

## The Knabstrupper

"About 20.000 years ago, after the ice age, the Cro-Magnons were hunting in the area today known as southern France. The cave paintings made by these hunters still exist today in the caves of Lascaux and Pêche Merle. These paintings prove that the white colour has not developed through domestication, as previously thought, but instead belong to the primeval colours. The paintings prove that the genetic codes for spotted colour patterns were present in the primeval horse and, through migration, were spread all over the world. When the horse was domesticated several thousand years later the genetic codes for spots were still present and could be strengthened through selective breeding.

Denmark, the oldest kingdom in the world, is by tradition a seafaring nation thanks not least to the Vikings. Not only were the Vikings capable seafarers, but they were also considered to be excellent horsemen. Thus the Norman descendants of the Vikings won the battle of Hastings due to a highly trained cavalry, which could only have been developed by people who prepared their horses through education and selective breeding. In the 12th century a French priest wrote to the French king that ...the Danes have at their disposal an outstanding population of horses that surpasses anything he has hitherto seen... In the church of Skibby not far from Knabstrup Hovedgaard is a frieze of murals showing three young princes riding spotted horses. These murals are entitled "Memento Mori" (remember death) and thus tells us that secular decadence will be punished in the afterworld. It further tells us that spotted horses expressed decadence, wealth, arrogance and joie de vivre.

When the reformation came to Denmark in 1536 the nobles' estates fell to the crown and king Frederik II founded the royal stud at Frederiksborg. During the reign of his son, King Christian IV, a hitherto unseen splendour was displayed at the royal court, which required correspondingly magnificent horses. In 1662 king Christian V spent a long period at the court of the sun-king Ludwig IV as the court of Versailles was his great example. Ludwig IV had a great passion for spotted horses and was often depicted mounted on such horses. The spotted horse was the quintessence of the time, and thus should not be absent from the Danish court either. Purchasers from all over the world came to the yearly auctions at Frederiksborg. The carriages of the Russian Czar were harnessed with Danish white born horses, and at the auction in 1771 the white born stallion Pluto was sold to Austria and became the oldest of the ancestors of the famous Lippizaner.

In 1683, Superbe, a black stallion, was bought by the Danish state stud at Frederiksborg Castle from a Spanish monastery cum stud in Xeres de la Frontera with the aim of improving the breeding of the classical high school Frederiksborger horse. Here he founded the nucleus of the line that eventually led to the Danish Knabstrupper.

In 1812 a direct descendant of Superbe covered the Flæbe mare, brought to Denmark from Cordoba during the Napoleonic wars and subsequently acquired by Major Villars Lunn at the estate of Knabstrup Hovedgaard. Thus, when the ensuing foal, named the Flæbe stallion, was born in 1813, the Flæbe mare became the ancestress of the Knabstrupper breed. The Flæbe mare had so many colours that she was jokingly referred to as "green".

Thus the Knabstrupper of today almost all descend in a direct line from the stallion Superbe through one of three stallion lines: The Silverking, Hermolin and Hugin lines.

### Uses:

Over the centuries, the Danish spotted horse has had a variety of uses. Until the century before last, the spotted horses were almost solely used by nobles and were the epitome of decadence and joie de vivre. They were primarily used in mounted festival plays and carousels, and sometimes they were harnessed to smart and pompous carriages. This was rare however, as it

was extraordinarily difficult to find and buy matching horses with similar spot patterns. The white born variety of the breed, on the other hand, became the carriage horse par excellence, and every reputable princely house just had to own a few. At the time the queen used to ride to the coronation and the white born was the preferred coronation horse, later becoming the preferred companion horse for many royal monarchs.

The white born as well as the spotted horses did justice to themselves at the famed court riding academy of Christiansborg Castle, where, especially under the tutorship of Georg Simon Winter von Adlersflügel, they really proved their worth in the high school. It was the proven classical riding and driving horse that Major Villars Lunn bred at Knabstrup.

During the Sleswig wars, the Knabstrappers were often used as officers' horses, with the often fatal result that the officer became too easy a target for the enemy sharpshooters.

When the royal stud at Frederiksborg Castle came to an end, the breeding program was continued under public management. The Frederiksborger was put to agricultural use whilst the Knabstrappers were mostly used for pulling light carriages or pleasure carts. During the period between the great wars, when breeding was influenced by the requirements of agriculture, a somewhat heavier type of Knabstrupper was bred for heavier work. When this requirement ceased after WW2, access to the lucrative racing market through crossbreeding with thoroughbreds and warm bloods was attempted. Often though, the result caused derision. Others tried to preserve the original classical riding horse; for this the main customers were the circuses all over the world.

This horse that was bred for the High School was often predestined for a life as a circus horse, not only because of its colour, but more for its character and because of its ability and willingness to learn. So Knabstrappers were exported to the circus world, from Australia to America, for many years.

When the entertainment industry, including the circuses, changed dramatically due to the introduction of television, the demand from the primary customer decreased and the most important use of the Knabstrupper disappeared. For a long time thereafter the Knabstrupper was almost a totally forgotten breed, until it once again reappeared onto the scene along with the growing interest for riding for leisure.

Today the spotted princely horse is mainly used for leisure and hobby riding. To anyone who, along with the ancient princes, believes in joie de vivre and expresses it through the colour of his horse, the Knabstrupper is the ideal choice. Within the scope of leisure riding the Knabstrupper has proved its versatility not only as a normal riding horse but also in the most difficult equestrian disciplines including dressage, eventing, hunting, pentathlon, show jumping and the airs above the ground.

#### Type:

It is very difficult to describe the ideal Knabstrupper, inasmuch as a totally pure specimen no longer exists. Furthermore the Frederiksborger, from which the Knabstrupper stems, has changed type. Breeding takes place within wide parameters as the focus is more on colour than on build. One has to accept that over time breeding must follow the changing fashion.

In the attempt to find the historical Knabstrupper type, a priceless monument helps us - the mounted horseman on the castle square of Amalienborg in Copenhagen, Denmark... The French sculptor Saly created with this monument a remarkably genuine sculpture of the ideal Danish horse in 1750. The ideal horse measured 155 cm. Thus Hjalmer Friis describes the monument: „...an anatomically almost perfect Horse, harmonious, well built, the medium sized Head with the somewhat convex Nose is beautifully united with the rather free set, well carried somewhat heavy

Neck. The Shoulder is sloped and heavysset with rounded Withers. The Chest is deep and wide. The Back is somewhat long. The Loins are broad, well-muscled. The croup medium long, regular square sided, strongly furrowed, sloping with a low set somewhat in set well borne richly haired Tail. The Legs are strong.....

The typical Frederiksborger of that time, and through it also the breeding carried out by the noble and estate studs (among these the Knabstrup Hovedgård), reminds us of the other European baroque horse breeds. Closest to this type today is the Iberian horse and the Lipizzaner.

#### Colour:

A good horse has no colour goes an old saying, but this is only partially true of the Knabstrupper. A Knabstrupper is not always spotted, but on the other hand neither is every spotted horse a Knabstrupper. Irrespective of whether Knabstrupper will be found in the future, there will always be people, who have a love for spotted horses. A few American scientists have worked superficially with the genetics of the Appaloosa horse, however without satisfactory results. Work using colour-codes carried out on a spotted species of pigeons, on the other hand, resulted in a genetic model which might also apply to Knabstrupper. Thus breeding experience and the statistics resulting from breeding form the basis of a simplified model for the passing on of colour-codes.

Imagine that a white blanket was used to cover a horse of any colour. In this blanket there are holes, so you can see the underlying color as spots. If the colour-code is weak, the blanket is small and only covers part of the body (half spotted). If the colour-code is strong, the blanket will cover the whole of the horse (full spotted). Particularly strong colour-codes will make the holes of the blanket shrink and the ensuing result is a white-born horse. A white-born is neither a roan nor an albino, but simply a spotted horse without or with few spots. In the case of a particularly weak colour-code, fragments of the white blanket can be seen on the body as white spots (snowflake-spotted), or the horse does not inherit the blanket at all and therefore is solid bay, chestnut or black.

The Knabstrupper comes in as many colour patterns as its distinct cousin the Appaloosa and more. The most sought after is the full spotted leopard, however no two Knabstrupper are alike, they are all unique. The colour codes are passed on in the normal way, and the Knabstrupper colour is dominant over all other colours. So if a solid coloured mare (NN) is covered by a Knabstrupper stallion (KN) (or vice versa): NN + KN = KN + NN + KN + NN or 50% solid coloured and 50% Knabstrupper coloured. Knabstrupper (KN) covered by Knabstrupper (KN): KN + KN = KK + KN + KN + NN or 50% Knabstrupper coloured, 25% solid coloured and 25% white born (KK). A white born Knabstrupper (KK) covered with any solid coloured (NN): KK + NN = KN + KN + KN + KN or 100% Knabstrupper coloured.

This was the short story of the spotted horse from Denmark. The story of a horse breed which has experienced the highest glory and the deepest oblivion, which has carried kings to the coronation and has pulled the farmer's plough. But its colourful appearance was always closely connected to that of its owner. If one is a colourful person, one cannot but enjoy this living example of nature's diversity.

Spotted horses have always been in existence since prehistoric times but only in recent years has a breed been founded the principal characteristic of which is the spotted appearance: The Knabstrupper. Among the ancestors of the Knabstrupper is an abundance of spotted horses, popular not only because of their outer appearance but also because of their great abilities and endurance in many areas. Major Villars Lunn at Knabstrup Hovedgård founded the Knabstrupper breeding and was one of very few to live to see the results of his breeding work i.e. a new horse breed, which was founded on Danish breeding traditions over centuries.

Today the Knabstrupper is unfortunately becoming rare, but its unique cultural heritage and abilities inherited over generations are now being recognized."

This article and the accompanying photos are courtesy of Sartor Riding and Horse Center.  
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