



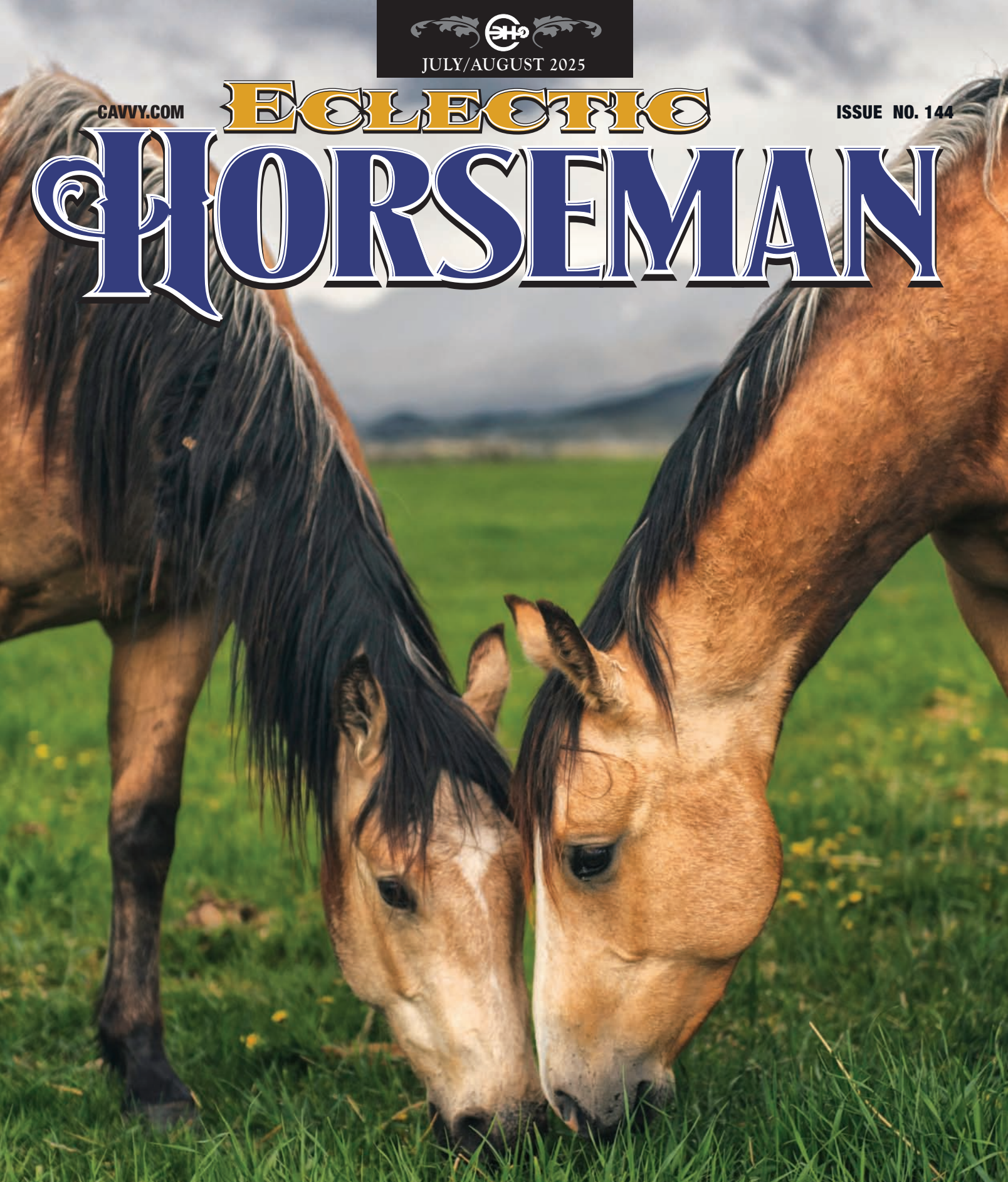
JULY/AUGUST 2025

CAVVY.COM

ISSUE NO. 144

ELECTIC

HORSEMAN



RAY DAYS REUNION 3 • PARADIGM SHIFTERS: TEMPLE GRANDIN — A GUIDE TO THE EQUINE MIND 4

THE TIMING OF THE ASK 8 • DECODING EQUINE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH: GENETIC DISEASES 10

MOTHER OF ALL GAITS: THE WALK 12 • THE NOKOTA HORSE 22 • A JACK OF ALL TRADES 24

After the Fair

BREED SPOTLIGHT ON THE NOKOTA HORSE

At the recent Midwest Horse Fair®, we learned about a rare breed that is shining a spotlight on this breed forged in history and hope.

In the vast expanse of the Northern Plains, a horse breed with a remarkable history and an even more promising future is slowly but surely reclaiming its rightful place: the Nokota Horse. Once belonging to the Lakota people and later isolated within Theodore Roosevelt National Park, these hardy and intelligent equines are now at the heart of a passionate preservation effort. With approximately 750 Nokota horses alive today and a registry of roughly 3,000 (including deceased horses), the Nokota Horse Conservancy, founded in 1999, is dedicated to ensuring their survival and promoting their unique qualities.

A REDISCOVERY BORN OF NECESSITY

The story of the modern Nokota Horse breed's rediscovery began in the 1970s. When Theodore Roosevelt National Park started auctioning off horses that had become isolated within its boundaries, brothers Frank and Leo Kuntz were among those who purchased them. Their initial goal wasn't to save a breed, but to introduce hardiness and bone to their own riding horses, which were struggling with the demands of long-distance competitions. What they soon realized, however, was that these horses were truly something special.

This realization coincided with the interest of Castle McLaughlin, Ph.D.; a Harvard University professor who was researching the horse's historical lineage on behalf of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Her historical and genealogical research, combined with the distinctive physical characteristics (phenotype and confirmation) observed in the park horses, laid the groundwork for establishing the Nokota Horse Conservancy.

UNRAVELING THE GENETIC TAPESTRY

For years, the Nokota Horse faced skepticism, often dismissed as merely inbred or crossbred Spanish Mustangs. However, recent scientific studies are painting a very different picture. Cornell University, with world-renowned equine geneticist Doug Antczak DVM, Ph.D., has taken a keen interest in the Nokota's exceptional hardiness and resilience.

A groundbreaking Cornell study found that Nokota horses possess the highest propensity of "Garrano genetics" among 40 commonly known breeds. The Garrano horse is an ancient and incredibly rare pony breed that originated in a region of what is now Portugal with only about 300 individuals left in existence today. This discovery links the Nokota to a deeply ancient equine lineage. Furthermore, the study identified the precursor to the modern Trakehner and South American Criollo genetics within the Nokota population. The University of North Dakota also found intriguing traces of Siberian and Asian ancestry,

prompting questions about potential ancient migrations across land bridges or even Viking introductions.

Perhaps most astonishingly, Phase Two of the Cornell study revealed that out of 12 haplotype loci tested for, Nokota horses carry nine that have never been seen in any other equine known to science. This points to a truly unique genetic makeup that contributes to their remarkable resilience and ability to fend off common diseases.

A BREED OF DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES

Nokota horses are not only genetically unique but also possess a distinct temperament and set of aptitudes. While they share the high self-preservation instinct of many wild horses, they are described as more calculated and less reactive than Mustangs. They'll assess a fence before hopping it like a mule and demand a connection and relationship before fully committing to training. This strong sense of awareness and respect is a hallmark of the breed.

In terms of appearance, about a third of the Nokota herd are roans, with grays and overos (with smaller, interesting spottings) also common. Physically, they can vary from "little traditionals" to taller ranch lines, making them versatile for different disciplines.

VERSATILITY IN ACTION

Despite their relatively small numbers, Nokota horses are proving to be incredibly versatile partners. They excel in a variety of disciplines, including:

- Liberty work
- Extreme Cowboy Race
- Cowboy Dressage
- Jumping (especially those with taller ranch lines)
- Ranch work
- Therapy work (due to their compassionate and empathetic nature)
- Bridleless riding

The Nokota Horse Conservancy actively promotes the breed through participation in events like the Midwest Horse Fair, recognizing that public exposure is key to their long-term survival. With a dedicated community of breeders, trainers, and enthusiasts, the Nokota Horse is poised to move beyond being just a "feral horse" stigma and into its rightful place as a recognized and cherished breed, offering its unique gifts of athleticism, intelligence, and profound emotional connection to those who take time to truly know them.

Why are you here at the Midwest Horse Fair?

"It's very much about getting these horses out and seen so people can see them and meet them. We have pockets throughout the country so far where people know about them. This is our first time here, and here was the Liberty Competition, and so I applied to exhibit with Mesabi because it's still my feeling that people are only gonna notice if they see them being shown. So I said, 'Let's bring the booth. Let's do all the horses and the breed demo and get them here.'"

—Jerusha Steinert, Vice President, Executive Committee Chair, Marketing and Advertising, The Nokota Horse Conservancy®.

"We asked Douglas Antczak, VMD, Ph.D., the Cornell University researcher, what he would recommend to help the breed survive. And we were thinking he was going to give us recommendations on breeding practices, and he said, 'get these horses out into the world. You've got to get people to care about them, and that will create the feedback loop that will help you sustain them, to take care of the core breeding herd, and also, widen the numbers in general. But if nobody knows about them, why should anybody care about them?' So that's a huge part of our mission and our focus is to be able to be out in the world."

—Judy Onufer, Treasurer, Executive Board Chair, Development and Fundraising Committee, The Nokota Horse Conservancy®.

**LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BREED AT:
NOKOTAHORSE.ORG**



Nokota horses were exhibited at the breed demonstration, during the 2025 Midwest Horse Fair.



ABOUT MIDWEST HORSE FAIR

Since 1979, with a goal to serve as America's epicenter for the equine community, the fair strives to provide the ultimate experience for equine enthusiasts and the public through exposition, education, and entertainment. As the largest three-day horse fair in the country, it caters to both Western and English riders. The Midwest Horse Fair is owned by the Wisconsin Horse Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes the equine industry in the state of Wisconsin. Proceeds from the fair benefit the Wisconsin Horse Council for grants and scholarships, trail improvements, leadership programs, and communication to help future growth and development of the equine industry. The 2026 fair is scheduled to take place April 17-19 at the Alliant Energy Center in Madison, Wisconsin. For more information, visit MidwestHorseFair.com.