



The Flemish Horse: The Gentle Giant of the Low Countries

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The Flemish horse is one of the oldest and most influential heavy horse breeds in the world — the ancestor of the great draft breeds of Europe and America, and still the standard by which sheer horsepower is measured. Known today as the Belgian Draft, the Brabant, or by its Flemish name **Belgisch trekpaard**, this massive, good-natured animal has pulled wagons, plows, cannons, and knights through nearly a thousand years of European history, and it remains one of the most beloved working breeds on earth.

A Warhorse's Lineage

The Flemish horse traces its ancestry to the “great horse” of the medieval battlefield. In the Middle Ages, the marshy lowlands of Flanders and Brabant produced horses that were large, strong, and steady enough to carry fully armored knights — a load that could easily exceed 250 kilograms. This was the age of the destrier, the warhorse, and Flanders was famous for breeding the best. Chroniclers of the era praised the “Flanders horse” above all others, and Flemish breeders exported horses across Europe, where they were prized by kings, nobles, and mercenary cavalry alike.

It was this medieval stock, crossed and refined over centuries, that eventually produced the modern Flemish draft horse. When armor became obsolete and knights retired from the battlefield, the Flemish horse found a new career: agriculture.

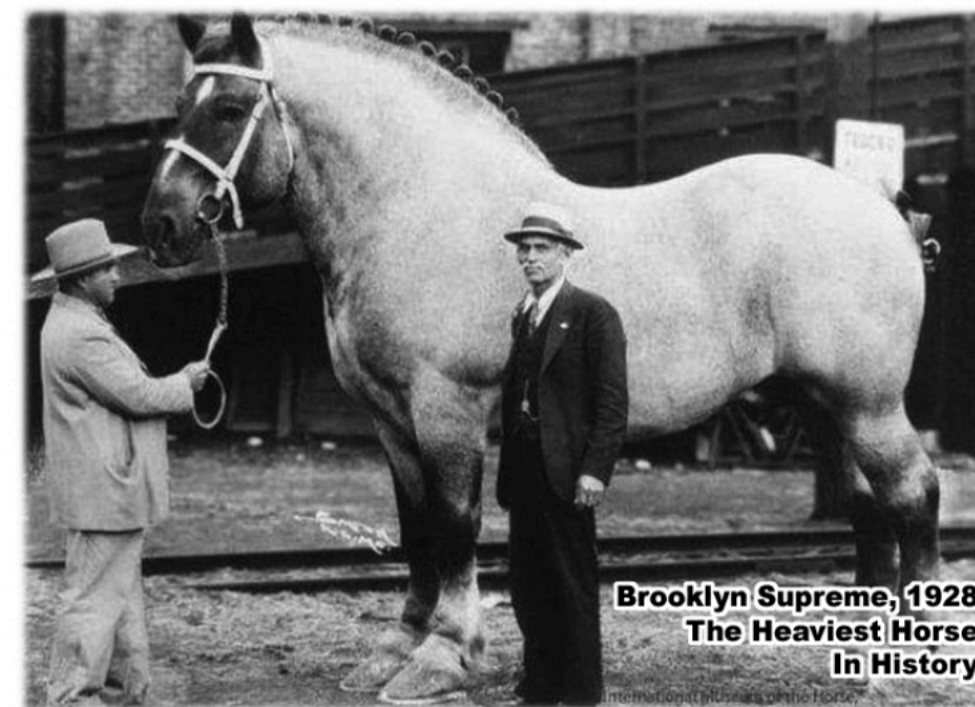


The same strength and calmness that had served it in war made it ideal for pulling plows through heavy clay soil, hauling timber, and drawing barges along the canals of the Low Countries.

The Making of a Breed

The horse we recognize today as the Flemish — or Belgian — draft is largely a product of the nineteenth century, when breeders in the provinces of Brabant and East Flanders began standardizing the type. In 1886, Belgian breeders founded the studbook for the **Cheval de Trait Belge**, making the Belgian one of the first heavy horse breeds in Europe to be formally organized and recorded. The demand was enormous: at the breed's peak around 1910, more than 200,000 Belgian draft horses were registered, and the export trade to America was booming. The American Belgian Draft Horse Corporation was founded in 1887 to receive and register them.

What breeders selected for was mass. The classic Flemish horse stands 15.3 to 17 hands high and weighs between 1,800 and 2,200 pounds — with stallions sometimes topping 2,500. Its conformation is built for power: a short, thick, muscular neck, a broad chest, deep barrel, strong, short legs with heavy bone, and immense hindquarters that supply the thrust for



draft breeds from the Ardennes to the Percheron.

The Flemish horse also made history as the biggest of all time. The most famous Belgian ever recorded, Brooklyn Supreme, a stallion born in Iowa in 1928, stood 19.2 hands and weighed about 3,200 pounds — among the largest horses in documented history. At the other end of the scale, the breed earned a quieter fame for its legendary temperament: Belgian drafts are famously docile, patient, and easy to handle, earning them the nickname “gentle giants.”

Hard Times and Revival

Mechanization struck the draft horse hard. By the 1950s, tractors and trucks had nearly eliminated working horses across the industrialized world, and Belgium was no exception. The registered population of Belgian draft horses in their homeland fell to just a few thousand, and by the 1960s the Old Type Brabant was nearly extinct — a casualty of exactly the agricultural efficiency the breed had made possible. World War II had taken a further toll, as occupying armies requisitioned horses wholesale.

The rescue came from an unexpected direction: America. Because American breeders had continued to register and breed Belgians in large numbers — keeping the blood of the original Flemish imports alive — the breed survived on the other side of the Atlantic. In the 1980s and 1990s, Belgian and American breeders began re-importing European bloodlines, and European breeders turned back to America for stock to rebuild their depleted herds. Belgium's own population recovered from the brink, and today the Belgian is one of the most popular draft breeds worldwide.

The Gentle Giant Today

Modern Flemish horses have found a new career beyond the plow. They remain unmatched in pulling competitions, where they drag weighted sleds in tests of raw strength that would break lesser breeds. They work in logging and small-scale agriculture, drive carriages, appear in parades and historical reenactments, and — thanks to their steady dispositions — serve as dependable mounts and companions for riders of all ages. The breed's reputation for calm makes it a favorite for beginners, and its strength makes it the anchor of many a draft-horse team.

In Belgium, the **Belgisch trekpaard** is a point of national pride. Festivals celebrate the breed, breeders maintain the old bloodlines with fierce dedication, and the Flemish horse has been officially recognized as a cultural treasure of Flanders. From the armored battlefield of the Middle Ages to the pulling ring of the twenty-first century, the Flemish horse has carried the working world on its broad back — a gentle giant whose influence spans the entire history of the draft horse.

the pull. The typical color is light chestnut with a flaxen mane and tail, but roans, bays, and blacks are also common. Compared to other drafts like the Clydesdale or the Shire, the Belgian carries little feathering on its legs — an asset in the mud of European barnyards.

A Gentler Divide

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the breed split into two directions. American importers, who prized speed, stature, and a showier look, bred their Belgians taller and lighter — the “American Belgian,” which today is the most numerous draft breed in the United States. The Europeans, meanwhile, preserved the older, heavier, more massive type, known as the Brabant, which remains closer to the original Flemish model. Both descend from the same Flemish stock, and both were exported around the globe, contributing their blood to

