



# Canada's ROYAL HORSE

The Canadian horse, brought over from France more than 350 years ago, is recovering from the brink of extinction thanks to dedicated breeders



**ABOVE:** Four of the six Canadian horses at Gail Cuthbert Brandt's farm, near Plattsville, roam the paddock on a beautiful day.

**LEFT:** D'Artagnan, only two weeks old here, plays in a nearby field.

*“They were a phenomenal little horse, a general-purpose horse. They used them to plow. They drove them to church. They raced them.”*

JIM KEHOE, CHAIR OF RARE BREEDS CANADA



STORY AND PHOTOS BY LYNN HADRALL

**D**'Artagnan is a new Canadian whose ancestors were sent to North America by King Louis XIV in 1665. His birth on a local farm extends a family line that was once perilously close to extinction.

Gail Cuthbert Brandt introduced me to the frisky colt, and to her five other Canadian horses, shortly after D'Artagnan was born. On a fine spring day, Cuthbert Brandt and horse trainer Libby Peters spoke about working with this unique breed and about the joy that comes from preserving part of the country's history.

Cuthbert Brandt and her husband, Bernd Brandt, own Heronwood Farm near



Plattsville. The retired couple is passionate about their individual hobbies. Bernd collects vintage automobiles. Gail raises Canadian horses, a breed that had once dwindled to just a few hundred.

Cuthbert Brandt wants more people to understand and appreciate this breed descended from royal French stables. As a Canadian historian, she specialized in Quebec. She's the former principal of Renison University College at the University of Waterloo and among her loves are paintings by Cornelius Krieghoff showcasing the Canadian outdoors. Her horses descend from the majestic horses often depicted by that Dutch-Canadian artist. The breed is the official horse of Canada.

“It just appealed to me from that perspective as sort of the intellectual side,” Cuthbert Brandt says. “From the practical side, because I only got into this after I retired, I wanted a horse that was a so-called easy keeper.”

Canadians, nicknamed “the little iron horse,” match perfectly with her retirement plans. They don't eat a lot. They usually don't need to be shod. Their long, luxurious manes and sturdy feet are built to withstand harsh winters.

“They really live up to their reputation. They are a very intelligent horse and they learn very quickly. It just seemed like it was a good kind of coming to convergence of what my personal situation was, as an older person just getting into the horse industry and my academic background,” she says.

Cuthbert Brandt's family has a history of standardbred breeding. Her brother still has racehorses in Zorra Township. She was already planning for farm life when

**OPPOSITE TOP:** D'Artagnan frolics in the paddock as his mother, Rita, keeps a watchful eye on him.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** Gail Cuthbert Brandt, former principal of Renison University College, leads Rita and D'Artagnan to a paddock for some play time.

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she became principal of Renison in 1992 and learned to ride when she retired. She bought the farm intending to get one horse, unaware that there were so few of the Canadian breed left.

"I liked the fact that it was Canada's national horse, that was appealing to me. I thought I would like to do whatever I could to give it more publicity, get involved with promoting the breed."

Today, champions of the Canadian breed celebrate that it has come back from the brink.

"Their numbers have improved enough that it's not a huge issue," said Jim Kehoe, chair of Rare Breeds Canada. "There was a concern that maybe there weren't enough of them being bred. There are enough of them now, but there has to be enough demand for people to raise them."

Kehoe grew up with Canadian horses in the Ottawa Valley. His family called them French-Canadian horses. His horses weren't purebred, but they shared the traits for which the breed is cherished, dating from a time when farmers used animals for multiple tasks.

"They were a phenomenal little horse, a general-purpose horse. They used them to plow. They drove them to church. They raced them. And they're in the pedigree of a lot of other horses, including American breeds," Kehoe says.

Tina Morrison, Ontario director of the Canadian Horse Breeders Association, bought a farm and her first horse (a different breed) when she was a single mother raising three children. In expanding her herd, she chose the Canadian.

"I thought, 'Let's do it right.' If there are so many horses in the world, let's pick a breed that's going to need help and I did a lot of research and I kept coming back to this Canadian all the time."

The latest count reveals about 7,300 registered Canadians (horses 20 years old and younger) worldwide, up from about 400 when the breed bottomed out.

"It was terrible then because they were



almost extinct. It was mostly because of machinery, World War One, World War Two," Morrison says. "The United States took a lot of our horses for the wars. And then machinery came in and they didn't need the horse any more. And they exported so many and there were other horses they were using. They just didn't pick up. It was sad."

Morrison credits the breed's survival to dedicated breeders.

"Basically, it's just the breeders themselves, the passion of the people who belong to the Canadian Horse Breeders. They just decided themselves that this horse was worth saving and that's the only way the horse has come back."

Morrison is now breeding the offspring of one of her first Canadians. "It's special because this will be the first time one of our babies is giving us a baby. It just shows how long it takes to slowly build the numbers up."

Morrison has a three-hectare farm with a riding arena in Caistorville, about 30 minutes southeast of Hamilton.

"There is a Canadian horse for whatever discipline you want. You're not stuck in one genre. They can do driving, riding, jumping, dressage, anything. For me, I like to mate them, train them and sell them and educate. I've had other horses and this breed in particular is so sociable. They love people."

Morrison plans to attend the Ancaster fall fair again this year where she will educate

more people about the breed's storied past.

"It's the only horse that evolved in Canada. Had that horse not been brought to the new world, I don't think the inhabitants would have stayed. It would have been way too hard for them to stay here," she says. "I think that's the biggest thing. They wouldn't have stayed without this horse."

Morrison says the breed is great with children and is very intuitive. "They just make really tight bonds."

This seems evident on a visit to the Brandt farm. Each horse shows its personality as Cuthbert Brandt and Peters make their morning rounds in the stable. Like any family of six, this herd has its characters.

"You get to know their foibles, their personality and you really bond with them because we are working with them all the time, every day, sort of like each one of them is your child," says Cuthbert Brandt. "It's just the same way with your own children. You don't have a favourite, but you certainly appreciate each one for his or her personality and contribution to the herd."

D'Artagnan's personality is emerging. Curious, playful and smart, he was captivated by my camera and wasn't shy about nuzzling me as he frolicked in the paddock with watchful mother, Rita, nearby.

Horse-naming protocol required that his name start with a D. Arrivals next year will start with an E. His full name is Heronwood Tolou D'Artagnan. Cuthbert Brandt summoned royal flair in choosing his "D" name. On the farm, she fondly shortens it to Dart.

It doesn't matter if you call him by his royal name or by his everyday one. This colt comes with a tremendous family history. 

To learn more about the Canadian horse:  
lechevalcanadien.ca  
rarebreedscanada.org  
heronwoodcanadiens.com



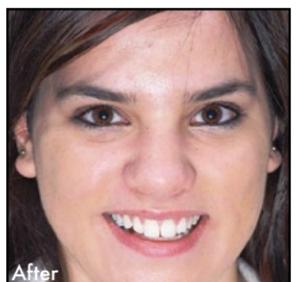
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