

Bisch Equestrian at  
Los Cedros USA

# *Arabian Tales*

The horse breed with a  
legendary history thrives  
in modern-day Arizona

Text by **Jake Poinier**





## The Arabian horse story began thousands of years ago in the

Middle East, in environment even hotter and more humid than our own Sonoran Desert. Between natural selection in the harsh conditions and controlled breeding by the nomadic Bedouin, Arabian horses evolved to have large nostrils, wide-set eyes and long, arching necks that helped them survive in the challenging sand and rock terrain. Whether used in battle or for work and travel, they also developed the traits that make them so popular with horse enthusiasts today: intelligence, trainability, speed, stamina and a desire to connect with their owners.

“What makes Arabians different is they lived in the tents of Bedouins and were treated like a member of the family,” says Eileen Verdieck, head of marketing for Bisch Equestrian at Los Cedros USA in Scottsdale. “The result is that they have an affinity for people that other horses don’t have. Walk into a stall and they’ll come up and visit you. They’re curious, bright and spirited, and good horses for children or adults.”





Bailey Mirmelli competes on the junior circuit

PHOTO BY OSTEEEN-SHATZBERG PHOTOGRAPHY

Combining athleticism and intelligence, Arabians are the jack-of-all-trades in the equine world. “Arabians can be cutting horses, working Western, Western pleasure or English show, where they’re judged for motion and beauty,” says Dede Bisch of Bisch Equestrian at Los Cedros. “There are Arabians that jump, do dressage or race. Endurance is their thing, since no other breed can really compete at 100 miles in a day.”

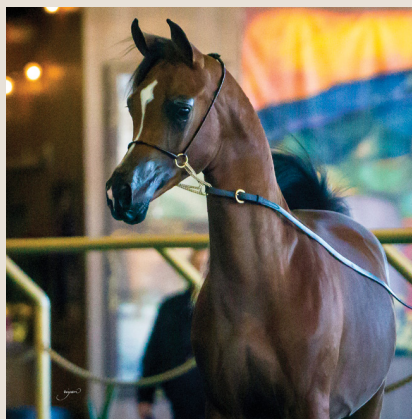
It’s no secret that equestrian sports aren’t inexpensive, but an Arabian can be purchased for as little as \$1,500 or so. The prices can escalate quickly from there, of course. The 2017 Marquise Auction at the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show, for example, had an average price of \$242,846, and top-end breeding horses may command a market value as high as \$15 million. “They’re like living art,” says Bisch.

#### THE LIFE OF LUXURY

While Arabians may no longer

command a spot in human living quarters, life on a farm in Arizona is quite a bit cushier than their ancestors experienced – and many owners and breeders have bought second or third ranches in Arizona in order to keep their horses here for part or all of the year. The Los Cedros facility, for example, was designed and built by Chilean businessman Miguel Sfeir in 2000 for the ultimate in horse comfort. Constructed like a citadel around a main courtyard, Los Cedros includes 99 stalls with outside views for the horses, multiple arenas for events and lessons, training and breeding facilities, and a 9-foot-deep circular pool for the horses to take a swim. Although more for human enjoyment than for the horses, custom doors, sconces, intricate domed ceilings, stained glass and decorative saddles throughout the complex and offices were imported from Morocco.

Some of the biggest advances in the industry have occurred



## 11TH ANNUAL ARABHORSE FARM TOUR

**FOR THE 11TH YEAR,** New Year’s weekend, Dec. 29, 2017, to Jan. 1, 2018, offers a rare opportunity to experience the beauty, history and lifestyle of the Arabian horse industry up close. Founded by David Cains and Scott Bailey, the ArabHorse Farm Tour attracts people from around the country to the Valley. Ten farms throughout north Scottsdale will open their properties to the public to showcase world-renowned Arabian horses. Guests will see the elegant animals in the

ring and also enjoy their friendly, gentle nature up close. Each farm is scheduled for a specific time during the four days, and guests may visit one farm or multiple farms. Each participating farm offers festivities and educational opportunities. While the event is free, guests will have an opportunity to help support Healing Hearts Animal Rescue and Phoenix Children’s Hospital. For more information and a schedule, visit [arabhorsefarmtours.com](http://arabhorsefarmtours.com).



in nutrition and veterinary care. “Our horses here have dentists, massage therapists, acupuncturists and farriers for each kind of work they do. They even get chiropractic adjustments,” says Bisch. “Traditionally, we used large-animal vets, but now they specialize in surgery, reproduction and even ophthalmology.”

To keep up with worldwide demand while maintaining Arabians’ best characteristics, breeding is another aspect that has continued to advance. “As a breeder, I look at many of the same things as when I judge,” says Janice McCrea Wight, who keeps four to six brood mares as well as a stallion, Rahere. “A good foundation is very important, so I’m into good legs and feet and correct skeletal structure – that’s what makes the horse. Form to function is very important to me.”

Most breeding is done by artificial insemination rather than live coverage, and semen is often frozen for storage or to be sent to another state or country. “They’re still marketing stallions that have been dead for 40 or 50 years,” says Verdieck. “The benefit is you get to use hindsight, which allows you to figure out the best ways to use the bloodlines.”

#### SHOW TIME!

One of the best places in the world to see Arabians in action is in our own backyard at the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show, which will celebrate its 63rd annual event at WestWorld of Scottsdale on Feb. 15 – 25, 2018. From its modest beginnings with 50 horses in 1955 – on the grounds of the Arizona

PHOTO BY EMANUEL VACEANU





Lee Courtney with  
her 11-year-old  
horse Ssequin



“There’s nothing like being out in the desert, the open air and cool crispness of fall mornings”

**Arabian owner Lee Courtney**

Biltmore – the show draws a global audience and has grown to more than 2,400 horses, 300,000 spectators and more than \$2.5 million in prize money. Famous attendees have included Steve Young, Patrick Swayze, Al Jardine, Tanya Tucker, Mike Nichols, Wayne Newton, Armand Assante, Madonna, Shakira, Bo Derrick and Charlie Watts, to name a few.

In addition to showing off the skills and beauty of about 1,000 classes of horses, popular additions to last year’s show will return, including pony rides, camel rides and a petting zoo. As always, people can participate in the meet-a-horse program, sitting on an Arabian and getting a free photo taken while wearing native attire. The behind-the-

scenes barn tour gives attendees an opportunity to meet competitors and their horses.

“For 63 years, the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show has brought the most amazing horses and people from around the world to Scottsdale,” says Taryl O’Shea, executive director. “Each year, we try to build upon what has worked in order to make it a fun family event. Scottsdale is a destination that people want to come to, with nice resorts, great restaurants and the best shopping. It fits nicely with what the Arabian horse people want – a unique experience where they can be a part of something special. In addition, over the history of this event, we’ve helped Scottsdale weather some tough economic times.”

### THE ARABIAN LIFESTYLE

With numerous Arabian farms and events, pleasant weather for much of the year and endless miles of trails to explore, many consider the Valley the center of the Arabian horse universe. The Arabian is a breed that also takes owners, competitors and judges to competitions across the United States and even around the world.

“I remember the first time getting on an Arabian, when I was 10,” says Bailey Mirmelli, a competitor on the junior circuit. “Other horses, especially when I was little, were harder to get going, while the Arabians were a lot more sensitive and tolerant.” Now 18, Mirmelli has competed in classes such as hunt seat, hunter pleasure and sidesaddle at local, regional and national events from California to Oklahoma – notching two reserve championship titles at the Arabian Horse Association’s Youth Nationals. “For me, showing Arabians has been a great experience, and taught me how to deal with competition, even when the results can be unpredictable,” she says.

Wight, who grew up showing Arabians and living on a small breeding farm, became a judge in 1981 and has since traveled all over the world – including national championships in 22 different countries. In October, she went to Morocco to judge the country’s national show for King Mohammed VI.

While Arabian owner Lee Courtney has done some in-





PHOTO BY EMANUEL VACEANU

state competing in halter and Western pleasure with her 11-year-old horse, Ssequin, her favorite pastime remains trail riding. “There’s nothing like being out in the desert, the open air and cool crispness of fall mornings,” she says. “There’s that great smell, and the horses love it, too. My greatest bond with her is when she’s turned out and can meet and engage with people. I absolutely love owning a

horse. It’s the best decision I’ve ever made.”

Seventy years ago, horses were more vital to everyday life, but the appeal of Arabians remains as strong as ever. “Today, we recognize that they make you healthier and help you build mental and emotional skills,” says Verdieck. “There are lots of easy entry levels, so you don’t need to be shy. It will change your life.”

## GIVING BACK

You can’t talk about the Arabian horse community without noting their philanthropic efforts across the Valley. Each year, the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show donates more than \$100,000 to various charities, including March of Dimes, Cox Charities, Child Crisis Arizona and Arabian Horseman’s Distress Fund. In recent years, Los Cedros has hosted events raising money for Make-A-Wish Arizona, as well as bringing horses on-site at Phoenix Children’s Hospital and to programs for challenged children and abused women.

In September, Royal Arabians in Scottsdale hosted a Horses and Hot Rods for Hearts event, raising money for the Phoenix Heart Ball. “As a member of the Heart Ball committee, I suggested we do something at the farm to introduce the horse world and Heart Ball to each other,” says Arabian owner Lee Courtney. “With 300 attendees, it was a raging success. We sold a horse, with the proceeds going to directly to the American Heart Association, and the Arabian community got an amazing new family.”