



Heavy horses mark 100 years on Michigan campus

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A milestone in horse breeding was reached last week at Michigan State University, when 100 years of purebred horse breeding on the MSU campus was marked at the 31st annual Michigan Great Lakes International (MGLI) draft horse show.

This year marked the first time since the 1946 American Belgian Show that draft horses from the MSU programme have been exhibited. Seven MSU students from the advanced draft horse class will exhibit the university's five teaching horses - two Belgians and three Percherons - as their final exam assignment.

Students were responsible for getting the horses ready to show, said Cara O'Connor-Robison, MSU draft horse coordinator.

In the early 1900s the university established purebred breeding programs for working horse breeds, including Clydesdales (1907), Percherons (1908) and Belgians (1918). Except for a hiatus that lasted 36 years - from 1963 when the last of MSU's draft horses left the university until 1999 when Ilona and Mark Stewart donated a team of Belgians - draft horses have played a role in the history of the MSU horse programme.

"MSU has had some phenomenal draft horses over the years," O'Connor-Robison says. "Back when MSU was still known as the Michigan Agricultural College (M.A.C.), breeding stock was promoted by competing in halter classes at shows all across the Midwest."

The M.A.C. breeding program was very successful and known as one of the best collegiate stables in the country. Between 1910 and 1930, its draft horses won 211 firsts and 155 championships at state fairs and international competitions.

"One of the Belgians we own today traces back to the mare Pervenche that came here in 1922," O'Connor-Robison adds. "Pervenche won her first grand championship at the International Livestock Expo in Chicago in 1923 as a two-year-old and won again in 1924. She was praised by many as the complete draft horse."

As part of the anniversary celebration, an exhibit will be on display from the MSU Museum highlighting the history of the MSU horse program. It includes period pieces from 1907 to 1963 and two leather harnesses trimmed in brass with the M.A.C. logo.

O'Connor-Robison says that 100th anniversary hats will be available for purchase at the MGLI. Proceeds from hat sales will benefit the MSU draft horse endowment fund, which when fully funded will ensure that draft horses will remain on campus as long as there is livestock.

Billed as North America's finest and largest draft horse event, the MGLI attracts more than 1000 head of Belgian, Clydesdale and Percheron draft horses and nearly 300 exhibitors from across the Midwest and Canada. The annual show consistently draws crowds totaling nearly 36,000 during the event's four-day run and brings in an estimated \$900,000 of revenue to local hotels, restaurants and businesses. The MGLI is the only event of its kind in the world to feature halter, cart and hitch classes and plowing and pulling competitions for draft horse breeds and mules at the same location.