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# THE SORRAIA

By Katy Hill

## What is the Sorraia horse?

Following on from my article on the Sorraia quadrille at Golegã in November last year, I thought readers might be interested to find out more about the history of these beautiful rare-breed horses and the conservation programme at the Escola Superior de Agrária de Santarém (ESAS) (Santarém Agricultural College) as well as how staff at the college breed, train and utilise these horses on a day-to-day basis.

Much of the information I have was obtained during a visit I was lucky enough to make to ESAS last September. Thanks go to several key people involved in the project: Professor António Pedro Andrade Vicente, PhD, who has kindly shared his extensive expertise on the Sorraia horse, and some lovely photographs, veterinarian Professor Paula Maria Augusto de Azevedo, who is responsible for the Sorraia Riding School at ESAS, and Nuno Marques, the riding instructor at the school, who also assists with the breeding, training and utilisation of its Sorraia horses. I am also grateful to all of the fabulous young students I met who are involved in riding and caring for these beautiful rare-breed horses. Their love and passion for them was great to see. Additionally, it was a pleasure to meet Nuno's assistant, Ana Rosa, who helps with his work with Riding for the Disabled, and physiotherapist Bruno Cunha, as well as some of the school's clients with special needs. All of them kindly allowed me to watch some wonderful therapeutic sessions with Sorraia horses.

## History and breeding

The Sorraia horse originates from the Sorraia valley region, near the Tagus River in Portugal. In the 1930s, while out on a hunting trip, zoologist and paleontologist Dr Ruy D'Andrade (better known as an important breeder of Lusitanos as well as for restoring the Alter Real breed) discovered a small group of horses roaming in the Portuguese lowlands near Coruche, in the Santarém district. D'Andrade set about preserving the group because his research led him to conclude that they were descendants of a very ancient, primitive Southern Iberian wild horse, and ancestors of both Lusitano and Andalusian horses that had, until then, been hidden in this hitherto inaccessible part of Portugal. He bought seven mares and three stallions from different local breeders, and it is from this small group of animals that the horses have been bred ever since. Sorraia horses are very in-bred, having all originated from this same group, and there are very few of them left elsewhere in the world, which makes them very scarce and one of the most endangered horse breeds in the world. There are only 120 breeding females left, and various efforts are being made to breed and conserve these horses in Portugal and some other European countries, such as Germany, as well as the USA.

Although Sorraia have excellent conformation and suffer no gait or health issues, there are problems with reproduction. From the 120 breeding females, yearly, only around 30-40 foals are produced, meaning it is difficult to breed from existing Sorraia stock. Since all Sorraia are related, some very closely, it is important to try to breed from those that are the least genetically close. However, despite the difficulties breeding, the lack of gait or health issues shows good natural selection and no malfunction. So, once a foal is born, fortunately it tends to be in good health.



**2017 filly foal Nuxelia, the world's first Sorraia born after embryo transfer, with India, the recipient Luso mare who carried her, and her biological mum Fiona**

As well as the conservation breeding programme at ESAS, there are other important Sorraia breeding programmes elsewhere in the world. The main ones are centred in Portugal and Germany, where there are about eight to ten breeders, with around 40 mares. There are also Sorraia in France, Spain, Denmark and Holland, and some in the USA, where Sorraia have been crossed with mustangs. The Associação Internacional de Criadores do Cavalo Ibérico de Tipo Primitivo – Sorraia, runs a closed stud book, which sets strict rules. For example, the association limits acceptance of horses that have some white markings or that are too dark. They must be either grullo (mouse grey) or dun. Zebra markings on the head, neck and legs are desirable (Zebra markings can also be seen in ancient paintings of horses in caves in the Iberian Peninsula). António Vicente told me that the latest DNA evidence points towards Sorraia

having their origins in horses of the Tarpan type, which was a Eurasian breed of wild horse that is now extinct. He also informed me that there is increasing evidence to suggest that domestication of horses first occurred on the Iberian Peninsula. If proven, this would mean that the Sorraia horse from the Iberian peninsula could be *the* breed of horse with the longest history of having been ridden and domesticated. Although the Sorraia is a small breed of horse it is never smaller than 14.2hh. Its mane and tail have two colourings (dark and light), and they often have dorsal stripes along their spine.





They are compact horses that are very hardy and need very little forage to stay in good condition. Nevertheless, they are still considered to be hot-blooded in that they are sensitive and reactive, yet gentle when worked properly. According to António, challenges can occur if these horses are not worked properly, when they will resist, and in the early stages of training they can be nervous and will stay in a corner when first approached, or until the trainer's trust is won. Nevertheless, he describes them as a 'small Lusitano', in that they share the same willing temperament, are comfortable to ride, have agile gaits, high knee action and an ability to both lengthen and collect their frame. Once trained, Sorraia are suitable for small children or adults to ride, and are a breed that is, for the British, most comparable to the Welsh Section B pony. Sorraia are used in riding lessons, to give public displays, in jumping (which they do well up to about 80cms), dressage, in-hand work and vaulting, as well as herding and other work in the fields involving cattle. Their build, gaits and temperament also mean they make excellent therapy horses for children or adults with disabilities or special needs.

### Development of the Sorraia horse at ESAS

The conservation project headed up by António Vicente at ESAS involves a small number of Sorraia that are being utilised for breeding. In order to maximize genetic diversity, which is already low in the breed, using the small number of mares they have, the team aims to produce foals each year from different stallions. In 2016, the team carried out the first Sorraia embryo transfer. The embryo was collected from a six-year-old donor Sorraia mare (Fiona), who had had three foals already and had been covered naturally by a Sorraia stallion (Xearas), and transferred to a recipient three-year-old Lusitano mare (India), who then carried the embryo successfully, full term, to produce a healthy Sorraia filly (Nuxelia), who was born in June, 2017. The process was covered in a TV documentary in Portugal.

In addition to the breeding programme at ESAS, Sorraia horses are used for ridden and therapeutic work. For the past two and a half years, Nuno Marques, former pupil of António Borba Monteiro of the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art, has been managing the day-to-day activities of the horses and riders at the school; and it was he and his staff and students that I was fortunate enough to meet last September.

On a very hot day we were first shown around the ESAS campus by Nuno. Set among shady trees, the college is comprised of academic and agricultural buildings and paddocks arranged around a gently undulating campus. We were shown cows, lambs, rabbits, sheep and pigs and goats - the college makes and sells its own goats cheese. As it was freshers' week there were also a number of new students on campus, who we were told would soon be driven around the town on tractors in a traditional freshers' parade, and who may well have ended up being ducked in the college fountain as part of the college welcome rituals! I also learned from Nuno that, sadly, student intake numbers at Santarém were falling. We speculated that this might be to do with young Portuguese no longer being so keen to pursue careers in rural management, agriculture or conservation and opting for other opportunities in cities or overseas.

Next, we were taken to see some of the results of the Sorraia breeding programme. In one of the paddocks we saw two handsome grullo Sorraia mares, a bay Lusitano mare, and two beautiful Sorraia foals, one of which was Nuxelia, the filly that was result of the first embryo transfer.



Afterwards, we were taken to the stables, where three stunning Sorraia stallions, standing no more than about 15hh, stood calmly on the cobblestones basking in the sunshine outside a traditional stable building. The first item on Nuno's agenda was a 'hipoterapia' session, or 'equine therapy' session using one of the stallions.



Gonçalo Cunha Filipe and Nuno Marques



The one male and two female students, aged between 24 and 50, all had Down's Syndrome. We saw the first two women to ride confidently grooming and tacking up their horse in a special 'vaulting' surcingle with handles and pads. We then watched all of the riders perform various vaulting exercises, such as 'scissors', 'around the world', 'aeroplane' and other stretching and twisting exercises as their mounts calmly and obediently trotted and cantered round on the lunge.



Ana Luisa Paveia

One of the more confident riders rode alone after her lunging session. She had an excellent seat and appeared very self-assured and relaxed. Following their therapy session, the riders happily untacked and hosed down their mounts with warm water. We were informed by their physiotherapist Bruno that riding is excellent for people with Down's

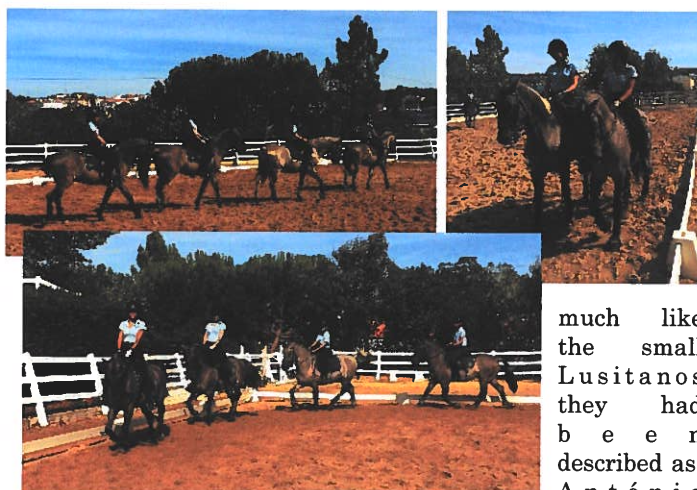
Syndrome as it helps to improve muscle tone but that it also has striking benefits for mental health and self-confidence, as well as helping to build skills in independence.

Nuno told me that he likes as many of his equine therapy students to ride and assist in displays and horse shows as possible, something which he said had initially worried some people. However, since all had gone very well so far on outings he is planning to continue to encourage his equine therapy clients to ride in more shows and displays in the future.

Following a delicious lunch in Santarém we returned to the stables, to be greeted by some of Nuno's regular young students from the college and the local area, who had been told I was visiting to take photos and write an article for Luso News. Three friendly teenage boys and three teenage girls were all identically and smartly dressed in blue T-shirts, jodhpurs and riding hats, getting ready to practise for the display at Golegã that I wrote about in the last edition of Luso News. They groomed, plaited, bandaged and oiled the hooves of the beautiful Sorraia stallions, so they looked stunning, all in English tack, and some in double reins. The students, who rode very well, rehearsed their formation ride, or 'quadrille' in walk, trot and canter, with Nuno watching and assisting where necessary. Now we had a chance to see the horses being ridden in a dressage arena, looking very



Francisco Antunes, Pedro Ferreira, Beatriz Gomes, Luana Romão, Beatriz Raimundo, Nuno Marques, Henrique Pereira



much like the small Lusitanos they had been described as.

António Vicente

told me that they are one of the few ponies that actually move like a horse, and during this display I really got a chance to see that.

Nuno gave me a bit of background on some of the horses, explaining that the lead horse consistently obtained high scores in dressage and had taken his rider from being very nervous to being very confident. The second horse, he explained, had conformation better suited to jumping than dressage. I learned, too, that he hopes to be able to train one Sorraia, at least, to a high level of dressage, but he said that there are issues involved in training a horse used in a college to do piaffe, since they might develop a tendency to switch on piaffe at inappropriate moments, like in therapy sessions, which could make things difficult for less physically able riders. Still, he is keen for some of his more skilled riders, whose confidence and riding ability has grown hugely since riding the school's Sorraia horses, to learn and compete at higher level dressage.



Having had a wonderful preview of the team practising the quadrille for Golegã in November, three of the riders took their horses out of the arena, returning on foot, to help rearrange the markers and put up a

small jump. The three remaining horses and their riders then gave us a demonstration of jumping, which was a great ending to a lovely display of these unique, rare horses.

We had had such a lovely day, and I was left really looking forward to seeing all of the students and horses again at Golegã in a few weeks, which as we now know, went fantastically. Thank you so much once again to the whole team and students at ESAS for showing just how wonderfully versatile and beautiful Sorraia horses are, and, yes, how incredibly like Lusitanos their movement is. Can I afford another horse, I wonder?!

For further information on Sorraia horses, visit <https://www.aicsorraia.com/index.php/en/>

**Photography: Katy Hill  
António Vicente**