

Bloodlines: King Fritz and the “Chex” Horses

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By Lesli Groves

Remember Jack of “Jack and the Beanstalk” trading his family’s only milk cow for three magic beans?

The true story of “Fritz and the Quarter Horses” is less fantastic but starts on a parallel course. In 1956, Fritz Watkins, of Wasco, Oregon, decided to start a Quarter Horse breeding program. The AQHA registry was 10 years-old and Fritz, 39, saw a business opportunity.

Raymond Guthrie of Prineville, Oregon, 120 miles south, had purchased three mares in foal from the Robert Q. Sutherland breeding program near Kansas City. When the foals were three months old, Fritz went to evaluate them.

Optimistically, he agreed to pay \$2,000 for the three baby stud colts and hoped his neighbors back home didn’t find out what he’d gambled. His wife named their favorite King Fritz. Sixty years later, the stallion’s name is still considered an asset in any pedigree.

This story is more like a fairy tale if you realize the median U.S. household income for that period was \$5,000 for an entire year. Plus, starting a breeding program with three baby colts would generally label you a fool. It did, however, leave ample time to start looking for mares. Whether it was his standards or his budget, or a combination of the two, Fritz didn’t select many. The percentage which produced ultimate show horses was incredible.

Ten years later, like Cinderella at the Prince’s ball, a four-year-old King Fritz daughter turned heads at Sacramento’s Cow Palace Stock Show. Named for Watkins youngest daughter, Shirley Chex was escorted by Watkins’ resident trainer, Ray Junker. Except no Fairy Godmother had intervened.

According to Les Vogt’s first-hand account in Performance Horse Journal, July 2016: “Nobody knew Ray Junker. He had a poorly shaped hat, a shirttail out in the back, no shotgun but stovepipe chaps that were too short that had R-A-Y written down the side. The mare was lop-eared with a hackamore on with a white cotton rope, like a lead rope, that was way too big... Before the end of the show, he had won the junior working cow horse, junior reining, junior pleasure, western riding . . . everybody thought, “Wow.”

Mitzi Chex and Karen Chex, from King Fritz’s second foal crop, debuted with Bobby Ingersoll about that time, and Vogt said the three mares were invincible. “Wherever they were entered, you gave up thinking about winning because you couldn’t. We’d never seen anything like it on the West Coast.”

So that's the beginning of the story as handed down, and if you admire King Fritz and the Chex line, you'll appreciate "Fairy tales do come true." Much has been made of the horses he bred, but Fritz Watkins is a relative mystery.

In the book "Legends," Fritz's wife, Helen, said, "Horses were a business to us. We showed extensively and advertised a lot." But by the records, there's not much else about Watkins and horses prior to 1956, when he bought three-month-old Fritz. And it appears he effectively exited the business in 1971 when he sold the stallion. There's lots more stories about King Fritz, the "Chex" horses he sired and their descendants. As you read them, you'll be amazed at the impact of Fritz's small breeding program.

The Watkins mares

Most stories about King Fritz quote Les Vogt of California, his last owner, for good reason. Besides having a long and colorful career as a trainer of champion cow horses, he's infinitely quotable. Vogt proclaimed the Watkins mares "the unsung heroes" of the King Fritz story.

"We had the superstar mares of the day, however, nothing produced like that infamous cross with those strange-looking mares I bought in the group in the original package from Fritz Watkins," he said.

Strange-looking is one of the more flattering ways Vogt described them. "They were just totally unsophisticated ... rough-looking and poor movers, but they produced extreme pluses." Whatever they were, apparently they were consistent.

Oregon's late Don Avila was the most famous horseman to respond to the Watkins' ads and haul a broodmare to Wasco for a date. "The first year I bred a mare to King Fritz, in 1967, I was the only outside breeder," he said. The resulting foal, Bob Chex, who was named after Don's son, helped put the younger Avila on the road to fame. Among other things, they won the AQHA high-point working cow horse title.

During 12 years with Watkins, King Fritz sired 69 registered foals, and the majority of the time they were from Watkins' mares. Compare that to the three years Vogt stood him, when he sired 249.

Even if we don't understand why Watkins' "strange-looking" mares crossed well on King Fritz, apparently it wasn't a fluke. So why wasn't the man heralded as a genius? I broadened my internet search for Fritz Watkins of Wasco without the word horse, and found a possible clue. Fritz wasn't a typical Quarter Horse breeder.

Cowboys, as well as people on the horse show circuit, tended to discriminate against his kind.

Offhand, the era's only other success story coming to mind is Jack Byers of Oklahoma. Despite winning 1972 All-American Futurity neither he nor his homebred filly Possumjet got much respect. She was sent off at the longest odds ever for that race, 44:1.

What I'm implying is, perhaps horsemen didn't haul their mares to Wasco, Oregon, because they were prejudiced against farmers. The \$2,000 Watkins traded for the three baby colts was gleaned from the 1956 wheat harvest.

"Our people" have a historic lack of respect for his people. Consider these common insults: He rides like a farmer. What farmer did you get that horse from? Where'd you get the farmer hat? To

be fair, Wasco was pretty far from the heart of horse country, so location was a factor, too. But the truth is, even though he'd rather ride a tractor than a horse, Fritz Watkins had good instincts about breeding stock horses. Apparently he was a very good farmer, too, and innovative for his time. What's more, the family farm he took his turn at managing, which was homesteaded in 1881, is still thriving. Fritz's 23-year-old great-grandson is primed to carry it forward.

Did the farmer know more about horse breeding than the cowboys? Or was there just magic in those three baby colts, like Jack's three magic beans.

If you only heard stories about King Fritz and the horses he sired, and didn't see his pedigree, you might think he was some complete genetic outcross. Not so. He was double-bred King; sired by a big-time show horse named Power Command, and out of mare from a big ranch (Waggoner's in this case), a Poco Bueno daughter. Another double-bred King of that vintage was King Glo, sired three of the first four NCHA Futurity Champions.

Credit Performance Horse Journal

When Les Vogt, here with Fritz Watkins on the left wearing glasses, bought King Fritz in 1970 he had to shell out \$50,000...plus an addition \$20,000 for a small band of mares.