

The Stallion's Mane

The Next Generation of Horses in Mongolia

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Abstract

Horses play a central role in Mongolian history and culture, yet there has been little academic research on breeding methods, either traditional or modern in Mongolia. The goal of good horse breeding is to maintain and improve the quality of the breed. By looking at the traditional breeding, we gain a better understanding of what Mongolian culture values in their horses and what they are hoping to pass on to the next generation. We can also learn how this information is passed on in an oral tradition from generation to generation of horse trainers and herders. In traditional Mongolian horse breeding we see that horses live a nearly wild existence and are influenced greatly by natural selection. Genetically, bloodlines are passed down the female side as fathers pass mares down to their sons and stallions are brought from a different herd to ensure genetic variability.

Currently, Western breeding methods are having an impact in Mongolia as some people are crossing foreign breeds with native Mongolian mares. There is a number of issues with these crossed and foreign horses. They have trouble surviving in the Mongolian climate and need extra care, they are expensive, and cannot be used in the traditional ways. These crossbreds, however, are more competitive in short distance racing and are having an impact in the sport of racing. Because the horses are so expensive there is potential for racing to turn into a sport of the elite, we also see a new distribution of labor in the racing community. In the future many anticipate changes in racing rules because of the impact of crossbreed horses. Despite the controversy many believe that the crossbreeding is helping to improve the over all quality of racehorse and in the future there is hope of creating a Mongolian racing breed with international merit. Though crossbreeding seems very different from the traditional horse breeding, we can see many parallels. The bloodlines are still being kept on the female side and the stallions are being imported from foreign genetics.

Introduction

From its birth until the day of its death, the mane of the Mongolian stallion is never cut. According to the Mongolian herders, the stallion is the father and leader of the horse herd, he is known as the emperor of the steppe. “If there is no stallion among horses, they cannot become a herd.”¹ A long mane makes him look powerful, strong, beautiful and different from all the other horses. It is said to attract and impress mares during mating season and to help him fight off wolves. Beyond even these practical purposes there is a deeper traditional significance behind the long mane. Among the horses, the stallion is the most worshiped and respected. It is said that his power and spiritual energy resides in his mane. “The stallion carries the spirit of the other horses and the spirit lives in his flowing mane.”² This is why the traditional spirit banners of Mongolian warriors were made from the manes of stallions. The manes of the most loved stallion are often kept after the horse’s death by its owner.

Just as the stallion is the center of the horse herd, horses themselves are at the center of Mongolian culture and history. “Every moment of Mongolian history is linked to the horse, it is impossible to imagine the nomad without it. The horse is an essential part of being Mongolian.”³ Horses are important not only to the cultural identity of the Mongolian people, but for those who live in the countryside they are vital for daily life. Horses are used for transportation, herding, sport, meat, rope making, and milking. The horse is called the friend of

1 *The Horses of Chinggis Khaan*, by: D. Erdenekhuyag. Page 19.

2 Interview with Ulzibat. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

man, and a nice horse and saddle are the most important accessories for a Mongolian person to look their best. “When a man rides a nice looking horse with a matching dell and saddle, people who are walking just need to stop, sit, and watch as pair goes past.”⁴ Horses are also behind one of the nation's favorite sports, racing. “Horse racing is one of Mongolia's national sports and everyone wants to be involved.”⁵

Because horses are so significant to the nomadic lifestyle there is much tradition dictating the continuation of the Mongolian breed. The foals born each spring represent the future of the nomads’ horses and it is vital that the strength, endurance, and usefulness of the previous generations are passed on. “Horse breeding is the process of using selective breeding to produce additional individuals of a given phenotype, that is, continuing a breed.”⁶ The goal of good horse breeding is to maintain and improve the quality of the breed. By examining how Mongolians breed good horses we not only learn how they accomplish this, but we discover what exactly they are looking for in their horses. We find what in the Mongolian horse the society values and hopes to preserve in their bloodlines. Culturally we can also discover how this information is learned and passed on through generations of herders. Since the domestication of the ancient horses, the breed has been changing; by looking at the history and evolution of the horse in Mongolia we in turn gain insight into the history of the people who use it.

This paper seeks to examine not only the traditional methods and the

3 Interview with Sumyabaatar. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai..

4 Interview with Ganbold. Horse trainer in Ulzii Horoolth district.

evolution of the Mongolian breed, but also how this is changing in the current situation of Mongolia. Like many things in Mongolia since the 1990's some sectors of horse breeding are rapidly evolving as they are influenced by the market economy and Western society. This is having a particular impact into the sport of Mongolian racing as people are crossing faster foreign horse breeds with the Mongolian horse. "A breeder could, using individuals of different phenotypes create a new breed with specific characteristics."⁷ This is changing the races, the people involved, and the horses themselves.

To meet this papers objective it was important to be able to compare modernized horse breeding methods to the traditional ones. This required two distinct field research sites. One composed of herders who continue to breed horses as they have for countless generations, and one made up of top race horse trainers on the cutting edge modern crossbreeding in Mongolia today. To do this I studied horse breeding in the field in both in the Ulzii Horoolth district, the main horse training and breeding area outside of the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, and in the winter camps of traditional Mongolian herders located in the mountains of the Arhungai aimag. Through my field research, I was able to gain a better view of the over all picture of horse breeding in Mongolia.

Methods

5 Interview with Deshegsuren. Horse trainer in Ulzii Horoolth district.

6 Racing Fixtures, the Online Racing Rresource. "About Breeding."

Horse breeding, like many things in a nomadic culture, is passed on nearly entirely in an oral tradition. This meant that the great majority of the research for this paper had to be done through interviews with trainers, herders, and professionals in the field. Very little educational research or writing has been done on the subject of Mongolian horse breeding, which meant that literary resources were scarce in both Mongolian and English. The books and papers that I did find were valuable in the general information that they offered me about the Mongolian breed and horse culture. This gave me more of a basis in which to conduct meaningful research from.

In traditional Mongolian society the horses are primarily cared for and managed by the men of the family. This meant that the majority of my interviews were conducted through a translator to Mongolian men. One of the problems that I faced was that these men tended not to be overly talkative or elaborate to a young foreign woman asking questions. Though it was daunting at first, I learned how to structure interviews and ask questions to get more information than the short answers initially offered. I did this by beginning the interviews with questions that were fairly easy to answer and acted as a warm up before moving on to more complicated and opinion based ones. I learned to structure questions that needed more elaborate answers, because yes or no responses are not informative. I would often start with a very broad question and then depending on the answer I received I would ask more pointed ones until I had a fuller understanding. This offered the speaker the opportunity to share his opinion and

knowledge without being too directed by my questions.

I found that the best interviews tended to come from older individuals in the community. It may be that their role as a teacher to the younger generations of horse breeders has allowed them to organize and vocalize what they know. Many of the younger men seemed to have trouble putting into words something they have done all their lives. Perhaps this is because they have never had to explain it to anyone. Though the women tended to not be the ones actually managing the horse herds day to day, they were full of information. Though they were at times initially reluctant to be interviewed, claiming that the men knew more about horse breeding, they proved to know much more than they gave themselves credit for. They also tended to be more talkative with me than many of the men.

Frequently I would even get the women's opinions without directly interviewing them. I would often be interviewing a man and his wife would fill in and offer more information for his answers. In a similar way I found it very useful to interview a few people at once. Because the Mongolian people generally like to talk about horses, when questions were posed when several people were together friendly arguments and discussions would often ensue. Through just listening to these discussions and debates I could learn much more than when I was just asking question after question. They also helped me to structure my questions to fit a Mongolian focus. I have found that you can usually get the best answers when you know what and how to ask.

Much of the previous knowledge required for my research comes from a life spent training and competing Event horses in America. Because I grew up in a

family that breeds performance horses, I had the background experience to know what questions to ask, and what I was looking for in Mongolia. This foundation also gave me the chance to make interesting comparisons between Mongolian methods and those used by the Western horse world.

At the end of each of my interviews I would always give the person a chance to ask me any questions. These questions were typically about horses in America and how we do things there. This would often develop into interesting discussions which allowed me to discover important similarities and differences. These more free form discussions often lead into areas which I had not even considered asking about and produced more questions for future interviews. I found that as my research continued and some of my questions were answered, new ones would emerge. In this way my interviews evolved with my knowledge as my research progressed.

Though I tried to remain open and objective during this research, bias is of course unavoidable. Because I created the questions I asked, they were skewed from a Western point of view because they are the only ones I knew how to ask. Though my background horse knowledge gave me the ability to conduct this research, it undoubtedly made me bias. From a life spent with horses I have developed my own opinions and views, though I tried to keep these separate from what I was learning here in Mongolia. The new view on horses that I discovered here was certainly an eye opening experience for me.

The Mongolian Horse

The Mongolian horse is one of the most ancient horse breeds in the world. “Riding horses are documented with the nomads of the central Asian steppes since 2000 BC.”⁸ Many archaeological sites show evidence that would indicate that Mongolia was where the first man sat upon the back of a wild horse, thus beginning the process of domestication and selective breeding of the horses we have today. “Tests have shown, that among all horse breeds, Mongolian horses feature the largest genetic variety. This indicates that it is an archaic breed suffering little human induced selection. This data also indicates that many other breeds descended from the Mongolian horses.”⁹ “Livestock was domesticated in the Asian steppe 12-14 thousands years ago, and the ancestor of the European horse was the Mongolian horse.”¹⁰

The Mongolian breed is characterized by its strength, endurance, reliability, and patience. It is a working breed and very good at going long distances and carrying heavy loads. “Mongolian horses are known for their ability to travel, for durability, and for being able to find forage in any season.”¹¹ They are primarily used as riding horses and only rarely utilized as draft animals. “Although the Mongolian horse is a small animal, it has strong muscles, is tough under any natural circumstances, alert, naturally intelligent and loyal to its owner.”¹² Though they are only 12-14 hands tall, they are still considered horses and not ponies.

8 Oklahoma State University webpage, Department of Animal Science, Mongolian Horse

9 *Variation in Asian Horse Breeds*, I.G. Udina.

10 *Traveling by Mongolian Horse*, Bekhjargal Bayarsaikhan, page96.

11 *Traveling by Mongolian Horse*, Bekhjargal Bayarsaikhan, page96.

12 *Traveling by Mongolian Horse*, Bekhjargal Bayarsaikhan, page96.

A Mongolian herder typically owns between 25-200 horses. Some people may own over a thousand, but nearly every family that lives in the Mongolian countryside owns at least a few horses. These horses live in herds that roam free on the steppe. Each herd is composed of mares, geldings, and young horses and is lead by a stallion. Because the mares and stallions have other duties, it is primarily the geldings that are ridden. These horses are typically ridden for 3-4 days at a time and then released back into the herd. They are then usually re-caught in 10-15 days. The length of riding and release time depends on the horse's physical condition and the season. The herders have the most contact with their geldings, while the mares and stallions live a much more wild existence. Reproduction of these horses happens very naturally in the herds with almost no human intervention. Foals are conceived, born, and grow up on the steppe.

The Mongolian horses are important to nomads, not only for their livelihood, but to their history, identity and culture as well. The Mongolian horse is often the center of artwork, songs, poems, legends, and language in Mongolian culture. It is a highly respected and honored animal and in many ways, and Mongolians identify themselves as a horse people. "Although we use our horses everyday we always love and respect them."¹³ When many foreigners think of Mongolia, the horse is one of the first things that come to mind. It certainly serves as a type of national identity and can be seen in many seals and symbols.

The horse can also be very spiritual for the Mongolian people. In

Shamanism the spiritual power that a person possesses is known as a individual's wind horse, or *khii mori*, and the horse is frequently used as a powerful fortune telling symbol. In a family horse herd there will often be one adult horse that has a blue scarf tied around its neck. This is the family's worshiped horse. The color and sex of the horse appropriate to be worshiped by a particular family is usually determined by a lama or shaman and after a ceremony and blessing this horse is considered to be sacred. This horse cannot be ridden often, and when it is it must be by the head of the family for special occasions only. It can never be eaten and must be allowed to live out its life naturally on the steppe.

Most Mongolians also have a favorite or loved horse among their herd. This horse is usually one of the nicest horses they own, either it is very fast, or fashionable with good movement and color. This horse is used only for special occasions and is kept very strong by never having to do heavy work. Some people even give this special horse extra food. The owner's treatment of this particular animal as it ages varies. Some people let the horse live in their herd until it dies naturally, others release it to a sacred mountain to die on its own, wild in nature. Other families will kill the horse when it is too old and use it for food. They believe that the good energy and spirit of this loved horse will then come into the family and not be wasted. The head of the horse is then either kept by the family, or placed on an *ovoo* on a sacred mountain to honor it.

Ancestors

The Mongolian horse is thought to have descended from the prehistoric wild horse, known in Mongolia today as the Takhi or Przewalski horse. This ancient relative has recently been reintroduced back into Mongolia after near extinction and is living in small numbers in the wild. The Mongolian horse still shares many characteristics with its wild horse ancestors. They have similar body types, characterized by a smaller stocky body size, a short thick neck, a large head, a heavy coat, strongly built legs, and a more roached or arched back. Compared to many modern breeds the Mongolian horses display a very ancient bone structure. Many of the Mongolian horses still exhibit a deer, or Takhi coloring in their coat as well as similar dorsal stripe and tiger markings on the back and legs.

Despite these similarities, there are many differences as well. “Mongolian horses have been tamed by people and their colors have changed, their manes became longer and they became more robust.”¹⁴ The Mongolian breed is now truly distinct from the Takhi. The Takhi and the Mongolian horse have developed a different number of chromosomes, the former having 66, and the latter having 64, making cross breeding rare. The Mongolian horse is also larger than the Takhi, it exhibits a much wider range of coat colors, as well as having more mane and tail hair. They are also said to be much more trainable than their wild ancestors, due to centuries of domestication and working with humans.

One of the most important characteristics that the Mongolian horse inherited from the Takhi is the ability to survive in the harsh Mongolian climate.

“Although these horses became a new breed, their particular appearance, acute hearing, sense of smell, ability to guard the herd from wild animals and to find food in all seasons, plus their endurance has not changed.”¹⁵ The Mongolian environment offers plenty of challenges and its horses are undoubtedly one of the toughest and hardiest breeds in the world. Despite domestication, in many ways the Mongolian horse lives a lifestyle very similar to that of its wild ancestors. A herder's horses typically live in several herds out on the steppe. These herds are lead by a stallion and they find all the food, water, and minerals that they need on their own. Even in the harsh Mongolian winter the horses are almost never protected by human made shelters or given extra food. These horses must rely on their instincts to survive.

Genetic Purity

In many ways this hard lifestyle has kept the Mongolian breed very pure. “The Mongolian horse has not interbred with other breeds since its origin and is a pure blood Mongolian livestock.”¹⁶ Because other breeds have not adapted to live in the Mongolian climate they have great difficulty surviving here. There is a legend that tells of how Chinggis Khan brought several different kinds of horses back with him in his conquests across the world, but none of them could survive on the steppe and after just one winter they had all died. Though the Mongolian horse was domesticated by humans and selectively bred to suit their needs, the

14 *The Horses of Chinggis Khaan*, by: D. Erdenekhuyag. Page 21.

15 *The Horses of Chinggis Khaan*, by: D. Erdenekhuyag. Page 21.

breed has also been greatly influenced by natural selection. For the Mongolian horse the foals that had the traits to survive in the steppe environment were the one that would live to pass on their genetics.

Because the uses of the Mongolian horse in culture have not changed greatly since ancient times, breeders today are still looking for the same traits that their ancestors were. These traits are the ones that allow the horse to best accomplish what the nomad asks it to do. Though they are no longer needed to fight battles or conquer the world, the horses of Chinggis khaan have changed little today genetically and many of the ancient bloodlines have been preserved.

Mares

It has been said by many herders that Mongolians love their mares the best. Much of Western breeding philosophy puts great emphasis on the quality of the stallion. “In the thoroughbred breeding industry there is the cult of the stallion. Many breeders and most buyers subscribe to the view that the better the stallion the better the foal, and that a good sire can make up for an ordinary dam.”¹⁷ The Mongolians, however, tend to think of breeding as being more equal. “They believe that the dam is just as important as the sire, and some believe her to be more important.”¹⁸ Some Mongolians think that the mare may have more influence on the quality of the foal than the stallion will. “Lots of things are determined from the dam. A daughter of a good racing stallion will give lots of

16 *Traveling by Mongolian Horse*, Bekhjargal Bayarsaikhan, page96.

17 *Mongolian Horse Talk: In the Home of the Arvaiheer*, P.Blunt, H. Robinson and Tur-Od.

fast race horses.”¹⁹

According to Mongolian tradition, a good mare is described as having: “A large head, ears like a female deer, a large womb, light movement, smaller hindquarters, large hooves and muzzle, teeth like that of a cow, thick mane and tale, thin forelock, a large utter, deep eyes, and a voice that is thin, high, and musical.”²⁰ Mares are said to be very pleasurable to ride because their movement is light and quick and they are very sensitive. But because heavy work can cause a pregnant mare to reabsorb her foal, mares are rarely ridden. In summer and autumn the mares are sometimes caught and used for a day and then returned to the herd. If the mare is not pregnant, however, she is used in a very similar way to a gelding. Mares typically have their first foal at the age of five and can reproduce until around the age of 25.

Reproduction

Reproduction on a whole for the Mongolian mares seems to run very smoothly. Of all the animals that the herders tend, the horses in the spring are by far the easiest. Sheep and cattle seem to need lots of human help to deliver and care for their offspring in early spring. The mares, however, typically have their foals on their own out on the steppe and require very little assistance. Mostly the horses are simply watched over.

When the time comes for the foals to be born the herder will keep his

18 *Mongolian Horse Talk: In the Home of the Arvaiheer*, P.Blunt, H. Robinson and Tur-Od.

19 Interview with Batulzii. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

horses closer to the camp. When the foals are very young a member of the family typically stays out to guard them at night, mainly as a protection against wolves. The new foals are considered to be symbols of joy and hope to the Mongolian people. When it comes time to catch and halter them, the first foal that was born that spring is always caught first and has a blue silk scarf tied around its neck. This shows that it is the elder and leader of the young horses and symbolizes a hope that the foals born to that year will be fast and strong.

In Western countries veterinarians play a large role in the breeding process, but in Mongolia veterinary care for horses is limited, and has not reached the realm of breeding. “In Mongolia, horse breeding has not evolved to the scientific level yet; we must instead rely on traditional ways of the nomads.”²¹ Despite the lack of veterinary care or knowledge, many of the problems that plague Western horse breeders do not seem to be an issue here.

Twins are very dangerous in horses and breeders in the Western world will usually check their mares using ultrasound. If it is discovered she has twins, the smaller one is pinched off surgically early on in the pregnancy so only one foal fetus remains. Mongolians of course are not able to check their mares, but twins here seem to never occur. Though there is some evidence in old legends that indicate that twins in horses are bad, none of the herders could ever recall a time when it has happened. “Mongolian legend tells that a horse that gives birth to twins is a very bad omen. If it happens, the two foals must be cast into a deep lake

20 Hoolvsan, Baldan. “Hoolgeen Shinj.” Sutra 17

21 Interview with Dogsuren. A veterinarian Ulaanbaatar with a specialty in Arabian Horses.

and one will be strong and swim to safety while the weak one will die. The strong one is the true foal.”²² Infertility is another issue with a number of sport horse mares but generally not with Mongolian mares. Mongolian mares are known for their fertility and though at first young mares may not have a foal every year, after a mare has had three foals there seems to be nearly a 100% fertility rate. This continues until the mares are in their twenties. Most middle age Mongolian mares give a foal every year without fail.

One problem that does occur at times in Mongolian mares and foals is rejection. Sometimes after delivery a mare will reject its foal and not allow it to nurse and will occasionally injure or even kill it. There are several things that Mongolians do to help solve this problem. First they typically keep the mare and foal close together, either in a fence or with a tie. They help the foal to nurse and try to get the mare to accept her baby. This is done by milking the mare and spreading the fresh milk on the foal, as well as cutting some of the mare’s mane or tail hair to tie near the foals head. In this way it is hoped that the mare will recognize herself and her smell on the foal and will accept it as her own. The herder will also sing special songs to the pair, primarily one called *Gorodray*. These songs are suppose to calm the mare and remind her to love her foal.

Another issue is the first foal that a young maiden mare gives birth too. This foal is often smaller and weaker then those delivered to older mares that have had several pregnancies. Because these young mares do not produce as much milk, and do not have experience in taking care of a foal, fatality rate is

²² Interview with Batdelger. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

often high. “Of 10 foals born to maiden mares in a given year, only around 5 will survive.”²³ In the Airhungai area the main reason for foal death is wolves, and these smaller weaker foals are the main fatalities.

Most Western breeders monitor their mares closely with ultrasound to ensure that they are pregnant, but this is not an option for Mongolian herders. Instead they use a variety of natural signs to tell them if their mares are pregnant. One of the simplest methods is close observation. After the foals are born the mare’s first heat, typically called the foal heat, is usually when a mare will get pregnant again for the next year. Stallions typically will only breed a mare that is ovulating, or in heat, and will never breed a pregnant mare. As soon as the stallion ignores a mare for a full heat cycle it is usually safe to assume that she is with foal. Herders who can carefully monitor their herd can usually verify which mares are pregnant and which are not. As the pregnancy progresses they are also able to tell by looking at the mare's body shape. A mare that is pregnant has a larger, fuller barrel and seems to carry more weight than a barren mares. There are also apparently a series of cowlicks that appear between the back legs when the mare is pregnant that are not found there normally.

Mongolian lore can even go a step further than Western veterinary medicine and predict the sex and quality of the foal in the womb. “When a mare walks, if the right hind leaves a deeper hoof print in the sand than the left the foal will be male, if the left is deeper than the foal will be female.”²⁴ They also look at

23 Interview with Sumyabaatar. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

24 Hoolvsan, Baldan. “Hoolgeen Shinj.” Sutra 6

the shape of the barrel when the mare is close to delivery and are able to predict the sex of the foal. Again, if it is larger to the right the foal will be a male, if it is larger to the left, female. How accurate these methods are, however, is greatly disputed. There are many legends and stories in Mongolia about old horsemen who were able to tell the quality of the future foal by just looking at a pregnant mare. Many such experts supposedly were employed by the great Chinggis Khaan, though this special ability seems to have been lost with the ages.

While the mare's primary purpose is to give foals, she is also utilized for her milk. "The mares are especially valued for their productivity: not only do they ensure the continuity of each family's herd but they are also the indispensable source of fermented milk drink called airag."²⁵ The mares typically give birth in May and will nurse their foal until a month before the next one is born, at which point they will reject their grown baby. The foals born in the spring are typically caught June 22, an auspicious day, and tied to the milking line. They will remain here until late October and the mares will be milked every two to three hours during the day. At night the foals are released to be with the mares and re-caught each morning. Mare's milk is very different from that obtained from the other milking animals. It is not creamy, and will not separate, but it has a much higher sugar content. It is said to be very nutritious and many herders described it as being very similar to human breast milk.

Stallions

Though the Mongolians place much more equal weight on the mare and stallion than some Western philosophies, the stallion is still very important. The stallion plays a dual role in the horses herd. It not only passes on its genetics to the next generation of horses, but it also leads and protects the herd. The stallion keeps the herd together, dictates where and when it moves, protects it from wolves and rival stallions, as well as leads it to food, water, and shelter. A good Mongolian stallion must have an acute sense of how to survive. “A herder really trusts his stallion, a good stallion does everything.”²⁶ Many herders remarked on their ability to predict storms, to fight off wolves, find natural minerals, find water, and to chose the best grazing land. A strong, smart stallion is invaluable to the protection and guidance of the herd and allows the horses to live on the steppe with nearly no human help. “The stallion must have good blood and a good body. To lead the herd he needs to be strong and fearless.”²⁷ This is why, of all the animals that Mongolian herders tend, the horses are the easiest and need the least amount of human care.

Because the horse herds needs less care, the herder does not have as much control over them as he does over his sheep or cow herd which he moves at least twice a day. The herders try to check on their horse herds as often as they can, but because the horses live a nearly wild existence they can sometimes disappear for several days. In this case a herder must know his stallions well and think like them to figure out where his horse herd is likely to be. “If the wind is blowing

25 *Chagi's Charge: Nadaam*, Robert McCracken.

26 Interview with Ulzibat. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

from the west, you must look for the herd to the east because they will follow the wind. A heavy storm and they will seek shelter near the mountains or trees. A hot day will bring them to the river. If the grass is poor they may head to the low lands and so on.”²⁸

Like in most western horse cultures, only the best horses are kept as stallions. While every female foal born in the herd will typically be kept for reproduction, most of the male foals born will be castrated and used as working horses. “When Mongolians select a stallion. They consider its brand, shape, swiftness, protective care of the herd, fertility, as well as its ability to withstand adverse conditions.”²⁹ The young male horses are typically castrated as three year olds, until this point they are broke to ride, tested, and carefully watched. If one with good lineage proves itself to be of good enough quality it will be kept as a stallion and its mane will never be cut. The rest of the young male horses are castrated and have their manes shaved to fit the fashion of the region.

According to Mongolian tradition a good stallion has: “large eyebrows with 5-6 eyelashes, large chest and throat, round knees and thick hooves, hindquarters like rising bread dough, a tail bone that is short and thick, a strong tongue, cowlicks between the neck and shoulder, eyes of a falcon, hocks of a baby camel, and a voice like the scream of the kite bird.”³⁰ The stallion is the glory and pride of the herder.

Stallions usually start breeding mares at 5 years old and will lead the herd

27 Interview with Zagdaa. Horse trainer in Ulzii Horoolth district.

28 Interview with Sumyabaatar. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

until they are 16 to 18 years old. Stallions tend to age faster than mares do and die younger. As they get older they also lose some of their physical ability to fight off wolves and younger stallions and so rarely lead a herd into their twenties. An average stallion will typically lead 15 to 20 mares and any number of geldings and young horses in their herd. If the stallion is of very high quality, such as a fast racing stallion that has a good racing record, they will breed only 5-6 mares a year. It is believed that if a stallion breeds too many mares he will become weak and the foals produced will be of lower quality.

Racing stallions continue to compete until they reach their teens. When they are being trained they are caught each day and released each night to go back to their herd. When they are absent the herd is led by the older geldings and a few smart mares, though it requires much more looking after from the herder. A herd without a stallion may disperse and join various other herds.

Breeding in Mongolia, as in the West is a game of odds. Even with a good stallion and a good mare, you are never guaranteed to produce a good foal; you just have a better chance. Even if a cross has produced a good foal once, it may produce a very different foal the next time. "If you cross the same mare and stallion and get many foals, they may come from the same blood, but they can be good at different things, some for riding, some for herding, some for racing. It just depends, you never know until you see how they grow up."³¹

29 *The Horses of Chinggis Khaan*, by: D. Erdenekhuyag. Page 18.

30 Hoolvsan, Baldan. "Hoolgeen Shinj." Sutra 6

Bloodlines

Bloodlines are important to horse breeders around the world and it is no different in Mongolia. “The bloodlines of the horse are often a good indicator of his quality and potential strengths and weaknesses.”³² Herders may only choose to leave one of their three year olds as a stallion about every other year. Generally most of the male horses end up as gelding. When they choose to leave a horse as a stallion this horse will always be sold or given to a relative. Herders never pick stallions from their own herd to run their mares because the genetics are too close and the chances of inbreeding are too high. The general rule with both people and horses in Mongolia is that breeding should not take place if the two are related closer than seven generations away. One of the key elements in Mongolian breeding is crossing horses with different blood. A stallion of different genetics is always brought in to lead the herd of more closely related females.

When a herder looks for a stallion to lead his herd he will often try to buy one from a different area of Mongolia. Though the Mongolian breed is similar across Mongolia, there are some differences in horses from different regions. The horses from mountain areas tend to be larger, with more stocky bodies, thicker legs, and are known for their strength and hardiness. They also tend to have more white and gray colors and are found to be more aggressive. The horses from the east are smaller with thinner legs, hard muscles and a longer body. They are renowned for their speed and produce some of the best race horses. Horses from the

31 Interview with Gombodig. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

32 Racing Fixtures, the Online Racing Resource. “A Stallion.”

Gobi region are primarily brown and smaller, though very hardy and can live on a lower quality of grass in harsh weather. They are known for being patient and kind. The horses from the west are considered very pretty and fashionable, with shorter necks and long ears and a wide variety of colors and painted horses.

Most herders believe that these differences are due to the exact environments that these horses have lived in for generations. Natural selection favors the horses that are best suited to the terrain, weather, soil, and grasses of a particular region. For example, horses from wetter, softer areas are known to have larger, softer hooves, while horses from the rocky regions have stronger narrower hooves. As one herder women explained it, “On the eastern steppe the grasses are sweet, and the blades are tall and thin. That is why the horses from that area are very fashionable and fast with tall narrow legs and more slender bodies. The grasses in our mountain region are salty and the blades are thicker and tougher. This is why our horses are very strong with big tough bodies and thick legs.”³³

There is some concern that horses brought from a different region may have difficulty surviving in a new area, because their bodies are not as perfectly adapted to it. Despite this, most herders agree that it is very good to cross horses from these different regions in Mongolia because their blood is more distant. The thought is that crossing mares and stallions with distinct genetics leads to higher quality horses. For these reasons people will often bring in stallions from a considerable distance away to breed with their mares.

A stallion will breed with the same mares for a number of years. Some

herders change their stallions every four years, some every fourteen; some leave the stallion until he dies. Some sell or castrate their old stallions and others just divide their horses into more herds when a new stallion is acquired. It often depends on the herder's economic situation, whether he is breeding race horses, or how good his stallions are. Most of the time a family will have several stallions; in this case they may change mares to different herds if they are interested in different crosses. No matter what the system, it is always important that female foals from a stallion be moved to a different herd when they reach breeding age to prevent inbreeding. An interesting trait of Mongolian stallions is that they will never breed their own offspring. “When their fillies reach breeding age the stallion will usually force them out of his herd.”³⁴ This naturally leads to greater genetic variation.

Passing on the Tradition

Mongolian boys generally learn to herd and manage horses from their father or other relatives. They learn through listening, watching, and imitating. As nomads children are around horses all the time and it is simply a matter of doing as their fathers have done for generations before them. “My father was a horse herder and since my childhood I helped him. This is how I learned”³⁵ Men typically begin a horse herd of their own when they get married. The start and base of their herd is usually several mares given to them by their fathers at the

33 Interview with Batdelger. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

34 Interview with Duuriimaa. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

time of their wedding. These mares will usually run with the parent herd until the new family can acquire a stallion of their own.

Because herders typically keep their mares and bring in stallions from afar, as well as pass on mares to future generations, Mongolian bloodlines are all kept on the female side. In many herds three or four generations of mares will be living together, a great-grandmother to her great-granddaughter. “Mares live long enough to see their first fillies grow old.”³⁶ These same female bloodlines have been kept in families further back than anyone can remember. For generations and generations fathers have handed mares down to their sons and in doing so have preserved unique family bloodlines that are continually crossed with stallions of foreign genetics to get good quality horses. Because these bloodlines have been preserved, family herds often carry some distinctive traits, such as color, unusual markings, attitude, body shape, or movement that is carried down the female line and shows up in many of the foals.

In Western breeding society much importance is placed on a horse's papers. For each horse, bloodlines are painstakingly recorded back for generations and a horse's pedigree and papers can play a large part of determining its worth, particularly in the case of young, untested horses. Horses must often be registered in a breed that tests for quality, and suitable crosses, such as in the American racing industry, are researched and determined on paper by looking at the bloodlines of numerous past generations. In Mongolia, however, things are

35 Interview with Ganbaatar. Horse Trainer in Ulzii Horoolth district.

36 Interview with Jargalsaikhan. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

different. Because of excellent oral tradition and memory, the paper form of recording bloodlines was never created. The Mongolian herders know each and every one of their horses by sight, often from a considerable distance. The herders show incredible feats of memory for the family trees of each horse in their herd, minus the stallion. They can typically trace back for any one of their horses 4-8 generations entirely by memory. Because herds are managed within a family this knowledge is passed on. Individual horses are remembered and with in the herd a herder knows exactly who is related to whom and how.

To distinguish their horses herders do not use names as we do in Western cultures. One of the main reasons for naming, numbering and registering breeding animals in the Western breeding circuits is to be able to record bloodlines. In Mongolia, because herds are kept within families, the methods for remembering bloodlines do not need to be universal. Because families personally manage the bloodlines within their own herds, the information does not need to be in a form that can be shared with strangers. Herders remember their horses not by names, but instead use detailed descriptions of color, markings, body type, sex, age, brands and scars. In the Mongolian language there are over 500 terms referring to horse color. Using this extensive vocabulary any horse in a herd can be unmistakably identified.

Socialist Era

During the socialist era in Mongolia, from 1924 to 1990, the breeding traditions of the Mongolian herders were forced to change in many ways. When

Mongolia was under socialist control animals were owned primarily by the state, and not by the individual herders. Herders were organized into collective communities known as *Negdels* that would care for state owned animals and in return receive and salary as well as other services and goods. State horses were herded in large numbers by designated horse herders instead of being kept by individual families. The age old tradition of owning and passing down large horse herders from father to son was upset.

Despite these changes, the traditional family bloodlines were not lost completely. Herder families were allowed to own 50 animals privately. Anything over this limit had to be turned over to the state. Most families kept a few of each type of animal and usually owned between 10-15 horses. It was through these smaller herds that ancient bloodlines were preserved, once again through the female side. Despite this, in the large state herds many genetics were mixed and family herds lost.

During the collective herding of state owned horses, the soviets started a program that appeared to be the beginnings of a breed registry. They recorded the herd, its location and the herder who cared for them. Within the herd, they organized the horses into categories and gave each of them a number along with a physical description. When new foals were born, they were written into the registry and given a number. The purpose behind this registry was to more efficiently recognize and locate missing animals.

With the democratic revolution of 1991, the animals were privatized. During the privatization herder families once again were given their own horse

herds. The number of horses that the state gave them depended on the number of people in their family and their ages. Some families were allowed to privatize horses that had once been part of their family herd, thereby continuing their family bloodlines. Many families started new bloodlines after privatizations that are being continued today in the traditional manner.

It seems that despite the soviet interruption, horse herding in Mongolia has in many ways reverted right back to its traditional past. People are once again managing their family bloodlines as they have for generations. The breed registry died with the soviet era and horses are now only remembered by those who care for them.

Crossbreeding

While most breeders in the countryside continue to breed horses in the traditional way there is a small sector in the Mongolian racing world that is trying something new. These people are importing foreign horses to cross with the Mongolian breed. These foreign horses are typically imported from Russia and sometimes China, they consist of Thoroughbreds, Arabians, and Budyonnies (Russian Military horse) and are typically stallions. These foreign stallions are being crossed with Mongolian mares to produce crossed racing horses.

It turns out that these foreign and crossed horses are different in a number of ways from the native Mongolian horses. They are much larger, with longer legs, and a more modern body structure. Unlike the Mongolian horses they have not evolved to surviving in Mongolia and have great difficulty in the harsh

climate. “Foreign horses have thinner coats and much faster metabolisms.”³⁷

They need a higher quality and quantity of food to survive than the Mongolian horses do. They also do not have the instincts, like finding good grazing land, minerals, and shelter, that allow horses to survive on the steppe. If put out with a Mongolian herd to live traditionally on the steppe, a large percent of foreign and crossed horses simply die.

In order to keep these horses in Mongolia they must be kept in barns or fenced shelters and fed extra food, nearly all year around. Where Mongolian horses find all their own food, these horses are fed hay and grain everyday simply to maintain a healthy weight. They occasionally wear blankets against the cold, or are kept in heated barns. To keep them healthy, they are given extra vitamins and minerals, as well as other veterinary and farrier care. Because of this, some breeders think that Mongolians should concentrate on crossing only native Russian horses because these horses are from a similar climate to Mongolia and would be better able to survive. The problem is that they do not have as high a quality as many Arabians and Thoroughbreds.

Many of the race trainers also remarked on how different these horses are to work with. Not only do they require more food and care, they require different training as well. They are much more fragile than the sturdy Mongolian horses and are prone to injuries, but they are also bred to be athletes. “They cannot work as hard, and you have to be very careful with them. They get tired and weak easily, but they also get in shape much faster than the Mongolian horses. It takes

³⁷ Interview with Battegsh. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

less time to train them for races.”³⁸ They also have very different personalities. While the Mongolian horses are steady, patient, and stand offish. The foreign horses are skittish, sensitive and very friendly with people. “These horses are always around people. Mongolian horses are still wild; we use them and then set them free. They don't like to be touched.”³⁹ Unlike the Mongolian horses, they are use to relying on humans for their survival. “Mongolian horses are easier to work with because it is what we are use to.”⁴⁰

Compared to Mongolian horses, these foreign horses are also breed for a much more specific purpose. A Mongolian herd contains horses that are used for many different purposes, nice looking horses for festivals, herding horses, distance horses, racing horse, yet all of these horses are from the same blood. A race horse can be used for other purposes. “When our horses are finished racing, we just use them for daily life.”⁴¹ When it comes to crossed horses this is not the case. Other then their use as race horses these horses are good for little else. They do not have the hardiness or durability to be used as common working horse in Mongolia.

These horses are also very expensive. Because they are imported and are of quality foreign bloodlines the stallions are very expensive to purchase and transport to Mongolia. This makes their crossed foals worth much more. One English Thoroughbred stallion that I visited was purchased for over 30,000 Euros and then imported to Mongolia. This is much greater then the price of most

38 Interview with Battegsh. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

39 Interview with Tserenxhuu, Horse herder in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

Mongolian horses.

There are also issues with the reproduction of these crossed horses. Many of these foreign breeds are quite large, around 16 hands. The stallions that are imported are being bred to Mongolian mares that are much smaller, only 12-14 hands. “The mare owner should consider the size of the stallion, as larger stallions will tend to produce large offspring. A small mare may therefore not be a good cross with a large stallion, as she may have foaling problems due to the great size of her foal.”⁴² The crossed foals are quite large, much bigger than a normal Mongolian foal. This leads to very difficult deliveries. Because herders usually just let their mares foal by themselves in the steppe and they rarely have problems, there is a lack of knowledge of what to do when delivery problems do occur.

It has been suggested that perhaps people should be importing foreign bred mares to breed with Mongolian stallions. They would be bigger horses bearing smaller foals than what they are built for, thereby eliminating the delivery complications. The issue with this is economic. An imported mare can only bare one crossed foal a year, while an imported stallion can produce more than ten. There is also a worry that the foreign mares will be weak, from the climate and living in a fence and therefore they will not produce good foals. “Foreign mares do not survive here well, while Mongolian mares can go to pasture the natural

40 Interview with Batbiar. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

41 Interview with Batulzii. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

42 Racing Fixtures, the Online Racing Resource. “A Stallion.”

way when pregnant with a cross foal and give birth to a strong healthy baby.”⁴³

Some breeders are now trying to select Mongolian mares that are capable of bearing larger foals and are having veterinarians measure womb and pelvis size. In the future, breeders are hoping to breed crossed horses to each other. Because they will be of more equal size delivery problems should be greatly reduced.

Competing Crossbreds

With all the issues and expenses involved in crossbreeding there would seem to be no point in doing it in Mongolia, except for one thing. These horses are fast. For past generation Mongolian horses were influenced more by natural selection than by human induced selective breeding. They were evolving on the steppe in nearly wild conditions. Things with foreign breeds were different. Breeds like the Thoroughbred and the Arabian have been selectively bred for centuries. Their bloodlines and pedigrees have been painstakingly recorded and horses were bred and crossed looking for performance and speed above all else.

“The English Thoroughbred is one of the best horses in the world because they have had good careful breeding in England for centuries. I want this good blood for my horses.”⁴⁴ These horses were not bred to be working horses like those utilized by the Mongolian nomads; these horses were bred to be sport horses. They are high end athletes. “They look nice, their legs, body, and head are fine and beautiful. They are graceful and light and their movement is so free

43 Interview with Dogsuren. A veterinarian Ulaanbaatar with a specialty in Arabian Horses.
11/25/08

compared to our horses. I love to watch them.”⁴⁵“The Arabian horses have high qualifications; they have a much larger lung capacity, and stronger bones. During exercise their bodies work at a fast rate and recover much better. They are a good choice for a racehorse cross.”⁴⁶

Maybe it would seem more reasonable for Mongolians to simply import and race pure blood foreign horse and not bother crossbreeding. There are several reasons, however, for crossing these horses with the Mongolian breed. First of all there is a rule in Mongolian racing that dictates that only horses that are at least 50% Mongolian blood can compete. The Mongolian races are also different from other racing. “The distance of the longest horse race in Mongolia is 30 km, and this is raced by adult horses over 5 and stallions. First, however, horses must go to the starting point at a mild trot, so the total distance becomes 60km. The classes and distances of races are as follows: 4 year olds- 22km, 3 year olds- 18km, and 2 year olds- 15km.”⁴⁷ Thoroughbreds, for example, are bred mostly for short racing, usually no more than 2 miles. To do well in the races they need Mongolian blood for endurance.

When the crossed horses compete they tend to race very differently than the Mongolian horses. It appears that their short distance blood comes through. They tend to always lead at the beginning of the race, starting off fast, but then tend to have problems fading towards the end. It is similar to the fable of the turtle in the hare. The crossed horses are fast, but don't always carry through,

44 Interview with Dshegsuren. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

45 Interview with Batbiar. Horse owner in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

while the pure breed Mongolian horses are slow and steady. “Towards the end of the race the crossed horse’s heads get lower and their ears begin to droop. They get so weak and tired in the last kilometers.”⁴⁸ Competition between the two shows that the crossed horses almost always win the shorter distance races run by younger horses, but with the long distance horses the competition is much closer and often favors the Mongolian horses, who seem to hold up better to the longer distances that test endurance more than speed.

Future of Crossbreeding

Crossbreeding in Mongolia is very new. It has only been happening for 4-5 years and only the first few foal crops have reached an age where they can be performance tested. The Mongolians who are breeding these horses are essentially trying to create a new breed. At this point, with only the first few generations of foals, it is still very much a guessing game. As one trainer put it, “You never know what you are going to get we are just crossing and seeing what happens.”⁴⁹ Like any selective breeding, such as that used to create breeds like the Thoroughbred and the Arabian, the process takes time and patience. It is a matter of trial and error.

The future of the crossbred horse in Mongolia is still not clear. As more horses are bred and tested those with the most competitive genes will be selected

46 Interview with Dogsuren. A veterinarian Ulaanbaatar with a specialty in Arabian Horses.

47 *The Horses of Chinggis Khaan*, by: D. Erdenekhuyag. Page 32.

48 Interview with Dshegsuren. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

49 Interview with Barbaatar. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

as breeding animals. Many breeders are hoping to cross back to the Mongolian horses, creating horses that are only ¼ foreign blood or less. By doing this they hope to create a horse that can survive in the Mongolian climate without special care and hold up to the longer distances, while still maintaining the competitive edge. The hope is that with time and more breeding the Mongolian horses can pass on their strength, endurance, and durability to the crossed breed.

As time goes on it is hoped that the crossbred horses will improve in quality. The breeders are hoping to produce a breed that can compete at the longer distances by combining the speed and the endurance of two distinct breeds. One day they may even be able to survive on the Mongolian steppe on their own. “Now in races everyone is able to recognize which horses are crossed and which are Mongol. In a few years the blood will be more spread and with more breeding back to Mongolian horses people will no longer be able to tell so easily, they will just be better horses. They are improving the quality over all.”⁵⁰

Cross breeders are trying to develop a Mongolian race horse that would be able to compete internationally and would have merit in the world wide equestrian community. “Mongolian horse herders want to create a Mongolian horse that can compete outside of Mongolia; the crossed horses are giving us an opportunity to do this. They are improving the quality, and we are developing a brand new kind of horse.”⁵¹ Just as Mongolia is making a stand in the world on its own and becoming much more involved internationally, the horse world is hoping

50 Interview with Batbiar. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

51 Interview with Geremele. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

to do the same. The pure breed Mongolian horse would not disappear, cross breeders claim. It is too valuable as a working horse to the herders, but this new horse would be what Mongolian race horses have evolved to. “In the future not all Mongolian horses need to have crossed blood, less pure bred Mongolian horses is not the goal, we are just trying to develop a new Mongolian race horse.”⁵²

If Mongolia really hopes to create a new sport horse breed with international merit, it is predicted that more Western breeding styles maybe adopted. Like in the West, breeding may no longer take place just amongst horses owned by one person. Good stallions may be owned by an individual and crossed with a mare owned by another for a negotiated stud fee. There are a few cases of this beginning in Mongolia already. Breeding may become much more of an economic area then it is traditionally. Because more will be invested into each foal, breeding in the future may also rely more heavily on veterinary medicine and scientific techniques then on tradition.

If breeders wish to compete these new horses outside of Mongolia, or export them to foreign buyers, some sort of breed registry must also be established. In this case part of a horse’s value will be attributed to its bloodlines and this information must be made universal. If Mongolia wishes to join the international horse world then their horses must have pedigrees and papers. Many of the stallions being imported into Mongolia already come with their breed papers, so it is simply a matter of the keeping track and establishing bloodlines of

⁵² Interview with Tsendayush. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

their own.

People Affected

This new surge of crossbreeding is of course having an effect on the racing community in Mongolia. It is a topic surrounded by controversy. In races near the capital crossed horses are winning all but the longest distances and many people are complaining that it is not fair. Racing has always been a sport that anyone with some horses could participate in. Herders have always just trained horses out of their herds to compete in local Naadams and other small races. Now with the crossbreed horses, the average horses just can't compete. Because crossed horses are so expensive to purchase and take care of, the average trainers and herders cannot afford to have them. This phenomenon is changing racing into a sport of the elite. Only people who can afford to breed and care for crossed horses are winning. Race fans also complain that races are not exciting anymore, now the crossed horses are always taking the lead, it is hardly even a competition at the shorter distances.

This is also having an interesting effect on employment in the racing industry. In the past race horse trainers, owned, breed, and cared for their own horses. Now that wealthy business owners are buying race horses there has been a new division of labor. Most of the owners of the crossed horses live in Ulaanbaatar and hire different people to care for, train, and race their horses. This system is very similar to the one we see in Western racing circuits.

While some people view this as a deviation from tradition racing that was once a sport for the ordinary herder, others see it as a good thing. “The division of labor is okay, money in the system creates jobs and allows for higher quality horses, more people can receive honor for a good horse, the trainer, the jockey, and the owner. These people can afford to buy very good quality horses and this is improving the breed on a whole.”⁵³ If this continues then less people will be owning and training their own horses for the races, and fewer wealthier owners will be hiring trainers, jockeys, and caretakers for their horses. The system will look much like that in American racing.

Future of Racing

Because the phenomenon of crossbreeding is so new most of its effects are concentrated outside of the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. In the rest of Mongolia traditional racing and breeding is still strong, yet even people in these areas are wondering about the future. No one seems to be sure of the outcome, but everyone has his theory and opinion. Most people seem to agree that crossbreeding will spread; these horses have shown that they are very competitive and every trainer wants to own horses that win.

Many people suggest that perhaps the racing format will be changed. Because the older Mongolian horses are still competitive at the longer distances two different racing circuits may develop, long and short racing. Others suggest that completely separate races may be instigated, in this way crossed horses

⁵³ Interview with Batulzii. Horse trainer in the Uuzii Horoolth district.

would only compete against each other and there would still be traditional Mongolian races for purebreds. On the other hand, many of the crossed horse trainers think that two separate levels of racing will develop, without a strict rule change. One will be an elite circuit and will involved mainly crossed horses and the other will be at a more local level where herders will enter their Mongolian horses in smaller races as they always have. This is similar to the situation that we see today.

Many of the Mongolians that would like to see changes to the racing rules are pessimistic. “The owners of the crossed horses are all very wealthy and are members of the racing board and have a lot of power. They want to see their horses win Naadam against all the Mongolian horses, so they have no incentive to change the rules.”⁵⁴ As crossbreeding is perfected and generations of foals continue to improved many anticipate that the pure breed Mongolian horse will no longer be competitive at even the longest distances. “Of course there will be trouble between those who crossbreed and those who don't. This is a problem with no solution yet. There use to be much more emphasis on good training, now it just depends on bloodlines.”⁵⁵“This use to be everyone's sport.”⁵⁶

While some foresee the end of traditional Mongolian racing as the competitive circuit looks more and more like those seen in Western societies, others are calmer. “No where in the world is there racing like there is in Mongolia. In the West 12, maybe 20 horses race at the same time. In Mongolia

54 Interview with Geremele. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

55 Interview with Batbayer. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

hundreds of horses race together, it is amazing. Racing here is not just about winning; it is about being a part of something, for honor and for fun. Hundreds of herders train race horses for their local Naadams, not necessarily to win, but just to enter. Racing is something everyone wants to be apart of. This will not change. This is a huge community sport for the average Mongolian and will not be taken over by the elite.”⁵⁷

While there appears to be plenty of drawbacks to crossbreeding in Mongolia, others see it as a very good thing. They are excited and hopeful. They believe that they are improving the Mongolian breed. “Some of the best horse blood in the world is being imported into Mongolia and it will do good things for the horses here. This is requiring everyone to raise the quality of their race horses.”⁵⁸

Not Far From Tradition

While it may seem that crossbreeding is a radical change from traditional Mongolian horse breeding, in many ways it is just an extension of it. In traditional herd management the mares are always kept and the stallions are brought from a different herd with separate genetics. The crossbreeding practices that we see in Mongolia are also keeping their Mongolian mares and bringing in stallions from a different place. Instead of a different soum or aimag, in this case it is a different country, but it follows the same philosophies.

56 Interview with Tsendayush. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

57 Interview with Batbiar. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

The breeders are also practicing one of the most important rules for traditionally breeding good horses, which is to cross horses of different blood. The idea that horses of different genetics will produce good foals has led them to looking for different breeds that are genetically distant from the Mongolian breed. The blood in this case is about as different as it can be. From herders on the steppe bringing in a stallion from a different herd, to importing English Thoroughbreds, perhaps this is simply the evolution of horse breeding.

There is a widespread concern among herders today that the quality of the Mongolian horse is decreasing. Most can remember from childhood, or from stories of their grandparents, that in the past the Mongolian horses were superior to those found today. “People say horses use to live longer, were stronger, and could work harder; you could ride them more. The horses now get tired faster and are weaker. They use to be much better 100 years ago.”⁵⁹ There is no clear reason for why this is happening, though people have their theories. A few believe that this is occurring because people have lost the ancient knowledge of how to breed good horses. Others offer that the horses role in Mongolia is changing, which is causing differences in the horse itself. “Many people have cars now and the quality of the common horse is decreasing because it does not have to work as hard.”⁶⁰ But the most popular theory is that the actual environment of Mongolia is changing. Because of global warming, climate change, natural disasters and pasture degradation, the quality and quantity of grasses available for grazing has

58 Interview with Tsendayush. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

59 Interview with Namkhia. Herder near Bolgan soum, Arhungai.

decreased and this is affecting the horses.

Herders and horse trainers are not sure about the future of the Mongolian horse. “Because of global warming maybe in the future the Mongolian horses will be lighter colors, with thinner manes and tails. Their patience will decrease. Now people are breeding for different reasons, racing or meat, and the Mongolian horse is becoming specialized. It was never this way before.”⁶¹ People continue to compare horses to the past and look for answers in ancestral knowledge, but frequently none are found. The problems affecting Mongolian horses today are unique to the modern era and to find solutions herders are having to look forward instead of to their past traditions.

It could be that this effort to bring in new blood and quality in the form of crossbreeding is an effort to counteract these effects. The breeders are trying to reverse this downward trend and improve their horses through genetics. If it is true that they have lost the old methods, then they are willing to try something new to get better horses. For those who are not crossbreeding, they simply hope that in years to come there will be enough good grass to give them good foals and perhaps these trends will reverse. They pick the best stallions that they can and hope for horses that are good and strong.

Horse breeding, like most things, is never stagnant. People are never satisfied to simply do things the way their ancestors have always done; it is human nature to try to do it better. To improve upon what has been done before.

60 Interview with Erdenbat. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

61 Interview with Erdenbat. Horse trainer in the Ulzii Horoolth district.

In Mongolia there has been a new push in all animal husbandry in the last decade to try to educate people that it is better to have fewer animals of higher quality than it is to have more animals of lower quality. “Since privatization knowledge is improving. Herders are concentrating more on breeding and there is a push to improve over all quality.”⁶² In many ways this has carried over to horse breeding.

Research in the next ten to twenty years on horses in Mongolia is going to be fascinating. It is simply too soon for us to really predict what will happen with the new crossbreeding phenomenon and how this will affect racing. There is talk of a new breed with international merit, but we have yet to see if and how this will be accomplished. Continued research in this area will be valuable as we observe how Western techniques are continually fused with traditional ones. Whatever the outcome maybe, we can be sure that it will be uniquely Mongolian.

If there is one thing that I have discovered while interviewing the horse people of Mongolia, it is that even herders in the countryside who are still breeding pure breed Mongolian horses in traditional ways are continually thinking and questioning about new and better ways to do it. People are trying to improve the quality of their horses as they have since the horse was first domesticated and they are starting from what they know and learning as they go. Let us hope that the manes of future Mongolian stallions will always be able to carry the spirit and power of the horse herd, whether they are purebred or not.

62 Interview with Dogsuren. A veterinarian Ulaanbaatar with a specialty in Arabian Horses.

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Glossary of Terms

Arabian- one of a breed of horses, raised originally in Arabia, noted for intelligence, grace, and speed.



Bloodlines - Direct line of descent; pedigree.

Budyonny - a breed of horse from Russia. They were developed for use as a military horse following the Russian Revolution and are currently used as an all-purpose competition horse and for driving.

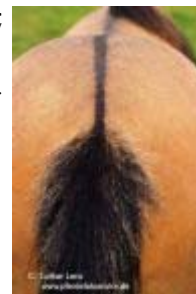


Colt- a male horse of not more than four years of age

Crossbreeding- to produce (a hybrid); hybridize. To produce an organism that is the offspring of genetically dissimilar parents or stock; especially offspring produced by breeding animals of different varieties or breeds;

Dam- Female parent of an animal, especially domestic livestock.

Dorsal Stripe- a dark stripe down the middle of a horse's back following the spine.



Draft Animal - an animal used for pulling heavy loads.

Eventing - is an equestrian event which comprises dressage, Cross-Country, and show-jumping. This event has its roots as



a comprehensive cavalry test requiring mastery of several types of riding. It covers every aspect of horsemanship: the harmony between horse and rider that characterize Dressage; the contact with nature, stamina and extensive experience essential for the Cross-Country; the precision, agility and technique involved in show-Jumping.

Farrier- a specialist in equine hoof care, including the trimming and balancing of a horse's hoof and the placing of shoes to the horse's foot.



Filly- a young female horse.

Foal -The young offspring of a horse or other equine animal, especially one under a year old.

Forelock- A lock of hair that grows from or falls on the forehead, especially the part of a horse's mane that falls forward between the ears.

Gelding- castrated male horse

Hands- A four inch measurement used to calculate the height of horse or pony at the top of the shoulder (withers). A hand is the approximate width of a man's hand



Heat - a state of sexual excitement immediately preceding ovulation. This expression applies to most female mammals and indicates the period when the animal is fertile and most receptive to mating.

Maiden Mare- A mare that has never given birth to a foal.

Mare- A fully mature female horse.



Naadam- traditional type of festival in Mongolia. The festival is also locally termed "eriin gурvan naadam" (эрийн гурван наадам) "the three games of men". The games are Mongolian Wrestling, Horse Racing, and Archery and are held throughout the country during the midsummer holidays.

Ovoo- (овоо, *heap*) is a type of shamanistic cairn found in Mongolia, usually made from rocks or from wood. Ovos are often found at the top of mountains and in high places, like mountain passes. They serve mainly as religious sites, used in worship of the mountains and the sky as well as in Buddhist ceremonies



Pony- a small horse with a specific conformation and temperament. There are many different breeds of ponies. Compared to horses, ponies often exhibit thicker manes, tails and overall coat, as well as proportionally shorter legs, wider barrels, heavier bone, thicker necks, and shorter heads with broader foreheads. They must be under 14.3 hands tall.

Paint/Pinto-- marked with spots of white and other colors; mottled; spotted: a *pinto horse*.



Phenotype - The observable physical or biochemical characteristics of an organism, as determined by both genetic makeup and environmental influences.

Prezwwalski Horse- the last remaining wild species of horses and the closest living wild relative of the domestic horse. The Mongolian name for these horses is "takhi," which means "spirit". Horses are central to Mongolian culture, and are a symbol of their national heritage.



Roach Back- A true roach back will have an upward curvature of the spine located generally between the shoulder and hip.



Sire- The male parent of an animal, especially a domesticated mammal such as a horse.

Spirit Banner- carried by Mongolia warrior-herders, called asulde, constructed by tying strands of hair from his best stallions to the shaft of a spear, just below its blade. Whenever he erected his camp, the warrior planted the Spirit Banner outside the entrance to proclaim his identity and to stand as his perpetual guardian.



Stallion- An adult male horse that has not been castrated, especially one kept for breeding.

Thoroughbred - one of a breed of horses, to which racehorses belong, originally developed in England by crossing Arabian stallions with European mares. It is the fastest short distance racehorse in the world.



Wind Horse- (Khii mori) is an allegory for the human soul in the shamanistic tradition of Central Asia. The origins of the wind horse can be found in the region of Mongolia as a component of Tengriism, and in Tibet in the Bon faith. The Turco-Mongolian legend reports of a magical horse, which was born as a foal with



eight legs and the ability to fly. The wind horse was the spiritual child of a shaman woman named Chichek, and should help her to escape the reign of an evil Khan. This succeeds only after his death, when it appears in Chicheks dream and carries her away. In Mongolian representations, the wind horse is usually shown with wings. *Khiimori* represents the inner strength of a human, his soul. This strength helps to find the balance between father sky (old Turkic: Tengri, Mongolian: *Tenger*) and mother earth.

Zebra Stripes- Distinctive leg markings that are often found on Takhi, as well as on some domesticated horses.



All definitions taken from Wikipedia.org (2008) and Dictionary.com (2008)

Example of American Thoroughbred Pedigree

UNCLE JOE BOY (USA) dkb/br. G, 2001 DP = 6-9-7-0-0 (22) DI = 5.29 CD = 0.95 - 14
Starts, 0 Wins, 0 Places, 0 Shows **Career Earnings:** \$1,642

PRIVATE TERMS (USA) dkb/br. 1985	PRIVATE ACCOUNT (USA) b. 1976	DAMASCUS (USA) b. 1964 [IC]	SWORD DANCER (USA) ch. 1956	SUNGLOW (USA) ch. 1947	
		NUMBERED ACCOUNT (USA) * b. 1969	KERALA (USA) * b. 1958	HIGHLAND FLING (USA) br. 1950	
			BUCKPASSER (USA) b. 1963 [C]	MY BABU (FR) b. 1945 [B]	
		LAUGHTER (USA) gr. 1970	BOLD RULER (USA) br. 1954 [BI]	INTRIGUING (USA) * ch. 1964	BLADE OF TIME (USA) br. 1938
				NASRULLAH (GB) b. 1940 [B]	TOM FOOL (USA) b. 1949 [IC]
			SHENANIGANS (USA) * gr. 1963	MISS DISCO (USA) * b. 1944	BUSANDA (USA) blk. 1947 *
	NATIVE DANCER (USA) gr. 1950 [IC]			SWAPS (USA) ch. 1952	
	BOLD IRISH (USA) * b. 1948			GLAMOUR (USA) b. 1953 *	
	ERIN (USA) b. 1927 *			NEARCO (ITY) br. 1935 [BC]	
	LISAS TYPE 1989	RAJA BABA (USA) b. 1968	MISS DISCO (USA) * b. 1944	MUMTAZ BEGUM (IRE) b. 1932 *	
			BOLD RULER (USA) br. 1954 [BI]	DISCOVERY (USA) ch. 1931 [S]	
			MISSY BABA (USA) * b. 1958	OUTDONE (USA) b. 1936	
WELL DECORATED (USA) dkb/br. 1978		PARIS BREEZE (USA) dkb/br. 1971	NATIVE DANCER (USA) gr. 1950 [IC]	POLYNESIAN (USA) br. 1942 [!]	
			MAJESTIC PRINCE (USA) ch. 1966	GEISHA (USA) gr. 1943 *	
		TUDOR JET (USA) * dkb/br. 1964	RAISE A NATIVE (USA) ch. 1961 [B]	FIGHTING FOX (USA) b. 1935	
		PRECIOUS LADY (USA) b. 1952 *	UVIRA (GB) dkb/br. 1938 *		

	HOT FOOD (USA) b. 1974	ACK ACK (USA) br. 1966 [1C]	BATTLE JOINED (USA) b. 1959	ARMAGEDDON (USA) ETHEL WALKER (USA)	b. 1949 b. 1953	
			FAST TURN (USA) b. 1959	TURN-TO (IRE) CHEROKEE ROSE (USA)	b. 1951 [BI] b. 1951 *	
			LOYAL RULER (USA) b. 1966	GALLANT MAN (GB) b. 1954 [BI]	MIGOLI (IRE) MAJDEH (GB)	gr. 1944 ch. 1939 *
				TOUT A L'HEURE (USA) br. 1952	EIGHT THIRTY (USA) TEDMELIA (USA)	ch. 1936 [I] br. 1935