

Will My

# UGLY DUCKLING

ever be a

# Swan?



*Your friend comes over to see the new foal and exclaims "Oh my, what a beautiful baby!" A year later your friend visits again. You show off your 4-legged friends and the question arises, "where did that beautiful baby go?" When you reply, "it's the one nuzzling for treats in your pocket," she looks at you in disbelief.*

by Diane Korby

The changes most horses go through in the first years of life can be dramatic, transforming beautiful foals into gangly, awkward youngsters, and then back once again into beautiful, graceful adults. This is true in all breeds but the changes seem particularly extreme in the Baroque breeds. What changes can be expected, and when will they occur? The answer to that question is both easy and discouraging; no one can answer with certainty.

Making evaluation even more difficult is the fact that some foals are born beautiful and stay that way their entire lives, whereas others don't blossom until their growth patterns balance out and they finally hit maturity, which could take years. Three things that do help are time, experience, and careful research of the pedigree. However, if you are new to the Baroque horse world, time and experience may not be readily available to you, and pedigree research can be an exercise in frustration and confusion, often due to language barriers, cultural diversity and even politics within the registries, breeders, and associations.

So where does one begin? Let's start with basic information on equine growth patterns, and go from there.

Most research on the subject of growth patterns in horses has been centered around breeds with a naturally occurring shorter life span. The information gleaned from this research can be very useful to you as you search for your dream horse. However, maturity rates must be spread out a bit longer for the Baroque breeds, since they may reach maturity closer to five, seven, and even up to nine years of age.

Experienced breeders draw on many sources when evaluating foals.



## EXTREME MAKEOVER!

This Andalusian colt was obviously a diamond in the rough. The photo at the top of this page shows him at 8 months, then 2 1/2 years (center photo) and finally in his full magnificence at age 7 (bottom photo). Photos courtesy: Manuela Reynolds

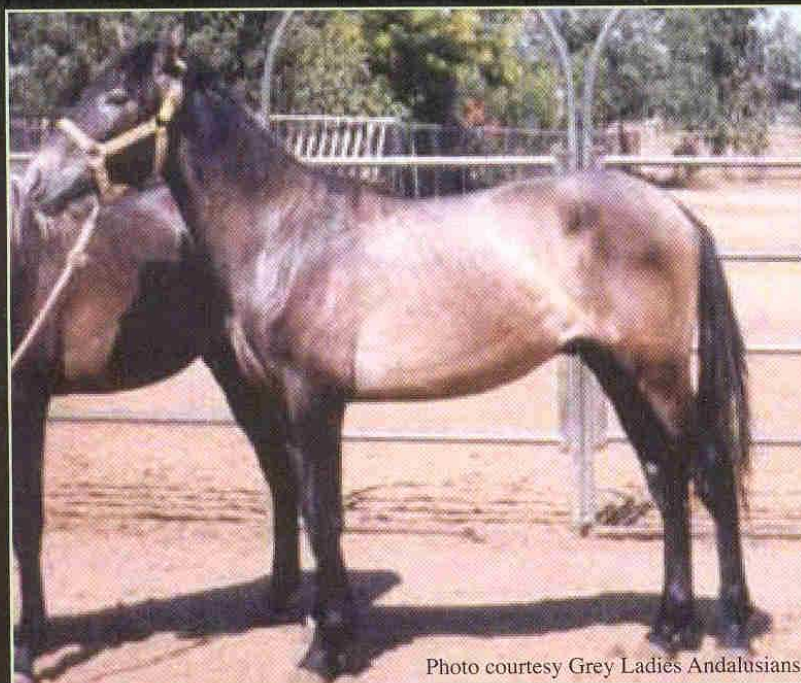
Some are scientific, while others are traditional...having been passed on from generation to generation. For instance, many breeders will tell you that, although changes occur at different rates depending on the horse and breed, the rule of thumb is that the best time to judge the future potential of youngsters is at three days, three months and three years of age for the general horse population.

One traditional yardstick used by many breeders to estimate a foal's height at maturity is to measure the foal from the crease in the middle of the knee in a straight line to the

occasionally before maturity is reached. The topline is one of the last areas to level off, making an evaluation very difficult until almost adulthood.

The other challenge to evaluating movement in youngsters is that the legs are undergoing continual modifications. For example, the very last change to be made during a young horse's growth is the body width. This directly affects movement because, when foals are narrow in front, the legs will tend to point outward. As the chest broadens, the toes may again point straight ahead. Working with a good farrier during this phase of

# the trans



Yearling

Photo courtesy Grey Ladies Andalusians



Six years old

Photo courtesy Grey Ladies Andalusians

coronet band. Each inch equals a hand, and each quarter inch equals one inch at maturity. (example: 15.25 inches equals 15.2 hands) The second method is to measure from the elbow to the ground and double it in inches, divide the inches by four, leave the remainder in inches, and you have the height in hands at maturity. Keeping in mind that these are only estimates, you will get surprisingly accurate results.

Movement changes as a foal grows, as we know from evaluating form to function in mature horses. It is common to see heavy movement in the front end of a young horse. This is the result of slower growth in the forehead, as is evidenced by those often-seen rump-high babies. The front and rear ends will grow independently of one another, balancing out only

a young horse's life is imperative.

Color may not be as important as conformation and movement, but it does follow a more predictable pattern of change. White markings do not grow as fast proportionately as the base body color. On many foals, white markings can appear excessive, such as stars and other facial marks which can dominate the entire head. However, by maturity, things usually appear much more balanced. Rarely is a star on a mature horse big enough to encompass most of the forehead.

Color will almost always change between birth and adulthood. Gray is the obvious example but other colors follow their own pattern of change as well. Often, foal coat colors will be the opposite of their color at maturity, i.e., if they are born a

dark shade they will be lighter at maturity and the lighter birth shades will darken. Mature black horses are usually born a shade of silver or bay. Foals which are born an intense black color are almost certain to change and go lighter. Primitive markings such as leg barring, dorsal stripes etc. are very common also but most will fade in time.

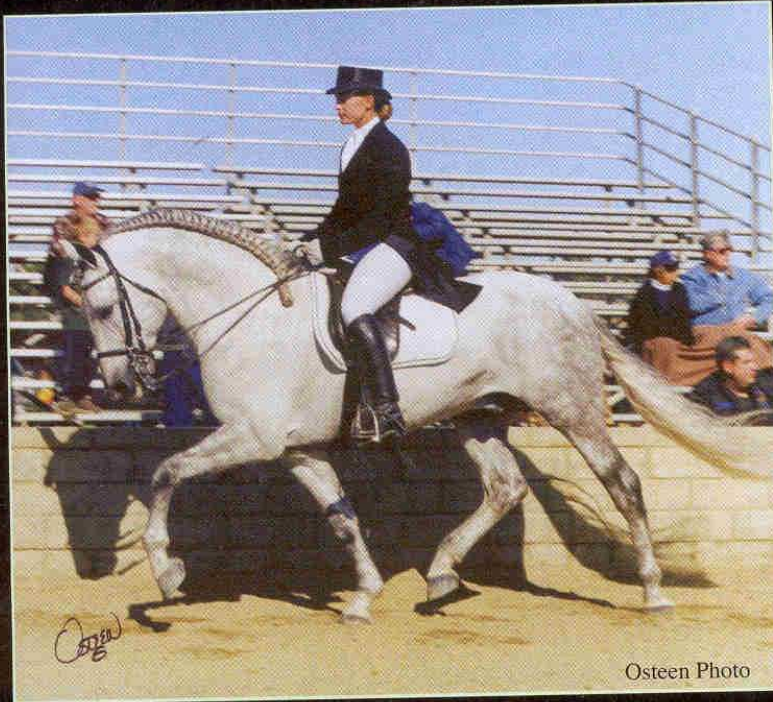
Diversity in length and proportion of body parts are unique to the individual foal and can range between subtle and radical. In newborn foals up to about 3 weeks, we may see more angulation and changes in dimension. Ears will appear to be

plan explicitly.

As the foal approaches weaning, his growth rate continues at an almost dizzying pace. His skeletal system is vulnerable at this time because it is laying the foundation for the beautiful athlete he is destined to become. Bone tends to grow faster than muscle, and in some cases the foal looks more like a caricature than a young horse.

Weaning can be stressful since changes in diet and environment often occur at this time. Parasites and disease can take advantage of a compromised immune system, and a

# formation



Nine years old.



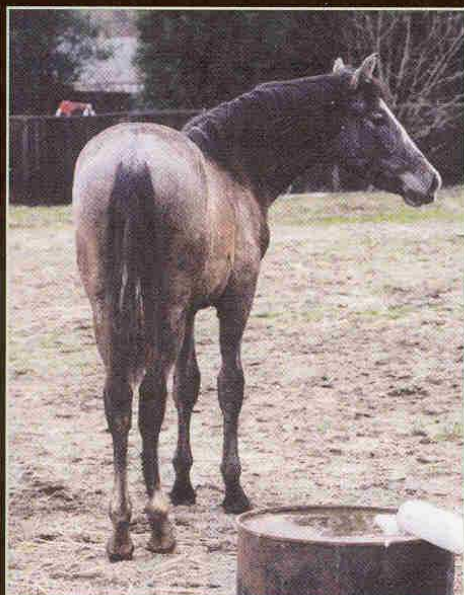
Eleven years old

too large and, of course, all foals are leggy. As time goes on, the angles and proportions of the head, neck, chest, and body will mature independently of each other. These parts are subject to the ebb and flow with growth patterns, oftentimes changing several times before they stabilize.

Legs can be quite malleable at birth, and as such, there are many deviations from the norm that are simply the result of living in the cramped quarters of their prenatal environment. A few days of exercise and freedom will correct the majority of leg abnormalities in newborns, but it is one area where the foal may also need a little help from its human caretaker. If there is any doubt whatsoever about a potential leg problem, it is important to have your vet or farrier examine the foal and follow their care

sound management program must be followed. The worming and vaccination program is of utmost importance now, as the changes taking place in the foal's body often mimic a parasite load. A pot belly, slow shedding, ewe neck, rafter hips, and narrow chest can be a normal growth pattern.

Yearlings are perhaps at the most awkward stage of their lives. Each part of their bodies seems to be growing at a different rate. It's almost as if several puzzles were combined and thrown into a paper bag, shaken up and the pieces re-assembled to make a picture. They are often narrow, angular, pigeon breasted, have narrow peaked rumps (which are also probably higher than their withers), and toe out on all four legs. These traits are in a constant state of flux and may be displayed



**GRAY AREA:**

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The Andalusian stallion (above) and the Lipizzan stallion (right) are indicative of the dramatic changes in coloration that can be experienced.



Leonard Boardman photo



Sara Stafford photo

in varying degrees.

The majority of youngsters have endured the worst of times by the transition between two and three years of age. From then until maturity, the majority of changes will be to fill out, tweak the height, finalize maturation of bones and joints, make last adjustments to the topline, and more fully develop their mental capacities.

When talking about growth stages in horses, it is important to remember that mental maturity is a process in and unto itself, and it may not coincide with the physical maturation process. Most young foals are relatively uncomplicated, curious, and playful in unique degrees. Their dam is the center of their world for their first month of life. As they enter the second month, the discovery of friends and their surroundings will teach volumes about tolerance, discipline, safety, and the ways of the world.

Weanlings are learning independence, forming friendships and degrees of trust and mistrust.

Curious and mischievous may best describe yearlings and two year olds, with the addition of confusion that raging hormones will add. They will test and retest boundaries, their minds racing with things seemingly aimed at making their owner go crazy. Socialization is important and it is ideal if they can be part of a herd situation. They learn cause and effect in this environment, making it much safer for their handler to teach them manners when needed.

One day, in about their third year, many of these often-obnoxious youngsters will change into respectful horses, ready to learn and suddenly become good citizens. Their minds are open to new ideas and they are ready to start learning the basics.

This is a pivotal point in a horse's life, and diet and exercise are critical. Moderate exercise is recommended to strengthen muscles and bones but should be curtailed before the horse shows signs of fatigue. At that point he has overtaxed the bones and joints and will be doing more harm than good.

Overweight foals are put at risk in several ways.