Haute École*, or High School training, spread throughout Europe, and special schools teaching this style of riding were formed, as far afield as Italy.

In 1562 the Austrian Archduke Maximillian imported some of these much sought after Spanish horses and established a stud near Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This founded the Lipizzaner as a breed in Austria and the establishment of an Imperial stud at Karst, in the area in which Lipizza is situated. At the Austrian court, the Lipizzaner horses were used to pull the Emperor’s coaches, for pageantry and for High School displays.

The recognised pedigree lines of the Lipizzaner breed are derived from six Spanish stallions: Pluto (a grey), Conversano (black), Favory (palomino), Neapolitano (bay), Siglavy (grey) and Maestoso (grey). It is interesting to note that the original stallions were of different colours, but the grey gene has become the most dominant and almost all Lipizzaners today, although born black, turn grey (white) by the age of eight or ten. There are some exceptions though, and it is not completely uncommon to have the odd bay or black Lipizzaner that retains its dark colour into adulthood.

In the late 1500’s, Emperor Charles VI, founded the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, using the Lipizzaner horses. Today the Spanish Riding School in Vienna makes exclusive use of Lipizzaner horses for their performances, which were opened to the public only after the First World War. Their performances are based purely on the classical and traditional style of *Haute École*, on which modern day dressage is based, as derived from the Spanish training methods. Operating from the spectacular Hofburg or Emperor’s palace in Vienna, their performance is filled with the grandeur of the past.

The horses perform traditional movements that were used in warfare, some that are still used in modern dressage, as well as some other spectacular movements, including the “airs above the ground” – like the levade, where the horse rears up, low on his haunches; the pesade, where the horse rears up, but is not as low as the levade; the courbette, where the horse jumps forward out of the pesade and lands again on his hind legs (this can include several jumps in succession); and the spectacular capriole, where the horse jumps with all four legs high into the air and kicks his hind legs out behind him.

In 1944, the white stallions had to leave their centuries-old home, fleeing before the advance of the Russians. This flight gripped the imagination and was immortalised in the Disney film, *The miracle of the white stallions*.

In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, several noblemen bred Lipizzaners. This included Count Jankovich-Besan. As the Russians approached, he decided to move the horses from his native Hungary to his parents’ estate in Bavaria. Some of the horses were moved,
pulling carts and wagons through miles of snow and others were moved by rail.

The railroad was a target for heavy bombing and a 300-mile journey took six agonising weeks. There was also the ever present danger that the troops would requisition the horses for food. Accordingly the horses were painted with paraffin and oil so that they would appear sick and unhealthy, unfit for human consumption.

After the war, however, conditions in Germany were still difficult and Count Jankovich decided to move the majority of his horses to England, where they arrived at Christmas in 1946 and were sent to Lord Digby’s estate in Dorset. In 1948 Count Jankovich moved to South Africa and the horses soon followed him to settle at Mooi River in Natal, again at Christmas.

**Major George Iwanowski**
The history of the Lipizzaner horses in South Africa is so closely linked to the life and times of one person. Major George Iwanowski, a polish immigrant, single-handedly launched the tradition of the performing white stallions in South Africa.

Iwanowski was born on his family estate, Lebiodha, in Eastern Poland. He graduated from the Warsaw Agricultural College and wrote his diploma papers on horse breeding to obtain a Master of Science degree. He spent two years as assistant director of the Polish National Stud, Bogastawice, whereafter he completed cavalry school and joined the 1st Lancers Regiment.

Then the Second World War broke out and he had to fight for his country. After the war, Major Iwanowski was commissioned by the Polish army to take over the SS stud, Lauvenburg, in the Rhineland. He spent two years at the stud when politics again interfered. Poland had been “sold” to the Russians and would become a communist state, subservient to Moscow. In a desperate move to escape the nightmare that was sure to follow, Iwanowski packed his bags and moved to South Africa.

On his arrival in Johannesburg, he set out to meet horsey people who could be instrumental
in helping him find employment. It worked and after an initial stint at a stud farm in the Karoo, he returned to Johannesburg where he and Josy Hicks formed a partnership and started Centaur Stables, which later became the first home of the Lipizzaner team.

The Major met Count Jankovich-Besan who invited him to his stud at Mooi River and offered him his first Lipizzaner stallion, Maestoso Erdem. Due to the natural trainability of the Lipizzaner, Erdem was soon performing some of the more difficult dressage movements and impressing at shows all over the country in both competition and displays.

It is interesting to note that Iwanowski was not only a dyed-in-the-wool dressage rider, but also jumped and competed in horse racing at the same time. Many steeplechase riders later become top dressage riders, but seldom, if ever, had one rider managed to win a dressage championship and a hurdle championship in the same year - something the Major managed!

**Building the team**

Following the success of the displays put on by Erdem, the Major began to build a performing Lipizzaner team. These were all stallions who belonged to other riders, pupils of the Major, but who performed together as a team. It was at about this time that the Major met Colonel Hans Handler, at the time the second in command at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, in Rhodesia, who gave him his first lessons in High School riding and accepted an invitation to visit his school in Johannesburg.

His input into putting together the still rather informal displays – both in organising and choreography, was invaluable. This gave the Major the idea of forming a permanent Lipizzaner team for public displays.

In 1962 tragedy struck when Erdem broke his leg. They managed to save the horse though, but his performing days were over. He was retired to stud, but sadly sired only two
foals before dying of a mysterious illness. The Major did not appear on a Lipizzaner in public for almost two years.

Fate intervened. Count Jankovich-Besan’s stud was in financial trouble and the horses needed to be sold or find their way to the butcher. Angela Irvin and her husband Jack, the managing director of National Chemical Products, bought some of the horses and move them from the stud at Mooi River to the NCP farm at Waterkloof, also in Natal.

Major Iwanowski was set with the task of finding homes for the other horses. He proposed to the Irwins that all their young colts be sent to his school for training and that they form a team known as the NCP Lipizzaner team to publicise the company’s products, which included horse feed. This was the first step towards realising the Major’s dream of having his own team of dancing white stallions – an ambitious feat as not even in England had a Lipizzaner team been formed.

The training of the young stallions progressed. The public flocked to the performances in droves. The shows became more and more spectacular with the riders donning the formal attire and some of the elaborate period dress of past centuries. Side-saddle displays captured the elegance of days gone by and is unique to the SA Lipizzaner show, as in Vienna they only have male riders.

Apart from the Major, all the other riders were women. Some of the original riders in the team were Mietie von Hartesveldt, Margie Widman, Ann Sutton, Lynn Jarmen, Gill Meyer, Anne Webb, Ania Glintenkamp, Eva Sydow, Carol Kretzschmar, Maureen Quinn, Helen Dagliesh and Valerie Welsh.

Going from strength to strength, the team’s efforts were rewarded when they were invited by Colonel Handler to visit the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. This proved to them that they were on the right track and that the Lipizzaners in South Africa were here to stay.

Major Iwanowski celebrated his 100th birthday earlier this year (2007) and the SA Lipizzaners proudly put on a special performance in his honour, with many of the people and riders that were originally involved. As he now lives in Poland, he was unable to attend, but a video of this event was sent to him as a special tribute from the team in SA.

**The Lipizzaners today**

SA Horsemans visited the South African Lipizzaner Centre, situated at the Lipizzaner Hall on the KEP (Kyalami Equestrian Park) showgrounds, owned by THS, in Kyalami, north of Johannesburg. The horses were being exercised and trained by their riders every morning and the school was a scene of activity.

One could distinguish the younger horses by their still dark coats and the snaffle bridles they were being ridden in from the older and much whiter horses in their traditional Viennese bridles with curb bits.

The Lipizzaners in South Africa are the only performing Lipizzaners outside Vienna, that are endorsed and recognised by the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, as our performances uphold their high standards and are based on the traditional principles and training methods and have not heeded the popularity-pull to become “circus displays”.

We were told enthusiastically that a crop of new colts had arrived from the stud farm that had recently been moved to Clarence to the farm of Karel de Bruin, after having been moved around quite a bit in recent years. This consists of a herd of mares, out of which they aim to have an average of four colts per year. The stallions are of course all stabled at the Centre – all 30 of them! They don’t call it Boystown for nothing!

The training of the young colts will start by running them loose in the undercover school, where it will soon be obvious to the trainers which horse has been chosen by the group as the leader. This is important, as he will be the horse to focus on and give the initial voice commands to, the one whom the other horses will follow.

Not until they officially start their lunging work, will the horses be one-on-one with a human, but all work will be done in this way, in a group. This running of the young stallions
is incorporated into the performance and gives the horses the chance to become used to the idea of performing in front of an audience from an early age.

The audience is asked to participate in this training of the youngsters by being absolutely quiet and at times being urged to clap gently and at other times more enthusiastically. To hear this about the training of these magnificent show horses, puts it just a little into perspective. They are trained to become the absolute masters at their art, the showmen that they are.

Of course, as approximately four new colts arrive every year, it is impossible for the Centre to keep them all. Some are inevitably sold on. It is, however, very rare for one of the older performing stallions to be sold, but it has happened in the past and will no doubt happen again when there is an overflow of stallions.

The horses live according to a very strict routine, with training for half an hour every day during the week, hacking out on Saturdays and the performance on Sundays. Mondays are for relaxing and going into the paddocks. The horses are also competed locally at shows to maintain credibility among the riding community and to uphold standards.

The standards for their performances and training too are very strict and are dictated by the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, from where a representative visits the Centre once a year in order to keep these standards in place and to offer assistance when needed.

**Fight for survival**

The Lippizaner shows are accepted as a feature of the SA equestrian landscape. However, few of us are aware of the struggle they have been fighting for survival. The Sunday morning performances alone cannot support the horses and they regularly travel the country to give displays and do corporate functions and events. With the changes in the country, sponsorships have become scarce as there are too many other pressing social needs that need support.

It became clear that in order to ensure their survival, the Lipizzaners would have to start giving, instead of taking – to run the Centre as a business, instead of a charity. Thus the South African Lipizzaners formed an alliance with the Reach For a Dream Foundation, enabling them to attract sponsorships for their continued survival, as well as to help many children in need.

Special performances and charity events in alliance with Reach for a Dream, will be put on and sponsorships and donations can be made. Companies can sponsor a specific horse for the amount of R5 000 per month, which will provide for the upkeep of the horse and a percentage will go to Reach for a Dream to help a sick child. The sponsor will get exposure from his generosity, which will serve as an advertisement for his business.

One company that has already come on board, is Theo’s Projects. They already sponsor a horse and have also approached the Lipizzaners with another offer – they are developing an equestrian estate outside Bronkhorstspruit, called Reverie Estate, which will offer an upmarket equestrian centre and competition facility, including indoor show arenas, show grounds, as well as polo fields, shops and an equestrian museum. There will be a lodge for guests, as well as privately owned half-hectare stands.

They have asked the Lipizzaners to endorse this new facility, to give their input, expertise and to lend it credibility and have in return offered the SA Lipizzaners 18 hectares of land at this facility. Through all of this, the SA Lipizzaners also aim to promote equestrian sports in this country as a whole.

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If you or your company wish to make a donation to the Lipizzaners, or to sponsor a horse, you can contact them on email Lipizzaner@hixnet.co.za or phone 011 468 2719. SAH