

# So you are thinking about... Importing a Horse...

Acquiring Your Iberian Horse on Foreign Turf  
By Susan Ambrose

There are many well established breeders in the USA offering remarkable Andalusians and Lusitanos. Yet for some, there is also the allure of traveling to the mother countries, for the all-encompassing quest to find their Iberian horse. These adventurous souls are best prepared for the risks and uncertainties by taking heed with a bit of homework. Before embarking on uncharted territory, here are some considerations.

Why go to all the trouble of Importing?

There are two obvious reasons, the first has to do with breeding stock. All domestically bred Iberians on North American soils owe their very existence to the intrepid pioneers of the 1970s. Yet both the Spanish and the Portuguese horse are still considered a rare breed when compared to the AQHA or Arabian registries.

Imagine going to Germany or Thailand to buy a Quarter Horse or Missouri Foxtrotter. Not that you would do this, but when you put it in this context, its unlikely you would choose a breeder with one mare and a couple years experience. Breeding horses is both art and science. Knowledge and guidance from the original source is backed by generations and centuries of expertise. By infusing improvement stock into the North American gene pool, a breeder will continue to enhance the quality of their program.

The other obvious reason for importing is training. The increased demand for FEI competition horses has been met with a scarcity in the US and Canada, now that the Iberian is recognized as an international contender. If you are in search of a fine tuned performance horse with FEI potential, there is no question you will find them in greater numbers in their mother countries.

And then, there is the sheer sentiment. For some, world travel combined with horse shopping can be quite fulfilling. There is a certain intoxication and gratification of finding a gem among gems. Many breeders and aficionados regularly import their stock. A number of trainers and judges in the U.S. frequently purchase youngsters, complete their training and offer them for resale to the dressage market.

The selection is greater and the price point is appealing for upper level dressage trained if they have not yet competed on the international circuit. Many that are in preparation, found from the mid € 20s K to 40s. Once they have competed, expect to pay upwards

horses – particularly schooling PSG and higher, can be of € 70K for Grand Prix level horses. Once a horse has been on the international circuit and scoring well, is typically priced in the 6 figures.

Where do you start?

Importing a horse from abroad is a complex undertaking and not unlike a relay race in which the responsibilities frequently change hands, making it difficult to track each step. Experts recommend that you enlist the help of an agent.

If you are ready to swim with the sharks, enlist the aid of a reputable guide to navigate you through the process.

Many breeders, however well intended, are not familiar with the complexities of exporting. Most often you will find the advertised horses online through a broker or agent. A knowledgeable agent works on commission and will be an asset in orchestrating the search and export process.

There are “old school”, multi-generation breeding families in Europe who still observe a tradition of selling horses face-to-face.



Many are not internet savvy and access can be difficult but the find is often a treasure. In South America, Brazil in particular, the primary breeders have fine tuned their marketing skills and are very eager to reach the American market.

Whether you plan to visit Europe, Central or South America, the best advice is to get a recommendation from an experienced buyer who's dealt with a good agent. Failing that, place a call to one of the breed associations to ask for a recommendation.

Often the breeders and trainers, however well intended, are not familiar or up to date with the complexities of exporting. The international regulations, documentation and testing requirements are constantly changing.

Your success is greatly enhanced by selecting a bilingual local with references, integrity and breed expertise– a trainer, judge, or breeder–one who understands bloodlines, conformation and proper training. Above all, someone with access to reputable partners that are experienced in the process.

Pitfalls to Avoid

An uneducated buyer is more easily taken by the opportunistic trader. Remember, you are bringing along a stigma with you, whether it applies to you or not... ‘the American buyer... naïve and extravagant’. You are shopping for a luxury item in a foreign land with premiums attached to its purchase. The cost of transport alone is higher than many horse breeds.

Many US citizens and foreign breeders & trainers are not bi-lingual so make sure the person working on your behalf has both languages.

Be aware of false ads, showing horses with flowery descriptions, glorious photos and video, but deeply discounted prices - they usually don't exist. You can end up with a different animal that the advertised photo, with little to no recourse. Don't buy sight unseen and never send money to someone you don't know. Check the references.

For your pre-purchase exam, always procure an independent third party vet, not the owners vet.

Common sense will tell you the sort of problems to avoid: dealing with a shady seller or agent that toys with pricing, switches x-rays, falsifies the lab test results, or even switches horses. There are also reports of buyers receiving extensive bills for so called prolonged treatment and boarding due to a ‘mysterious last minute life-threatening illness’. And then, there is also the use of narcotics to hide behavior problems. Obtain blood tests, freeze part of the sample for rechecking in 30 days. Another common problem( avoided with DNA testing) is buying a rare color at premium pricing, that later turns grey.

Other pitfalls encountered are failure to provide registry papers; falsified pre-purchase veterinary exams resulting in horses with undisclosed health issues such as unsoundness, founder, bowed tendons, etc. Obtain travel insurance for this process. Everything mentioned here can happen in your own neighborhood, but when working in a foreign country with a language barrier it's more challenging to spot.

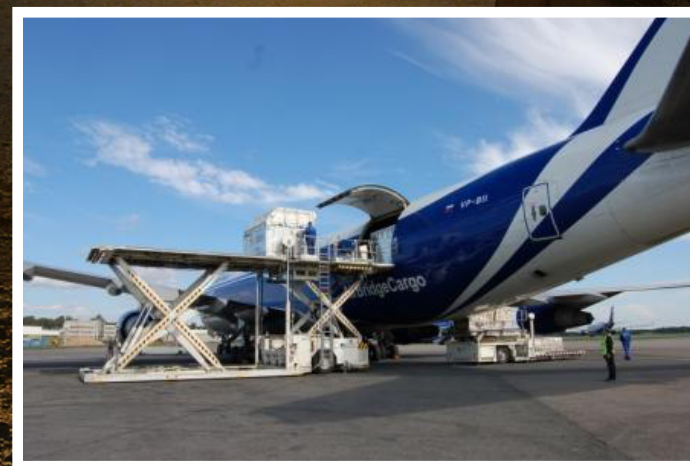
The Requirements & Process

The USDA regulates the process of importing horses into the USA through three ports of entry, NY, Miami or Los Angeles. Many Canadian buyers use this avenue then bring their horse in after it completes quarantine process in the USA.

Essentially, when importing livestock from abroad, you must comply with the established testing for contagious disease and meet all import and customs requirements. Failure to do so will result in having the animals restricted to the entrance port quarantine, where you will not be able to obtain their release.

The first step is to have the horse tested for Piroplasmosis, a tick born disease that is strictly prohibited in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. This is done before completing the purchase. Upon receiving the negative bloodwork, then conduct a pre-purchase exam by an independent vet and forward the findings to your vet.

After your vet clears the horse, verify that all the travel inoculations are current. The vaccines should be administered before the horse goes into quarantine, otherwise the testing can be adversely affected and you will pay for extra time in quarantine waiting out the time required.





Once the horse is transported to the quarantine facility (via ground transport), for European horses, a second piro test is verified through the official EU Lab in Germany. You are well advised to have a third piro test run through the USDA approved lab in Ames, Iowa .

Piroplasmosis is a tick born illness and exists worldwide. The US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia do not allow horses with positive piro tests within their borders. It is widespread in Portugal and parts of Spain, which has “red zones”. Some horses have natural immunity, but the “antibodies” showing up as titers in their blood will appear the same as the actual disease. The lab does not have a sophisticated testing system to differentiate from healthy or infected horses. The levels in the blood determine ‘pass or fail’ and they have a tendency to rise in the presence of stress, caused by cortisol production in the bloodstream.

Travel causes stress and a rise in cortisol. So the test results prior to departing the mother country must have a very low factor, to allow for the natural rise from the travel. Upon arrival in the USA, the horse enters quarantine and is re-tested. The horse is not allowed in the USA if their levels exceed the limit. Sadly, the options are to return the horse or euthanization. A third option is to have the documentation arranged in advance for ownership and destination of Mexico, then after the horse settles in there, retest and ship up to the USA or Canada. This is a dreadful situation, since the horse may be immune and just carry antibodies which means he can never get the disease.

#### C.E.M. Testing

Contagious Equine Metritis, or C.E.M. is a venereal disease caused by the bacteria *Taylorella equigenitalis* and is spread through breeding. Ultimately, C.E.M. results in a mare’s inability to conceive. Stallions can carry the bacteria, but do not show clinical signs. Federal law requires all breeding horses over the age of two traveling to the United States must undergo rigorous testing at a certified facility. C.E.M. testing will generally extend the time in quarantine to two to three weeks in Spain and an additional two to three weeks in the US.

The regulations regarding CEM testing are not much better. A horse showing CEM symptoms is treated by swabbing/cleaning the genitalia area for five days with two readily available products – chlorhexidine surgical scrub and furazone (Nitrofurazone). Yet the testing process can cost an additional \$12K USD for breeding animals. Of course, by acquiring young, unbred stock there is no C.E.M. testing, which shortens quarantine by six to seven weeks and you can apply the thousands you save toward the horse. There is one exemption with the USDA for PRE stallions in Spain over the age of 2 carrying a certificate of virginity. Unfortunately it does not apply to Lusitanos.

The quarantine facility handles the documentation and is current on all regulatory policies, in a perfect world. Your agent should be in contact on your behalf to verify that the documentation is in order, and keep you up updated on the status. CRECE, a quarantine facility in Toledo Spain, maintains an internationally complaint lab and employs a federally approved veterinarian. The facility has expansive grounds for pasture and training as well as offering full service reproductive services. If you are buying a stallion and want it gelded, they offer this while in quarantine with daily vet care. This facility is exemplary and what you would hope to find in any country.

Upon completion of testing and documentation completed with a federal seal, your horse is ready for sealed ground transport to Amsterdam . Once in Amsterdam, there is a two-day hold for verification of the animal’s health, testing and authentication of the documentation provided. An important benefit of this temporary stay is the horse receives rest in preparation of the second leg of travel. In the Amsterdam quarantine, the horses are provided a three-by-three meter (almost 10 feet square) box stall.

Now your horse is ready for the transatlantic flight. The horses are loaded into the three-stall pallet, which is their sealed container. Depending on the equipment, the container is either lifted inside the airplane, or the pallet may be rolled to fit the container which is already inside the plane. The process takes about fifteen minutes. A professional groom is provided by the airline for every pallet of three horses. The cost is included in the export fee. The horse is headed to one of three U.S. ports of entry, New York, Miami, Florida or Los Angeles, CA. Flights to NY from Amsterdam are the most frequent and least expensive.

#### What are the costs?

Typically the cost to import to the USA from Europe runs about \$10K - \$12K USD for an unbred mare or stallion. If the horse has been bred in the past, the USDA requires additional testing which can take from 4 up to 8 weeks of additional quarantine time, depending upon holidays and other factors, at a cost of \$12K USD. This applies to the breeding age stallions and mares with the exception of an exemption for PRE horses in Spain with documented proof of virginity.

Expect to spend \$12K on the quarantine and transport process, if the horse is unbred, and an additional \$10K - \$12K for quarantine testing on breeding stock.

If importing from Brazil, only a few years ago we enjoyed a lower import fee of around \$5-\$6K USD. However this figure is now closer to the cost of bringing horses in from Europe and now runs approximately \$10K USD. The cost of quality horses with training has more than doubled, from 7-8 years ago as the American market has become more established.

The international shipping container has three compartments and has a flat rate fee. If you purchase one horse to ship alone, you could end up being billed for the empty slots as well, tripling your cost. Your shipping agent can coordinate the shipment with other horses departing at the same time, which will save approximately two thirds of your shipping cost.

If you are bringing a horse into Canada, you will save a considerable sum by importing through the U.S., and after release from quarantine, then shipping on to Canada.

It is highly recommended that the buyer obtain shipping insurance in the event of any problems arising.

#### Arrival in the USA Port of Entry and Quarantine Facilities

Upon arrival, the sealed container goes directly into U.S. quarantine. Tests for dourine, glanders, equine piroplasmosis, and EIA are conducted by U.S.D.A. during quarantine. Test results from National Veterinary Services Laboratories (NVSL) are generally available three days after the arrival of the horse. Horses that test positive for any of these diseases will be refused entry into the United States.

You can elect to use the port of entry facility in New York, Los Angeles or Miami, or choose from one of approximately 60 approved U.S.D.A quarantine facilities in the U.S. The latter alternative could be advantageous if you wish to visit the horse or have him near your trainer while in isolation for CEM testing.

Perform a thorough investigation of the facility, as each site is unique and privately owned. The U.S.D.A. requires that quarantined horses remain a distance of at least 30 feet from other horses, but there are no absolute standards regarding type of fencing or other facilities, so you will want to ensure the site meets your standards.

The horse leaves the port of entry in a U.S.D.A. sealed van that cannot be opened until arrival at the quarantine facility. Many facilities offer direct shuttles as an optional service. Once your horse has completed quarantine, you can have your transport company deliver him/her to you. A more complete snapshot of the requirements is available at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov>.

In summary, enhance your success and select a knowledgeable insider with references, integrity and breed expertise– a trainer, judge, or breeder–one who understands bloodlines, conformation and proper training with access to reputable partners. This expertise is invaluable in accomplishing your goal.

#### About the Author:

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