

Coconut Grove

Brings Heart & History to Sport Horse Breeding

By Pat Payne

Thoroughbred stallion Coconut Grove is a horse with an amazing story, complete with exotic tropical locations and full of dramatic moments and improbable plot twists. "It was the experience of a lifetime," says his former owner Tamara Smith. "We all want to believe stories like this can really happen. I know they can."

If you breed jumpers or event horses, you're probably already familiar with this amazing stallion. Yet there are many sport horse fans that haven't even heard his name before. Coconut Grove is approved as a breeding stallion by 18 Warmblood registries around the world, including nine in the United States, seven in Europe and one in Canada. He was the first Thoroughbred stallion to receive a breeding license by the American Hanoverian Society and the first and only Thoroughbred to be granted "Improvement Sire" status by the American Holsteiner Horse Association. That's a long way from the day when he was purchased by a Salt Lake City breeder, only to discover that he did not have valid Jockey Club papers and was, in official terms, simply a grade horse.

Latin Roots

Coconut Grove was bred in Colombia and began his show jumping career in South America, where he quickly demonstrated his talent and drive. In 1993, as a six year old, he won Colombia's Young Horse Competition. The following year, he took the reserve championships in both the Colombian National Junior Championship and the



The Thoroughbred stallion Coconut Grove.
Photo courtesy of October Hill Farm.

country's Young Rider Championship. Ridden by his amateur owner, he had many open jumping wins.

By 1996, professional rider German Camargo began working with Coconut Grove. He moved the horse up to Grand Prix and the pair soon proved themselves at this level, taking the championship at Peru's Bolivarianos Games and Colombia's Year End National Champion Jumper title in 1997. In 2000, he came to the United States to compete – Camargo and Coconut Grove's former owner and rider, now

married, brought the horse to compete at the U.S. Open Jumper Championships in Miami.

It was the \$100,000 U.S. Open Jumper Championships in which Coconut Grove took third that secured his competitive reputation, Tamara recounts. Competing in Miami was a struggle for his owners, she says, since they were newly arrived in the United States and short of cash and equipment. Still, they competed successfully despite those limitations, she continues, making do and going without for the good of their horse. "I think it was worth it for them," Tamara continues. "It's what truly jumpstarted German's training career here in the United States."

Bold Choices

Tamara is a Salt Lake City breeder who specializes in Thoroughbred sport horses. She was convinced that the combination of Damascus and Bold Ruler bloodlines cre-

ated outstanding jumpers. (Both are famed American Thoroughbreds from the 1950s and 1960s with outstanding race records.) She'd had this combination before with a stallion named Napur and she knew she'd seize any opportunity to own another stallion with the same bloodlines.

When Tamara read about Coconut Grove and realized his breeding was very similar to Napur, with both Damascus and Bold Ruler bloodlines, she immediately tried to find out if he was available for breeding or for sale. Thinking he was still in Colombia, she tried to locate him but had no success. Once she realized he was in the United States, she quickly contacted his owners, only to find out he was about to be sold to a group of European buyers. Because Coconut Grove suffered an injury in 2001, he had just been retired from competition and was offered for sale as a breeding stallion.

Coconut Grove, she adds, qualified for every major show jumping competition during his career. That includes the Olympics, the Pan American Games, the World Cup, the American Grand Prix Association Championships and the American Invitational.

"When I saw the video that the Camargos sent, I said, 'This horse is everything I'm looking for – he has to be the one for me,'"

Tamara recounts. Luck was with her, as the Camargos decided they would prefer to see the horse stay in the United States. When Tamara found out he was available, she immediately made arrangements to purchase him and bring him to Utah. She knew she was taking a chance purchasing a breeding stallion that had never stood at stud before. She quickly discovered just how big a chance she had taken.

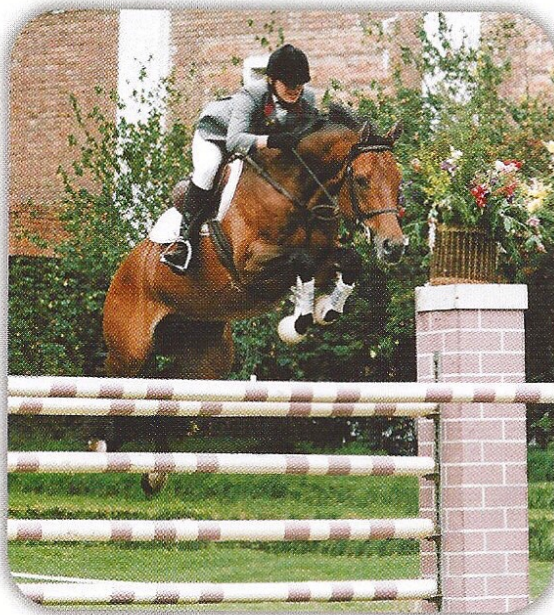
Coconut Grove's owners had not followed the official exportation procedures when bringing him from Colombia to the United States. As a result, he did not have valid Jockey Club registration and his offspring would not be eligible for registration either. Tamara struggled to find a way around this huge obstacle to her breeding plans.

Her initial requests to the Jockey Club were rejected leaving little hope that papers would be issued. Then, she recounts, she received the stroke of luck she desperately

needed. A Jockey Club employee realized that both Coconut Grove's sire and dam, bred in Colombia, had been blood typed. Since this information remained on file, Coconut Grove's blood type analysis could be compared. As a result, his breeding was authenticated and the Jockey Club issued his papers. Finally, Tamara could begin breeding him, but by then she had unfortunately lost a full breeding season.

This would not be the last of the struggles Tamara would face with Coconut Grove however. The following year, he suddenly went lame. Although he was originally thought to have foundered, the vets discovered the problem was actually severe hoof bruising that led to abscesses. As a result, she could only breed him a few times that year. Her plans shifted – 2003 would have to be Coconut Grove's first full breeding season.

It was a year which would prove that Tamara Smith's faith in her horse was justified. One of her client's 2003 foals, Quinze De Upatoi, went on to earn the highest score awarded to a yearling at the 2004's Selle Français U.S. inspection tour. It is a faith that has never wavered. "I knew the minute I saw him exactly what he was and how good he was," Tamara remembers. "It was a matter of everyone else seeing in this horse what I had already recognized. And his story really is like a fairy tale."



*Coconut Grove during his jumping career.
Photo courtesy of October Hill Farm.*

Warmblood Nod of Approval

In 2003, Tamara applied to the American Holsteiner Horse Association (AHHA) for a breeding license for Coconut Grove. "When a friend suggested I try to get Coconut Grove approved as a Warmblood, I thought 'why not?' He was exceptional in every way. It simply never occurred to me that he wouldn't be approved. I also never realized what the process entailed. That's how naïve I was about the European breeding system," Tamara recounts. "And I found out later that my friend was only joking about submitting the horse for approval!"

After making an official application and waiting several months for a decision, the AHHA approved Coconut Grove for limited breeding. (Because of those limitations, each mare owner had to petition the AHHA for approval before breeding.) He was also approved by the North American

Selle Français Association and the Rheinland Pfalz-Saar association, now known as Rhineland Pfalz-Saar International, or RPSI.

Soon, Tamara says, she received a call from Rick Toering from the American Hanoverian Society's (AHS) Jumper Breeding Program, asking if she would consider trying for AHS licensing and approval. After an internal debate about the wisdom of a trip to California for the required inspection, she decided to make the journey. "Each time you put a stallion 'out there' for approval, you risk being denied, which will mar his approval record. I believed in the stallion, so it was a risk I was willing to take. It would be the difference between him being recognized as truly great rather than just very good," she explains.

During that trip, Coconut Grove was presented for inspection at both the Hanoverian society and the Oldenburg Registry North America. In 2004, he made the trip to the west coast again, this time for the KWPN North America (Dutch) inspection. For these inspections, he was presented by well-known California-based trainer Willy Arts, who remained very involved with the stallion even after these approvals, Tamara says.

After these approvals, Tamara continues, she made the decision to limit the horse's travel because of his age and his value. He continued to receive approvals and licenses from the various breeding organizations, she says, but viewings were done on her farm or approval was granted based on his prior approvals. Those included several European organizations. (Please see "Approvals at a Glance" on page 40 for more information.) "I swore I just wasn't going to do any more," she says with a laugh.

She notes that early on the breeding associations placed restrictions on his breeding. The AHHA required all mares to be individually approved before breeding, while the Hanoverian Society simply noted that careful mare selection was needed. (Rick Toering adds that the AHA required that the mares have a certain percentage of "Hanoverian blood.") Breeding Coconut Grove to another Thoroughbred presented yet another set of requirements. Because the Jockey Club requires live cover breeding, Coconut Grove has very few registered Thoroughbred offspring. "That's one of my greatest heartaches – I can't ship semen and give Jockey Club papers. There are very few registered Thoroughbreds out there by Coconut Grove," Tamara says.

Still Going Strong

In late 2008, Tamara, facing personal decisions, sold Coconut Grove. Fellow breeder Wendy Davis Gerrish was eager to buy him, so the horse made the move to Texas. He is now based at Wendy's October Hill Farm in Hudson Oaks, near Fort Worth.

"It was a gamble but one I was excited to take," she explains. "I've known about Coconut Grove since the first minute after his breeding approval with the AHHA in 2003. I picked up the phone and got to know Tamara, and bought five breedings from him that first season. I thought, 'How lucky that we have an opportunity to use this incredibly successful, blooded stallion on our big, powerful jumping mares!' I bought more breedings to

him this year to use on an outstanding show mare that we wanted embryos from. The semen is just off-the-chart, really, really good. When Tamara called to offer us ownership, my only answer was 'absolutely!'"

"With Coconut Grove, we have the chance to go back and introduce another really accomplished blooded jumper stallion into our Warmblood breeding programs," she continues.

The changes that a stallion like Coconut Grove can introduce into his offspring are dramatic, she says, especially when breeding to very large and heavy mares. The combination can lighten the bone size, shorten the back, help get a longer leg and more sloping shoulder, and produce a hind leg more underneath the body to increase power from behind. Continually breeding larger and heavier horses to each other will bring the Warmblood breeds back to an older type that will not satisfy many of today's riders, she says. "Stride adjustability is crucial to being competitive on today's technical courses, and having that Thoroughbred influence—really accomplished Thoroughbred—has proven to enhance the performance and agility of Warmblood horses."

Like Wendy, Hanoverian breeder Rick Toering says Coconut Grove introduces some needed lightness to the Warmblood breeds. "I had been looking for a Thoroughbred stallion I could use since I have several heavier, old-style mares," he explains. "The second I saw he'd been approved by the Holsteiners, I started making phone calls within the Hanoverian society. I thought this was exactly the kind of horse we should be excited about."

In the end, what counts, former owner Tamara Smith says, is the horse's ability to improve his offspring. "All those approvals are fine and dandy on paper," she explains. "The fact that he's producing the way he is –

"Each time you put a stallion 'out there' for approval, you risk being denied, which will mar his approval record."

that's what really counts."

Both his present and former owner hope Coconut Grove will continue in the breeding shed for years to come. At 22, he continues to provide high-quality semen, current owner Wendy Davis Gerrish says. "He won't be around forever, but he's in excellent shape," she adds. "I haven't had a breeding stallion as old as Coconut Grove before now. Both he and our stallion Mezcalero both turned 22 this year. He'll let me know when he's ready to stop. But for now, he's going strong!"

Not Without Controversy

The decision made by so many Warmblood registries to approve Coconut Grove has generated some controversy. After all, he is the first Thoroughbred stallion ever granted a breeding license by the American Hanoverian Society and the only one to be granted "Improvement Sire" status with the American Holsteiner Horse Association.

The AHS approval process created a unique set of challenges for the society, says Rick Toering, with some in the organization questioning the wisdom of introducing a Thoroughbred stallion into the registry and others questioning whether Coconut Grove was the right Thoroughbred. In the end, he says, Dr. Ludwig Christman, breeding director at the German Hanoverian Verband, helped influence the decision. Because of reciprocity between the two organizations, when Coconut Grove was licensed by the AHS, he was automatically licensed by the German organization.



*Carino OHF, by Coconut Grove crossed with the Holsteiner mare Filsa by Corrado I.
Photo by October Hill Farm.*



*Corazon BF, by Coconut Grove crossed with the Oldenburg mare Gold Coin by Goldglanz.
Photo by Sheryl Ross Photography.*



Coquette BHF as a yearling at the 2007 Devon competition.

"Traditionally, you bring Thoroughbreds into your breeding program to lighten the type and make it more beautiful. You also hope to bring the Thoroughbred 'heart' – the stamina and the courage and the forward energy – to the equation," Rick Toering continues. "But there's sometimes concern about the salability of that first generation. Most breeders hope to get a really good filly from those first breedings, in order to produce top performance horses in the second generation," he says. He points out that many top performance horses, including top Hanoverian showjumper Shutterfly, for example, are out of mares sired by full Thoroughbred stallions.

Next Generation


Since Coconut Grove did not begin his breeding career until he was 15 in 2002, his offspring are just now coming into the show ring. Here's a glimpse of where some of them are today.

Carino OHF, registered as a Holsteiner, is now competing in Mexico. He is owned by rider Carlos Perez and was bred by October Hill Farm. At four years old, he is competing at the 1.0 meter level "He's a super horse," Carlos says. "I bought him because I am such a fan of Thoroughbred horses!"

"I have a very successful 17 hand four-year-old colt by Coconut Grove out of my very good mare Gold Coin by Goldglanz," reports Kc Branscomb of Branscomb Farms in Half Moon Bay, California. "**Corazon BF** is currently being prepared for the Young Jumper Championships five-year-olds class next year, jumping under

saddle 1.0 to 1.1 meters and showing very good scope, bravery, and excellent technique. He is a light, uphill type with elegant movement and an explosive jump."

"Internationally respected course designer and training consultant Linda Allen who supervises Branscomb Farms' young jumper training program says of Corazon B, 'he is the perfect example of the quality you can produce when you put a Thoroughbred of good jumping bloodlines on top of a classically-bred pure Warmblood mare of great quality.' He could be at home in the 4' hunter ring or, with training, the Grand Prix," Kc continues.

Breeder and AHS Board Member Rick Toering will be presenting his three-year-old Hanoverian filly **Coquette BHF** during the AHS 2009 Inspection Tour. Coquette is out of his wife's competition mare selected for the North American Hanoverian Jumper Breeding Program. He says this filly demonstrates exactly what breeders might expect from Coconut Grove. "While she's a little smaller than I hoped, she has an incredible canter and she's smarter, more agile and more athletic than her dam. You can really see the improvement when you compare their performance through the jumping chute!" Coquette is currently in foal for 2010, after which time Toering expects her to begin her performance career. 

Approvals at a Glance

**These registries have approved
Coconut Grove as a breeding stallion:**

*American Holsteiner Horse Association
American Hanoverian Society
(& Hanoverian Jumper Breeding Program)
Association Nationale du Selle Français
Belgian Warmblood Breeding Association
Belgisch Warmbloed Paard vzw
(Belgian Warmblood Studbook)
Canadian Warmblood Horse Breeders Association
Hannoveraner Verband
KWPN (Royal Warmblood Studbook
of the Netherlands)
KWPN-North America
North American Selle Français Association
(not currently operating)
Oldenburg Horse Breeders Society (North America)
Oldenburg Registry North America
& International Sporthorse Registry
Pferdezuchtverband Rheinland-Pfalz-Saar
Rhineland Pfalz-Saar International
Studbook Zangersheide
Trakehner Verband
Verband der Züchter des Oldenburger Pferdes*