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The Black Stallions

To mark the 60th anniversary of the book that introduced the world to the Black, meet real-life black Arabian stallion Cass Olé and the other horses who played Walter Farley's creation on the silver screen.

Article by
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Photographs Courtesy
Margo Smith Shallcross



Arabian show stallion Cass Olé, the main equine actor who portrayed the Black, had four white socks and a white star that were dyed for filming.



After the success of the *Black Stallion* films, Cass Olé performed at special shows around the United States with his trainer Margo Smith Shallcross. Often his appearance in special acts at national Arabian shows excluded him from competition.

RUTHLESS, savage, and beautiful, Walter Farley's *Black Stallion* was "the most famous fictional horse of the century," according to *The New York Times*. The Black remained fictional for more than 30 years until a movie director, Carroll Ballard, brought him to life in the 1979 Hollywood film *The Black Stallion*.

Although Random House published *The Black Stallion* in 1941 when Walter Farley was 26, the book was a creation of his high school and college mind. Young Farley's unconstrained imagination gave the Black unheard-of wildness and beauty. Finding a real horse matching the fictional Black's fierceness seemed not only impossible but also quite undesirable from the film crew's point of view.

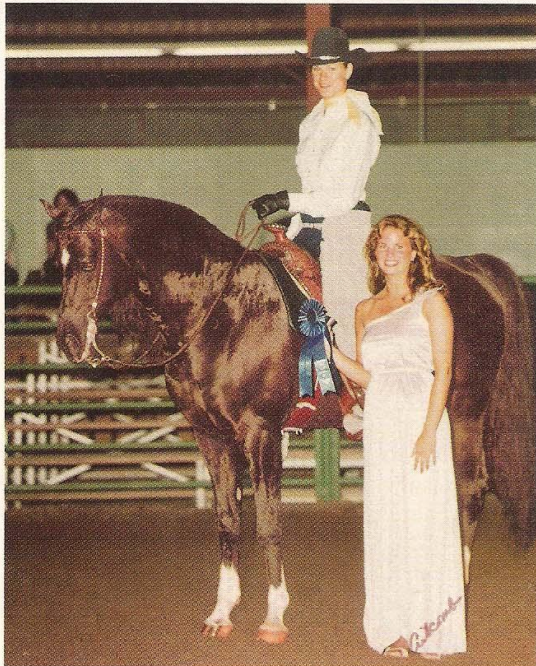
Director Ballard solved this early in the movie, by having Alec told a story of another legendary horse — Bucephalus, the mount of Alexander the Great — who seems to inherit the most extreme traits of the Black from Farley's book. Entrusting Bucephalus with the task of

reinforcing the Black's rugged nature, Ballard was free to look for a more civilized horse suitable for his movie.

Finding the Black

In his search, Ballard first went to North Africa, known for its excellent Arabians. He visited Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, countries directly on the fictional path of the book's steamer *Drake* as it left Bombay with Alec Ramsay, picked up the Black in Arabia, and sank off the coast of Portugal. From North Africa the director traveled to England and Spain, but neither of these places was able to supply him with a horse fit for the part.

Back in the United States, Ballard found himself at the Jack Tone Ranch in California. In one of the corrals he spotted Fae Jur, a purebred Arabian stallion whose free spirit and "touch of madness" reminded him of the Black. Fascinated with Fae Jur's wild personality, Ballard bought him for the studio, but, concerned with Fae Jur's small size, kept looking for a possible double. —>



Cass Olé enjoyed a successful show career both before and after the *Black Stallion* movies. Here, he and trainer Margo Smith Shallcross had just won the open western pleasure class at the Alamo Arabian Horse Club Show in 1980.

In the meantime Walter Farley, most likely feeling pangs of conscience after having created such an unruly hero, recommended several horses for the Black's part. His favorite, a purebred Arabian stallion named Cass Olé, surpassed all others in matching the imaginary stallion's physical magnificence. With his proud head and expressive eyes, Cass Olé was a display of equine royalty, character, and beauty.

Cass Olé was foaled in 1969 at the Donoghue Arabian

Farm in Goliad, Texas. "The beauty and intelligence of Cass Olé was no accident; he was royally bred," said Gerald Donoghue, Cass Olé's first owner. Cass Olé's dam, La Bahia, and sire, Al-Marah Cassanova, were a 1961 Top Ten Mare and Top Ten Stallion, respectively, as well as Legion of Merit winners.

As a colt, Cass Olé was of a "peculiar mouse color," for which he was first called "Mickey Mouse." The glistening blackness revealed after his baby hair shed off complemented his beautiful head, a trademark of the Donoghue Arabian Farm, making him custom-cut for the Black's part.

In 1972 Dr. Leo Cuello and Dr. Elena Villavicencio purchased Cass Olé for their daughter, Francesca Cuello, and brought him to their Texas ranch, San Antonio Arabians. Cass Olé's first trainer, Walter Chapman, was a friend of the Donoghues and a trainer of their horses. At the Donoghue Arabian Farm he had already worked with the young stallion's dam and sire. Apart from regular show training, Chapman enjoyed teaching his equine subjects simple tricks and thus gave Cass Olé a taste of what would later become his daily routine with movie trainer Corky Randall.

Cass Olé and Francesca Cuello won more than 600 ribbons in local, regional, and national competitions. Their most spectacular wins came in 1975 and 1976 when Cass Olé was twice named American Horse Shows Association Horse of the Year after winning the King Saud Cup. During the same time, Cass Olé became the 1975 U.S. National Champion Arabian in Western Pleasure, Amateur Owner to Ride, and the 1976 U.S. National Reserve Champion Arabian in Ladies Sidesaddle.

Capturing the Black on Film

To avoid possible injuries to Cass Olé and to be able to film all the challenging and dangerous stunts included in the script, an international equine crew was assembled.

Star and Junior

Star and Junior were about 6 years old at the time of *The Black Stallion* production. These two sorrel Quarter Horses belonged to the Randall family and were trained for stunts. Star and Junior participated in the fighting, running, jumping, and some of the swimming scenes in *The Black Stallion*. For both of them this movie was just a beginning of a long Hollywood career as stunt horses.

Because Star and Junior were used interchangeably, it is often impossible to tell which horse completed what stunt. One of Star's most notable appearances is the scene of the Black's running through Flushing Meadows. Star could be depended on to run to Junior, so the Randalls left Junior at

the end point and walked Star a couple of times to and from his pal. When released, Star raced to Junior, knocking over vegetable and fruit stands and paying no attention to people jumping out of his way.

Star also doubled Cass Olé in the scene where the rope leading from the Black's halter gets caught up between rocks. A rope ran from Star's off hind fetlock, around his neck, and back to the fetlock, pulling his leg under. This arrangement allowed Star to sit but not stand. He was an intelligent horse and knew that, so he just stayed down. Corky Randall remembers having to pitch rocks at Star to make him try to get up. Not trusting such an unreasonable request, Star gave it a couple of tries but it was not until the sound effects were added that the scene looked as dramatic as it appears in the movie.

Fae Jur

Fae Jur was foaled in 1972 on the Jack Tone Ranch in Stockton, California. He was sired by the farm's foundation stallion Fadjur and out of top-producing Arabian mare La Fana. Cass Olé and Fae Jur were very distantly related as they both traced to the famous Crabbet line of Arabians from England. Fae Jur was a regional Park Horse champion when director Carroll Ballard bought him for the movie.

Fae Jur's rugged nature landed him a place in the movie trailer and allowed him to complete one of the most memorable scenes in *The Black Stallion*. He is the horse who

cautiously advances towards Alec (Kelly Reno) as the boy holds out a handful of seaweed. Fae Jur, rebellious by nature, takes a few steps forward, retreats, and finally comes close, making the scene very realistic.

Rearing up while play-fighting with movie trainer Corky Randall was Fae Jur's strength as an actor and his favorite activity as a stallion. His playfulness came in very handy in the snake-trampling scene. As the hooded cobra rose over Kelly, Cass Olé came charging at it from a sand dune, while in the next take Fae Jur reared up over a nonpoisonous cobra double. In the final sequence of the movie, we see Fae Jur for the last time, as he happily strikes his hooves at Junior in a pretend fight before the race.

Fae Jur became Cass Olé's double. Two stunt horses, Star and Junior, joined the crew for running, jumping, and fighting shots. Horses from the lagoons of Camargue in southern France were brought in for the underwater shots. Finally, authentic race horses appeared in the grand finale race.

Prior to filming, Cass Olé, Fae Jur, Star, and Junior were gathered in Newhall, Calif., at the farm of Glenn Randall Sr., a well-known Hollywood horse trainer. While Glenn Sr. supervised training in California, his sons Corky and Glenn Jr. became the horse trainer and stunt coordinator on the set. Many years later, director Ballard is still appreciative of having worked with such knowledgeable trainers.

In California the horses were taught to respond to whip and verbal commands. They were also schooled in coming to and going away from the trainer, running to one another, turning, walking backwards, and laying their heads down. Additionally, Cass Olé and Fae Jur had to learn the proper wild stallion behavior such as showing anger by putting their ears back, rearing on command, pawing the ground, and stomping a snake. Equally important for the production was the loving horse behavior, so they practiced nodding their heads and pretending to give a kiss.

"Cass Olé was a natural and willing subject," says Corky Randall. Years of experience as a show horse, plus his intelligence and well-mannered temperament, made him "a delight to train." Under Corky's guidance, Cass Olé became a truly versatile horse, completing about 80 percent of the horse footage in the movie. He was vicious and wild on the Drake but loving and friendly on the beach with Alec.

Cass Olé was even able to deliver the requested facial expressions to please a demanding director like Ballard. "It was amazing," said Corky about his trainee's acting talent. "I never met a horse before who wanted to be an actor."

One thing the horses could not be trained to do was to look black. Ranging in color from white and gray

to sorrel, Fae Jur, Star, Junior, and the two swimming horses were all dyed black. The white star on Cass Olé's forehead, an inheritance from his dam, and his four white socks had to be blackened as well. Moreover, every day Paul le Blanc, Cass Olé's personal hairdresser, weaved an artificial mane into the stallion's real one for a wilder look.

During five months of filming, the horses were transported to many destinations, including Toronto, southern Ontario, Sardinia, Rome, Oregon, and Hollywood. Out of all those places, Sardinia proved to be the least hospitable location. For shots at Costa Para-



Cass Olé attended President Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Parade in 1980 with trainer Margo Smith Shallcross and siblings Francesca (mounted) and Jancy Cuello, who owned and also showed the stallion.

disio, one of the island's most beautiful and remote beaches, the horses had to make a three-hour hike each way to get to and from the set. Cold weather during filming in Sardinia presented another obstacle, as most of the shots required human and equine stars to continuously bathe in the water.

Cass Olé was patient and cooperative. He accepted long hikes, running in and out of cold water, swimming, and charging at the poisonous cobra. Only toward the end of the movie did he lose his patience. When the crew was filming Kelly Reno



Movie trainer Glenn Randall and Kelly Reno, the actor who played Alec Ramsay, appeared with Cass Olé at the Arabian Horse Fair in Reno, Nev., in 1978, the year before *The Black Stallion* was released.

(playing Alec Ramsay) riding Cass Olé bareback with his arms outstretched triumphantly, Cass Olé gave Kelly a taste of a real wild ride. The stallion bolted, Kelly grabbed the mane and held on, and the terrified crew was left behind in a cloud of dust. It was a miracle that

Kelly didn't get hurt, says Ballard, but luckily he was an excellent rider. Everyone was relieved when Cass Olé reappeared with Kelly holding on for dear life.

When *The Black Stallion* came out in 1979, it was a great success. The picture received good reviews, three Oscar nominations (best supporting actor, best sound, and best film editing), and one Academy Award for best sound editing by Alan Splet. The movie premiered in the United States, Japan, and France. Although Cass Olé did not get a chance to attend the overseas premieres, he pro-

moted the movie domestically with his new trainer, Margo Smith Shallcross.

Life After Hollywood

After his successful appearance in two movies, *The Black Stallion* and *The Black Stallion Returns* (released in 1983), Cass Olé returned to his life as a show horse. Francesca, her brother Jancy, and Margo, his trainer at San Antonio Arabians, showed him in western, sidesaddle, and halter classes. Cass Olé won several local and regional titles. At the national shows, however, he often appeared in special acts, which automatically excluded him from competition.

Cass Olé was also highly desirable as a breeding stallion, photo model, and performer. Many people were successful in breeding their mares to him for black foals. In his lifetime Cass Olé sired 123 offspring.

Cass Olé and Margo performed in numerous promotions and shows around the country. Cass Olé's best act was the liberty routine. With only a rope separating him from the people, he would appear before his audience unrestrained. Proud and beautiful, Cass Olé would enter first and wait for Margo. As she talked about his training and appearances in movies, he earned great applause from the audience for rearing, bowing, and doing figure-eights.

Seven years after Cass Olé's death, in its June 2000 issue *The Arabian Horse World* magazine recognized him as one of the ten most important Arabians in America in the 1900s. Cass Olé "showed millions of Americans, through his movie *The Black Stallion*, the beauty, gentleness, and tractability of the breed." In his lifetime, Cass Olé not only very successfully promoted the Arabian breed, but also created an unforgettable screen character that continues to fascinate generations of viewers.

Monika Szumowska is a freelance journalist, living with her husband and three children in Sparks, Nevada. She started riding horses for recreation in Poland and continued after moving to the United States. She is interested in American equestrian history and traditions as well as children's involvement with horses. 🐾

Pete and Repete

Pete and Repete were gentle swamp-roaming horses brought to the set from the lagoons of Camargue in southern France. Their names came from the many takes and retakes it took to film the underwater scenes.

Director Carroll Ballard remembers the astonishing difference between their appearance on land and in water.

These old, pot-bellied, big-footed ponies transformed into graceful swimmers once in the water. Their ballet-like leg movements masterfully combined with lively music created very charming underwater sequences of *The Black Stallion*.

Pete and Repete were never allowed to swim in liberty; they were always constrained with a halter. After going to great trouble to bring them to Sardinia, no one wanted to risk having them swim home before the movie was completed.