

Icelandics fra Slettunni

By Chris Egan, Freelance Writer

Our Prairie Garden Farm breeds Icelandic horses, with the stud farm name fra Slettunni. (translated: 'Icelandics from the prairie.')



Was Santa good to you this year? Did his elves visit your barn, leaving a new saddle, boots, carrots, and apples?

Twenty years ago, Jennifer Hamilton got a Christmas present that changed her life.

A former Pony Clubber, Jennifer was ready for a new challenge. "I saw a picture of an Icelandic horse," said Jennifer. "I don't even think I knew what gait he was doing, but I wanted a horse like that!"

In 1987, there were only a couple hundred Icelandic horses in the United States. Jennifer recalled traveling to Chicago, Illinois, to pick up her Icelandic, the first of nearly one hundred Icelandics that the Hamiltons have owned over the years. The number of Icelandics in the United States has increased within the last two decades, with nearly 4,000 - 5,000 at present.

"It was a HUGE leap for me, to learn about a five-gaited saddle horse. The subtlety of cues is amazing," said Jennifer. "It has been an endlessly fascinating experience for us."

As the Hamiltons showed me around their farm outside of Fairfield, Iowa, I was truly struck by their dedication to their horses. Jennifer's husband, Doug, originally more of a driving enthusiast, has also become involved with Icelandics. To learn more about the Icelandic gaits and training methods, he traveled to Iceland and spent a summer with Baldvin Air Gudlaugsson, an Icelandic trainer. Doug was happy to discuss their feeding plan and also told me that he tracks each horse's training progress.

"Icelandics are ambassadors for nature," said Jennifer. "Riding an Icelandic is a tremendous confidence booster, and trail riding is where they shine. Enjoying nature on horse back is deeply therapeutic for a rider and great fun for the Icelandic, who has a great natural work ethic. Steady, smooth and sure-footed, Icelandics are good for the body and soul."

Icelandics are a quiet breed, and it's easy to visualize them slipping through a forest. After watching Jennifer's video of an Icelandic horse "trotting" along the beach, I was a bit intimidated at the thought of riding one. The horse seemed to be flying! However, once I was astride this diminutive horse, there was no sensation of moving fast, except for the wind in my face. Sorli, the Hamilton's breeding stallion, was also very "user friendly" and seemed to have an OFF switch! From fast to stop, Sorli did as I asked in a smooth and gentlemanly manner. Sorli, who is available for breeding, is one of the top ten highest scoring Icelandic stallions now residing in North America!

Even though Icelandics are gaited, balanced riding methods are taught by Jennifer to her students.



ABOVE: The Hamilton's stallion, Sorli, gives a riding lesson to Brittany Baldozier.

Note the specialized Icelandic bridle in this photo.

BELOW: AS you can see, Icelandics make good mounts for everyone of all ages. Here, Mary Lamoureaux and her Icelandic mare, Vera, show off their 5th place ribbon at the Iron Oak, Wisconsin endurance ride in 2007.





ABOVE:

Grace Fernyhough and her Icelandic mare, Tauta, placed 1st in the youth division of the Iron Oak Endurance ride this spring.

Grace is one of Jennifer's students.

BELOW:

Owner Rebecca Hougher on her mare, Viktoria and her son at her side, by Sorli, Kolbeinn fra Slettunni.



For over 1000 years, the Icelandic horse, the only breed of horse in Iceland, has remained isolated from the genetic influences of other horse breeds. In the normal cycle of the Iceland farm year, livestock is turned out the back gates of their farms during the summer to graze the enormous communal pastures in the highland mountains. Traditionally, if an undesirable trait showed up in a foal, it was often culled and used for meat. This practice continues today in Iceland and horsemeat is exported regularly to mainland Europe and Japan. It may sound very harsh, but this is probably the strongest reason that, today, you will rarely find an Icelandic that would ever kick, bite or even lay its ears back at a human for any reason. This sort of behavior is simply not tolerated.

Their gene pool is limited, and the Icelandic breed even has a rating system for their breeding stock. This system is based on 60% riding qualities such as the gaits and character, with the remaining 40% being conformation. By the same token, an Icelandic horse is not allowed to leave the island if it does not meet minimal standards.

It is the Icelandics' willingness to work that is one of their primary traits. This makes them an excellent mount for all ages. "Many times, the lesson is a therapeutic experience for the rider," said Jennifer. "The communication between the rider and an Icelandic is easy and smooth. They are powerful, yet easy to communicate with."

For equestrians interested in riding an Icelandic, the Hamiltons offer year round riding packages, which include a lesson and different riding options, from a ½ day ride to weekend riding at Shimek State Forest or Brinton Timber Park.

