

# The Proud Paso Finos

One family carries on a tradition of raising and training fine horses. Many are champions.

In the lush, green hills of Brooksville, Florida, the rumble of rolling thunder causes folks to cock an ear. It could mean rain is coming. Or it could be the proud Paso Finos of El Juncal ranch—heads high and necks arched like perfectly carved chess pieces, their hooves pounding out a unique, distinctive cadence like the chugging of an onrushing train.

These are no ordinary horses. Paso Fino means “fine step.” And they’re famous for a ride so exceptionally smooth and bounce-free that it’s said that a rider wearing a flat-top hat could set a glass of wine on the crown and ride without spilling a drop.

These are the mounts of the conquistadores, bred and trained at El Juncal by



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK SANDLIN

descendants of those same Spanish warrior-explorers here under the moss-draped oaks of Central Florida.

These are champions. Three generations of the Mejia clan and three generations of a family of mares have produced 19 trophy-winning horses since the ranch opened in 1984.

“It’s a sickness, raising horses,” says Andres Mejia, who founded the ranch with his father.

They began with a handful of horses they brought from the original El Juncal in Colombia. The best mare of the bunch, Contraseña, came from one of that country’s legendary Paso Finos. Now 20, she roams a special paddock near the ranch’s entrance with her very first daughter. Both are heavy with yet another set of colts.

The family’s love of Paso Finos stretches far beyond Florida pastures.

**above:** The Mejia family proudly displays three generations of Paso Fino horses. **top:** Ribbons come naturally to the horses from El Juncal—the family has already produced 19 champions.

In fact, it was 50 years ago last October that Jaime Mejia, the family patriarch, at the request of the Colombian government, rode a bay stallion named Artista into a ring in Dallas to





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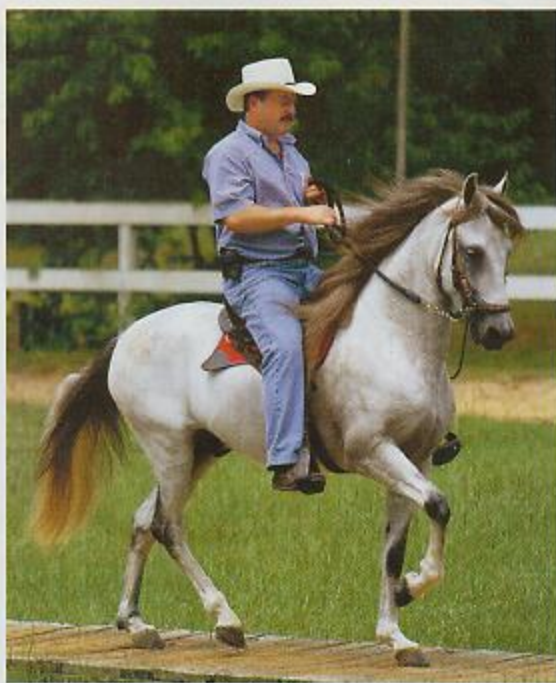
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Detail: Statue Garden, Lion Station, Bequest of Nathan Alonzo Cummer. Photograph: Courtesy of Eric G. Rios.



Paso Finos possess a  
special gait like no other.

introduce the breed to  
U.S. equestrians. They  
were stunned.

"They asked us  
what we did to teach them to walk like that," he re-  
calls. "They didn't believe it was a natural gait."

Jaime can still hear what they heard as the horses  
stomp across the sounding boards in the display ring  
at El Juncal. There's none of the *bitty-thump, bitty-  
thump* of the horses in Western movies chasing  
after outlaws. Paso Finos move with a singular,  
rhythmic *one-two-three-four* drum roll of a gait that  
can't be taught.

"They are born with the step," says Andres. "The  
only thing we do, or that the trainer does, is polish  
it a bit, give it elegance." He makes it sound simple.  
It's not. Their way is special.

"Most of our horse people have a passion for their  
horses, but for the Mejias it goes beyond that," says  
Cynthia Christian, co-operator of St. Francis Veteri-  
nary Practice. "It's as if their horses are a part of  
them. The family members take care of the horses  
as though they were caring for themselves."

The family started raising Paso Finos in the hills  
of Bogotá, Colombia, almost a century ago, under  
Jaime's father. The horses today still bear a brand  
that combines a T and H for *Teodoro e hijos*  
(Teodoro and sons) in his honor. In 1982, a horse  
breeder lured Andres to the United States to care for  
Paso Finos she owned in Maryland. Jaime remained  
in Colombia. ▶



### Life-Changing Accident

Then came what the family refers to as "the accident." Jaime was serving as a judge at a competition. It was 1984. Colombia was awash in cocaine and cash. A young *mafioso*, as Jaime calls him, entered a Paso Fino that stood short of the regulation height required for the breed. Jaime disqualified it. Five days later, he was gunned down, shot five times—in the stomach, chest, and jaw.

Miraculously, he survived. Just as miraculously, they believe, the family found the 45-acre spread that became the new El Juncal in Florida.

**"Paso Finos move with a singular, rhythmic one-two-three-four drum roll of a gait that can't be taught."**

Jaime Mejia

They drove by it on their way to see another one. It had gone up for sale the night before.

"It was meant to be," says Jaime. Turning 80 this month and going

strong, Jaime still rides and rules at El Juncal, visiting with the horses, playing a part in their training and handling. The passion that gripped him as a child still burns as he looks over a rail fence and admires the young three- and four-month-old colts running with their mothers in a paddock.

"The horse breeder always has the hope that his colt will be the best," he says. "We live for the day we breed the stallion with the mares. The day one's born, the training begins."

They do this more out of love than for money—but there is money. "One horse, I think it was sold for \$1.2 million," Andres says, adding with a playful smile, "That's what we're shooting for."

The Mejias rely mostly on their

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## the paso fino story

Paso Finos come from a blend of three breeds that mixed in Spain—the Spanish Barb; the native Andalusian; and the now-extinct Spanish Jennet, which had the Paso Finos' unique gait.

The first 25 Paso Finos arrived in the New World on Columbus's second voyage in 1493. As the only horses in the Western Hemisphere, they gave the Spaniards an unstoppable military advantage over the American Indians. Sent to help colonize, they proved perfect for the job—calm, steady, and tireless.

Paso Finos exist in many colors, weigh between 700 and 1,100 pounds, and stand between 13 and 15.2 hands. For more information on Paso Finos call (813) 719-7777, or visit [www.pfha.org](http://www.pfha.org).



mares, rather than stallions, to continue the champion line. And they are, in many ways, Hispanic horse whisperers, using gentle but firm training and lots and lots of patience. "We don't use chains to control the stallions," says Andres. "Never. We don't believe in that."

The horses are naturally drawn to humans, born with a desire and willingness to please. Young colts rush to the fence to meet us, shaggy hair hanging down in their eyes like cocky, good-natured teens.

"A horse is like a child," Jaime says. "After it's born it has to be formed," which takes at least four years. So the Mejias halterbreak their horses at three months, put them in stalls, and work with them for two or three months more.

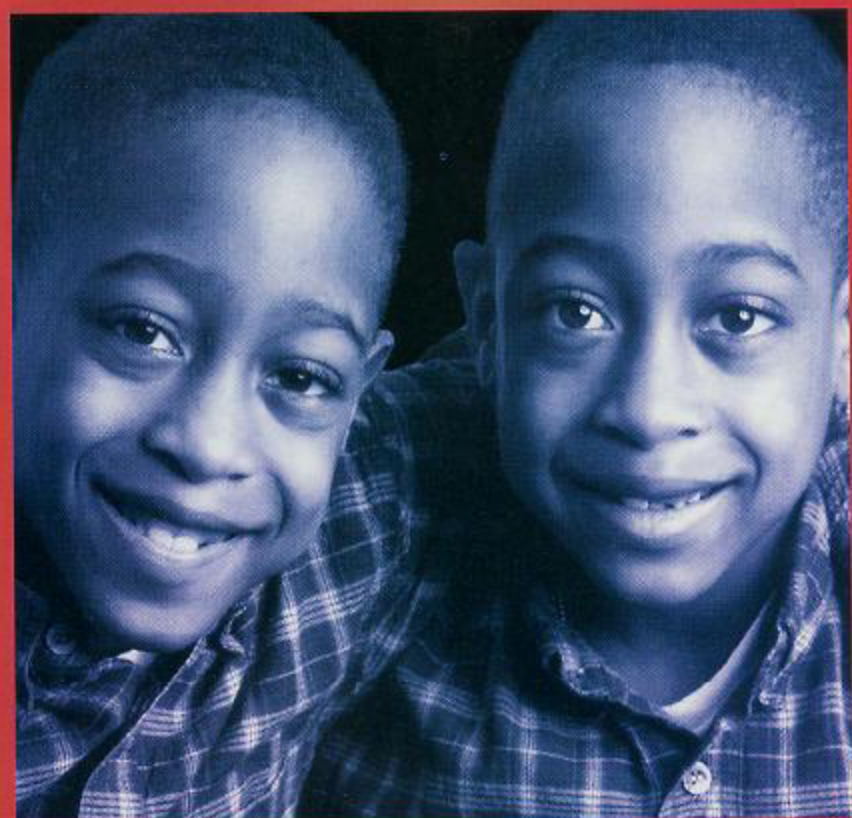
The real test comes when they put on a saddle at 30 months. Then they start training—seven days a week, gently coaxing and guiding. All this is done with a single hope: that the combination of genes, training, and luck will yield another champion with hooves that pound like thunder, echoing across 500 years to the time of the conquistadors.

CARLOS HARRISON



Exercising the horses is more pleasure than work on El Juncal ranch in Brooksville.

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