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THE EQUESTRIAN LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

THE AIKEN HORSE SHOW

Its History And Highlights

Spring Fashion Spectacular

TALES OF TWO RARE BREEDS

A SUPPLEMENT TO THE CHRONICLE OF THE HORSE



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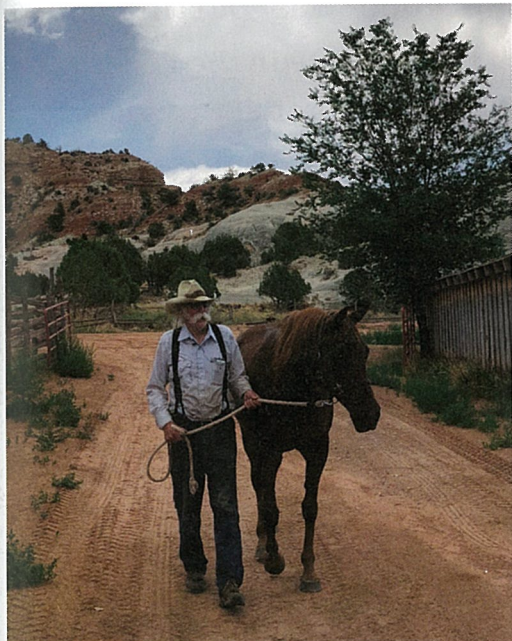


SPRING STYLES
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*un*TACO

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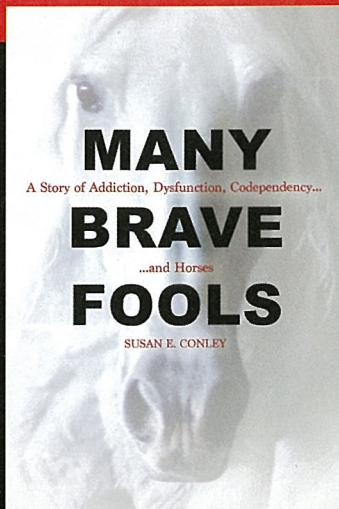
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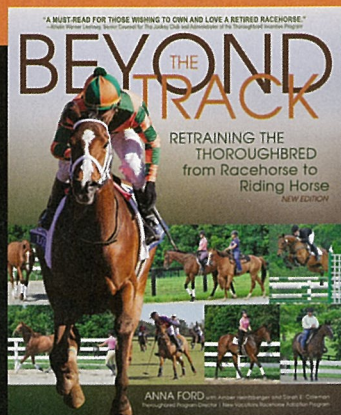
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THE EQUESTRIAN LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

A MEMOIR



Susan Conley shares how the process of making herself into a rider helped her become the person she most wanted to be: not the “ex-wife of an addict,” but a responsive, confident woman, entering the prime of her life.

A REFERENCE



With step-by-step instructions for building the solid educational foundation the OTTB needs to excel in a new career, this book is **the** go-to reference for anyone interested in pursuing a partnership with a Thoroughbred athlete.

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Some historians think the equines depicted on the Parthenon frieze were relatives of modern-day Skyrian horses.

SAVING THE Skyrian HORSE

For Sylvia Dimitriades Steen, helping the breed thrive on the Greek island of Corfu and beyond is a story of patronage and persistence.

By Tania Evans

Standing in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens, I compare the frieze replicas on display at the base of the Acropolis to a photo of Skyrian horses I'd taken two days before on the Greek island of Corfu. Both show blocky forelocks and clipped manes standing stiff and thick.

In many of the museum's reliefs and statues, I see the uncut flowing mane and forelock that today's Skyrians flash in their distinctive headshake. This dramatic toss of the heavy mane makes it ripple and flow like the tides around the Greek islands. I see the same small, athletic equine, similar confidence and innate athleticism. I recognize the skull shape, especially the square nose and the soft set of the eyes, so different from today's other small island horses, such as the Icelandic horses or England's Exmoor pony—different from any other equine.

Skyrian horses today are smart and friendly, and they're often escape artists, jumping raised fences or crawling through them. But despite a long and colorful history on Corfu, the Skyrian horse was officially labeled "critical-maintained" in 1991.

Enter Sylvia Dimitriades Steen. In 1996, Steen brought four Skyrians—Pearl, Ruby, Emerald and Sapphire—from Thessaloniki, Greece, to Corfu. She called her non-profit organization The Silva Project, aimed at protecting rare animal and plant species at her home estate, Villa Silva. Her Skyrian horse herd grew, and Steen bought more land, beginning construction of a stable, school, life-enrichment center, organic kiwi farm and an animal rescue center.



MARK HIGGINS/ISTOCK PHOTO



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TANIA EVANS PHOTO

Sylvia Dimitriades Steen, pictured at her expansive covered arena in Greece, has made it her mission to save Skyrian horses for the last 25 years.



TANIA EVANS PHOTO

Sylvia Dimitriades Steen brought in Rachel Etherington as breeding manager of her Skyrian horse program around 2003.

Meanwhile, in 2005, the Skyros Island Horse Trust Project began, a mission to save the horse that had lived on another Greek island in the Aegean Sea for centuries but numbered around 100 at the time. This effort produced a breeding program, a studbook and a Skyrian rescue and earned worldwide media attention, including numerous National Geographic articles and a documentary produced by Horse Fly Films called “Of Gods and Kings.”

Through three Greek programs—on Skyros, Corfu and the third on the farm near Thessaloniki—the horses’ worldwide population is now around 350.

Today the mares on the island of Skyros cannot be exported. However, because the Corfu program is private, Steen sends out small colonies from Corfu to well-researched places: The first of these went to Scotland through the veterinarian Alec Copland. This herd was later taken over by the veterinarian Sheilagh Nisbet who says, “I fell in love with them.”

Steen’s horses also went to Clio Marshall in France; she first purchased two geldings from Nisbet and started a nonprofit organization, Bouillon de Poney. She next purchased two mares in foal and a young stallion from Steen, and she later obtained another stallion from Eleni Natsika.

“We believe that promoting the Skyrian Horse in France will eventually have a positive impact on the breeders in Greece, even if we can’t see the benefit right now,” says Marshall. “We have kept the two stallions at the farm [and] given them some time to adjust to their new environment, and we are now working on some new projects for them: They will be working with some local kids—we would like to have a program that focuses on everything the relationship with a horse can bring to a kid, and not on the riding—and we are discussing a project with a local sophrologist who is interested in introducing horses to her patients.”

In addition to breeding, Nisbet’s and Marshall’s programs are training and placing Skyrians in therapeutic riding work. The Scottish enthusiasts have about 30, divided into four herds.

As of late 2018, Steen and breeding manager Rachel Etherington have bred 45 Skyros horses and placed at least 18 in new homes, expanding to England and Crete.

“We have the best Skyrian blood in Greece,” says Steen. “Not only is the Skyros a rare breed, but we are maintaining a valuable genetic resource for the whole world.

“I always wanted to send a satellite herd of Skyrians to America—before I die!” she adds.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

But why does it matter if the horses are dying out? What’s one more extinct species in our world where so many others have gone extinct?

For one thing, the Skyrian horses have stubbornly survived for many thousands of years.

Is the Skyrian horse of today related to the horses that pulled Achilles' chariot at Troy, before carrying him into battle, in mythology? Are the Skyrian horses the ones depicted in white marble, being ridden across the upper walls of the cella inside the Parthenon? Historians debate those questions.

But that's not where the horse's historical significance ends. Around 350 B.C., Alexander the Great of Macedonia likely rode into battle on a Skyros—perhaps because he needed a sturdy, sound, smart and calm horse of great endurance.

Whether the horse was already there from the time of Achilles or only later, the horse has disappeared from all other places. Only in Skyros did the Skyrian survive, so it was given the island's name. Easily captured and willing to work, the horse was used for war and farming.

But another reason for the horse's value is genetic. A study conducted in 2011 on the horses' DNA proved it a unique breed. Six of seven native horse types in Greece were traced back to Middle Eastern breeds, but the Skyrian was distinct in DNA. Distinct, in fact, from every other breed in the world.

Steen's Skyrians number 27 now, with five at her inland farm Silvaland and 22 at Villa Silva in Kanoni. The herd in Kanoni draws a long stare from me when I walk through the pines up to their barn and metal pole paddocks on Steen's estate.

They toss their gloriously thick manes and move lightly on their feet to see me. As we talk Etherington trims the hoof of a 35-year-old mare, one of the originals brought from Thessaloniki. She explains how their self-sufficient lifestyle has lengthened their lifespans and strengthened their feet. They never need shoes, which is fortunate since there are no large animal veterinarians on Corfu and few farriers.

TANIA EVANS PHOTOS



Skyrian horses now number around 350, and they're known to be hardy and good natured, which helps them excel in therapeutic riding programs.

The 22-year-old stallion Leonidas comes out of his stall, shaking his mane and gracefully strolling around, glancing over at the mares in small paddocks behind his. His fence has been raised several times since he can jump almost twice his own height.

All of the Skyrian horses I met are under 115 centimeters—about 11 to 12 hands—bay or black, or occasionally gray. They are born with white legs that go black at 6 months. A star on the forehead is sometimes acceptable, but no other white is allowed for their registry.

They move like horses rather than ponies. They have long trot strides full of suspension, walk strides that overreach 8 inches or more, and gentle, reaching canters. Perhaps they grew taller before food became scarce on Skyros, but they were never large. The men riding them across the Parthenon frieze dangle their legs past the horses' bellies. Though they were used for war in centuries past, today they excel as therapeutic riding mounts and as children's horses and driving ponies.

A DESIRE TO HELP

Though she's now retired, Steen was a psychologist, having studied at the University of Geneva under the famous Jean Piaget. She devoted her career, her energy and inheritance to helping people.

In 1963, along with Maria Papagou, she founded Theotokos, a non-profit organization in Athens for people with special needs. Today this organization serves people under 25, and it is the largest such center in Greece, annually helping more than 400 clients. She also founded two nursery schools, produced educational wooden toys for schools, and she is a founding member of Greek Canine Society and Greek Animal Welfare Fund.

In 1996, she retired to her family summer estate on the peninsula of Kanoni, the site of the ancient capital for the island. As a youngster, Steen begged her father to return more permanently to Corfu and their vacation site on Kanoni, and finally he bought this wooded hill in 1956. It was christened Villa Silva.

"I used to play at the monastery at the foot of our cliff when the nuns still lived there," she says, referencing the now closed Vlacherna Monastery that lies on a small island below. "And I went night fishing with the local fishermen too. In the full moon of August, we caught many fish."

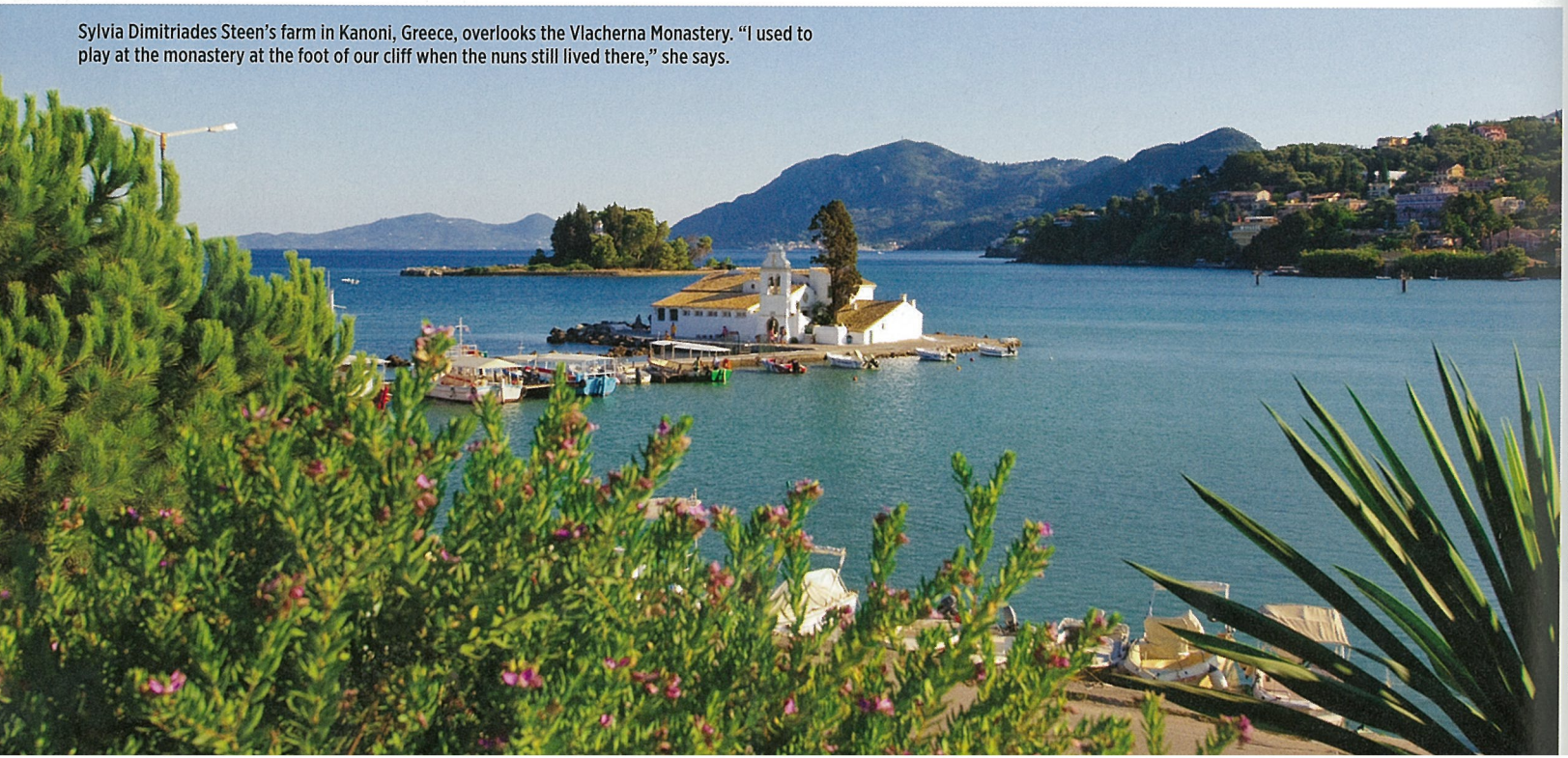
The estate is an ancient site; it boasts a lemon eucalyptus tree, verified to be 900 years old. There is also a 1,500-year-old ficus tree just outside her house. The Kanoni estate is hilly and wooded, rocky and breathtakingly beautiful when viewed from the top of the cliffs that drop down to the ever-changing blues of the Ionian Sea.

Soon after her retirement Steen founded an animal rescue group. She got calls from all over Greece to take on rescue animals—among them songbirds, tortoises, giant snakes and even a kangaroo. When I arrive, Steen is on the patio, feeding injured vultures in a large cage shaded by tropical trees and pines, a mix of altitude and climate.

"I've re-homed dozens of stray dogs," she says. "Then I heard about the Skyros. Their situation was dire in 1996."

Steen, ever the therapist and a supporter of the needy, brought Skyrians under her personal umbrella. Over the next 20 years, she acquired several, and she bred judiciously, keeping meticulous records. It turned out the Skyrian horse had a knack for therapy work. The horses require no tall, strong side-walkers to hold

Sylvia Dimitriades Steen's farm in Kanoni, Greece, overlooks the Vlacherna Monastery. "I used to play at the monastery at the foot of our cliff when the nuns still lived there," she says.



patients aboard. No ramp is needed to help people onto their backs. The horses are low maintenance, rarely sick and very easy keepers.

Initially Steen built stabling in the woods on her Kanoni land, inviting volunteer workers and interns, many housed in her 200-year-old home. Around 2003 she hired Etherington to run the breeding program. Then Steen bought land a few miles inland where she built a magnificent open air indoor arena—still the only covered arena on Corfu—stables, and a cafe she called Silvaland. In 2012, she opened Silvaland to the public, offering lessons for children with special needs, as well as a riding program for all children.

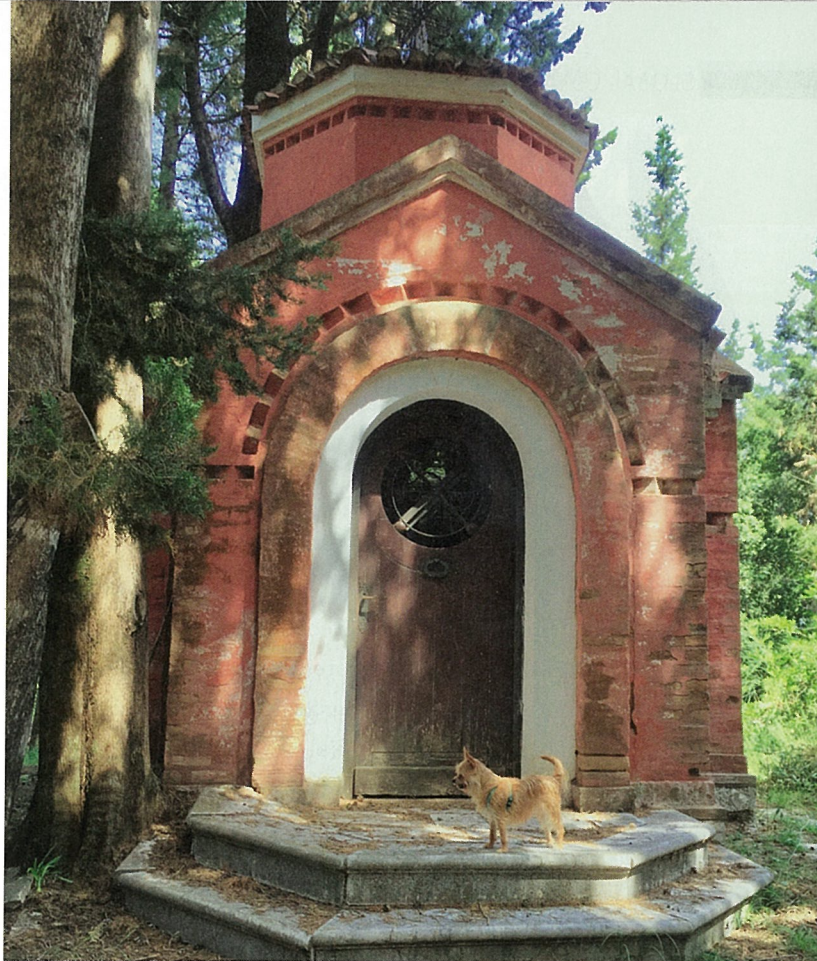
Driving from the tourist-ridden coast to the interior of the island is a breath of fresh, if not ocean, air. The olive groves, 500 years old, shape the terrain everywhere outside of the cities. Narrow roads, often gravel with some asphalt, give way to the groves. Black nets, like fishing nets, hang from trees or lie rolled up in long snake-like coils waiting for late fall when olives ripen and drop. Corfu exports the olives, handpicked by villagers.

The past is present in Corfu, both the good and the bad. Even today, Greek parents can be reluctant to admit their children have physical and mental challenges, according to both Etherington and Steen, who have been working with such children in Greece for years.

But those who bring their children to ride or groom the Skyrians at Silvaland find the contact elicits joy and communication. Parents participate in the lessons or sip a coffee in the cafe while watching their children ride in the expansive covered arena. For several years, Steen brought in clinicians to give lessons and to teach staff. A Brazilian therapeutic riding instructor trained employees from 2003 to 2008, and competitions were held in a variety of disciplines. But the funds for these events have dried up.

It's now been nearly 24 years since Steen retired to Corfu. In that time, she has bred Skyrians carefully, and they now live in Scotland, England, Ireland, France and Crete. She has 27 more Skyrians at home, many ready to find new homes, including a 10-month-old stallion—though the introduction of piroplasmiasis in areas of Greece has made their export more challenging.

But one fact looms: Steen can no longer financially sponsor the Skyrian herd in Greece, or share export and relocation costs. In the near future she sees the limit of her patronage of the herd at Kanoni and the operational costs of the Silvaland school and its covered arena. A philanthropist all her life, she now needs help to support Skyrian survival. Her generosity has jeopardized her own health and financial future, all because she wanted them to live beyond immortality on a museum frieze. 🍷



Retiring to her land in Kanoni, Greece, was a dream come true for Sylvia Dimitriades Steen.

