

Paso Finos in Ireland

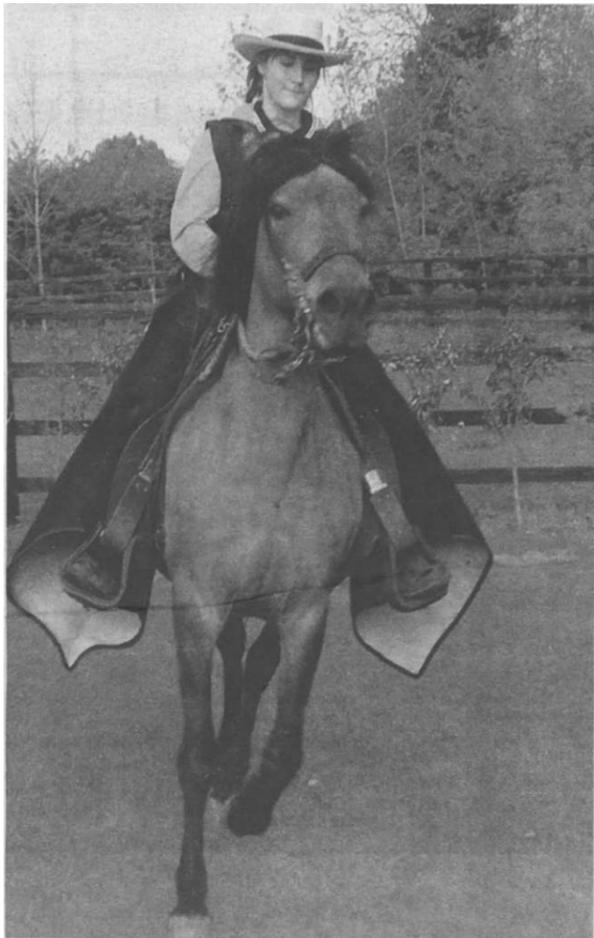
By John Cully

DESCENDED from the amblers of ages past when roads were rough and rutted and saddle horses were the only feasible mode of transport other than wagons, and people thus needed horses that would give them as comfortable a ride as could be managed, we have today a wide variety of gaited horses. Here are found such as Tennessee Walkers, Kentucky Saddlebreds, Missouri Foxtrotters, Racking Horses and other North American types. We have too Mangalarga Marchados and Marwaris (yes; their ears touch lyre-like above their heads, the very same). In South America there are to be found Peruvian and Columbian Pasos. From the Caribbean, mainly from Puerto Rico, we have now in Europe the true Fino, possibly the definitive representative of the type of 'Fine Step' or 'Fine Pace' horse to be seen today.

If you have never seen Finos in action it can be a surprise, not unlike the sensation you might feel the first time you have ever heard an alto voice at full throttle. There you are in the auditorium with choir and orchestra giving it out good-oh and next thing you know here is this big powerful guy up on his hind legs, on cue, and apparently singing in a woman's voice. However, in no time at all it dawns on you that, unexpected though it may be, this is nevertheless natural. It is actually the highest normally occurring man's voice; its all just a matter of fixed ideas, the letting go of same, really. Thus is it also with Finos; you watch, initially astonished, but as you do so it seems more and more graceful, elegant and natural with every passing minute. Letting go of fixed ideas, you see. More than one way to do things, capice?.

Organisationally there is a world governing body, or at any rate a body approximating to this, called The Paso Fino Horse Association, or P.F.H.A., headquartered in Lexington, Kentucky. Within this there are operative a number of Regional Groups, such as the Piedmont, the Northeast, the Northwest, the Deep South, the California... In Europe a collegiate organisation has grown up since 2000 called the Paso Fino Association of Europe, or P.F.A.E., based in Markt Nordheim, Germany. The European organisation and the American one, naturally enough, work harmoniously together and the European one is also an accepted registry for these horses. Under the aegis of this European association there is a growing calendar of events, culminating in the European Championships held at the superb facilities at Rieden/Kreuth, near Amberg in the Oberpfalz or Upper Palatinate, in what is now northern Bavaria. These are not, however, as yet held annually, and the next one is in 2013.

Within this European organisation we see a similar pattern of Regional Groups forming, such as a Swiss, an Austrian, a French, an



Pictured above and right: Laura Ott, daughter of Marina Ott, at 'Paso Finos del Baltico' in Castledermot, Co. Kildare.

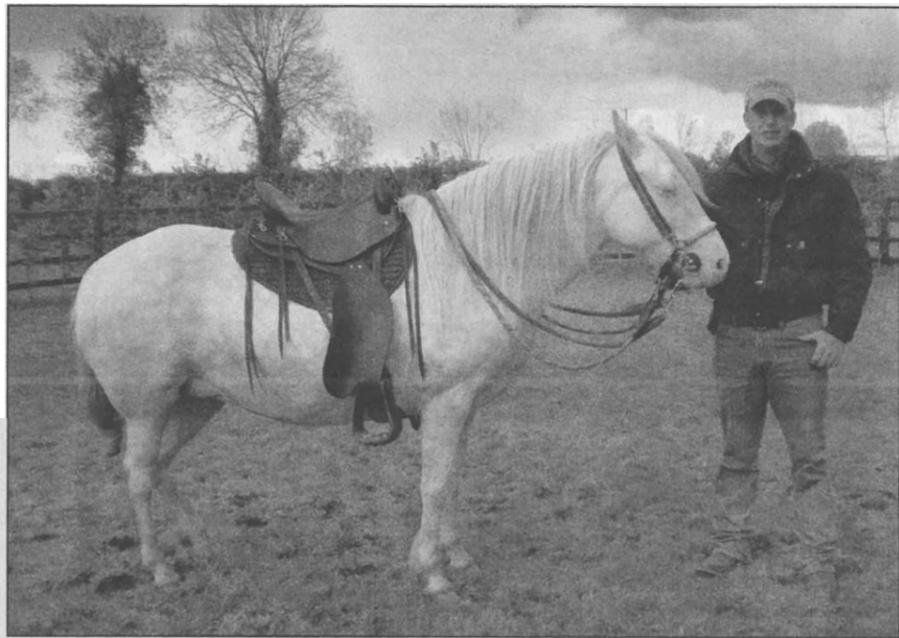
Italian group. This may seem to imply more than actually exists, numbers being still comparatively small. Finos are relatively recent arrivals on this side of the Atlantic and there might be 1,000, or somewhat more, in all of Europe, of which 500+ would be in my much loved Germany, so often the pioneer in these and other matters. In Ireland there are a mere 20 at most, but it will all no doubt grow into itself in due course.

One of these European Groups seems to have recently developed into a stand-alone organisation called the Paso Fino Association of the U.K. and Ireland, though it apparently remains in good standing with the other organisations. Little other information is to hand about this association - however, as there seems to be a certain amount of adjustment going on internally, one may observe that it is a very British thing to do, this pulling off in another direction from the mainstream; and a very Irish thing to do, to go scampering after them seriatim as they do it. (I speak as one who knows all too well!.....). Be that as it may, within it we find two of the three Paso Fino entities in Ireland just right now, these being Cochise Stud, in County Offaly and Reyezuela Paso Finos in Co. Kerry. A Mr. Peter Everett of the said Reyezuela Paso Finos is currently

Chairman of that association. In addition, Andrew O'Byrne-White, son of Cochise's owner, won a title at the last European Championships.

Official in Ireland

Nevertheless, the official accredited representative of the Paso Fino Association of Europe, e.V., for Ireland and indeed for Britain also is Frau, or Mrs., Marina Ott, who may be found at 'Paso Finos del Baltico' in Castledermot, Co. Kildare. The Ott family are recent arrivals in Ireland and come from the delightfully named Heiligenhafen on the Baltic coast, opposite Fehmarn Island, in what was long ago called Pomerania, their stud farm name clearly referencing this. By even the most exacting standards theirs is a bijou, high-quality operation, small and beautifully kept and managed. The hands-on stuff, keeping and working with three mares, one stallion, a filly and a foal on the way - one of the mares incidentally being a Cremello - is all done by Mrs. Ott and her singularly pleasant and gracious daughter, Laura, herself a very accomplished horsewoman. The Cremello mare is, so far as is known, the only Fino in all of Europe thus far with this rare, beautiful colouring. Their stallion, 'Ponderosa Cosmos Dos', is likewise an animal of some fair dis-



Stan Paul, best trainer in Germany



tinction, in as much as over 50 high grade Finos in Europe are traceable to him. In 2011 this same stallion was second in the Top Ten Sires in Europe, no mean feat by any standard.

The saddle used for Finos has a clear kinship with the sort of saddle used in North America in cattle management, though there are obvious differences. Dress in the arena is actually quite formal and elegant, whereas a more relaxed mode prevails outside it. However, the hat is de rigueur in competition, as also are the very eye-catching leggings. These are called zamorros and each one - one for each leg, of course - is made from a single piece of cowhide, hairside out. Depending on the steer, this can all by itself give rise to interesting patterns. They are very well made and fitted with fabric inner linings, and apart from a deep pocket in which, I understand, a little light refreshment may be stored, a striking feature is the way they hang down below the stirrup. In the countryside, the pampas or similar, among scrub and thorn and one thing and another, these will protect both the rider's legs and the horse's flanks. However, the thing to come at here is that a very warm, indeed hot climate, is native to their place of origin and the dropped air-scoop shape, when a horse is moving along at a goodly clip, provides

welcome ventilation for the rider. It is not, however, altogether clear how effective it might be in cooling or chilling any such liquid refreshment as may be carried!

It might be said too, that whereas the characteristic gait comes completely naturally to these horses they may readily be cantered if one wishes it. However, the horses' characteristic four-beat gait, in its three speeds of Corto, Largo and Classic Fino, plus their ability in some cases to provide Trocha and Trote y Galope additionally, is where the emphasis lies. It is these smooth fine 'paces' and the animals considerable strength and stamina which makes them what they noticeably and pre-eminently are, i.e., excellent, comfortable, safe trail horses.

Mrs. Ott herself played a vital role in bringing the whole Fino sector into existence in Europe, from its very beginnings; as a Founding Member she was virtually the sine qua non in all of this. She has worked closely with colleagues such as the Sperbers, Doris and Reini, founders of Gestut Sternberghof, today the biggest Fino operation in Germany, located between Wurzburg and Nurnberg. The aim of the P.F.A.E. is the establishing and furthering of all matters to do with this interesting breed in Europe, and she is working assiduously to develop this here in

Ireland and in Britain. She therefore now hopes, in time, to attract people genuinely interested in this to work with her, to learn, to participate. She hopes also to organise clinics and demonstrations to expand and further knowledge and expertise in this and there was, accordingly, an Open Day at Paso Finos del Baltico on May 13th this year.

Four days, Thursday to Sunday, featured demonstrations and clinics presented by Stan Paul, undoubtedly the best trainer in Germany at this time, with Sunday being the Open Day. Mr. Paul was here as a guest of Paso Finos del Baltico and was visiting Ireland from Markt Nordheim, where he is based at the Sternberghof establishment. He proved to be a most knowledgeable individual and very personable and down to earth with it. The whole four days were very successful and long may things continue thus for this extremely interesting and worthwhile development, which can only embellish the whole equine scene here in Ireland.

Editors Note:

The author is a Life Member of the American Quarter Horse Association. He founded the Irish Quarter Horse Association and built it from nothing, zero, to full affiliation with the A.Q.H.A., as of 2002. In recognition of this he was given the task, jointly by Ken Smith of A.Q.H.A. and Frank Constantini of the National Reining Horse Association - each respective Presidents of those Associations at the time - with initiating Reining in Ireland. This, in association with Horse Sport Ireland, he has now also accomplished. He is currently engaged in privately developing a line of Reining Quarterhorses, based on the 'Hollywood Dun It' bloodline.

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