



A Breed Apart

Area couple raises Friesians, noted for their versatility, stature and charm

By Jeanie Senior

Alan and Iris Bennett's beautiful black horses, pulling a carriage, tend to be the stars of any parade they are in.

The horses are Friesians—a breed developed centuries ago in the Friesland province of the Netherlands.

Notable for their proud stature,

lush, wavy manes and tails, and feathered fetlocks, Friesians are growing in popularity because of their versatility: They pull carriages with style and élan, but also are used in jumping and dressage.

"Endurance is the only thing they don't excel in," Alan says. "They're just not built for endurance. The carriage, that is their specialty."

Alan competes in carriage driving. He started with "serious driving" in 2000.

Using a harness and a shiny four-wheel carriage—both made in the Netherlands—the couple and their horses take part in competitions during the summer in Oregon and Washington, with Alan as driver and Iris as navigator. The events draw competitors from Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana and British Columbia.

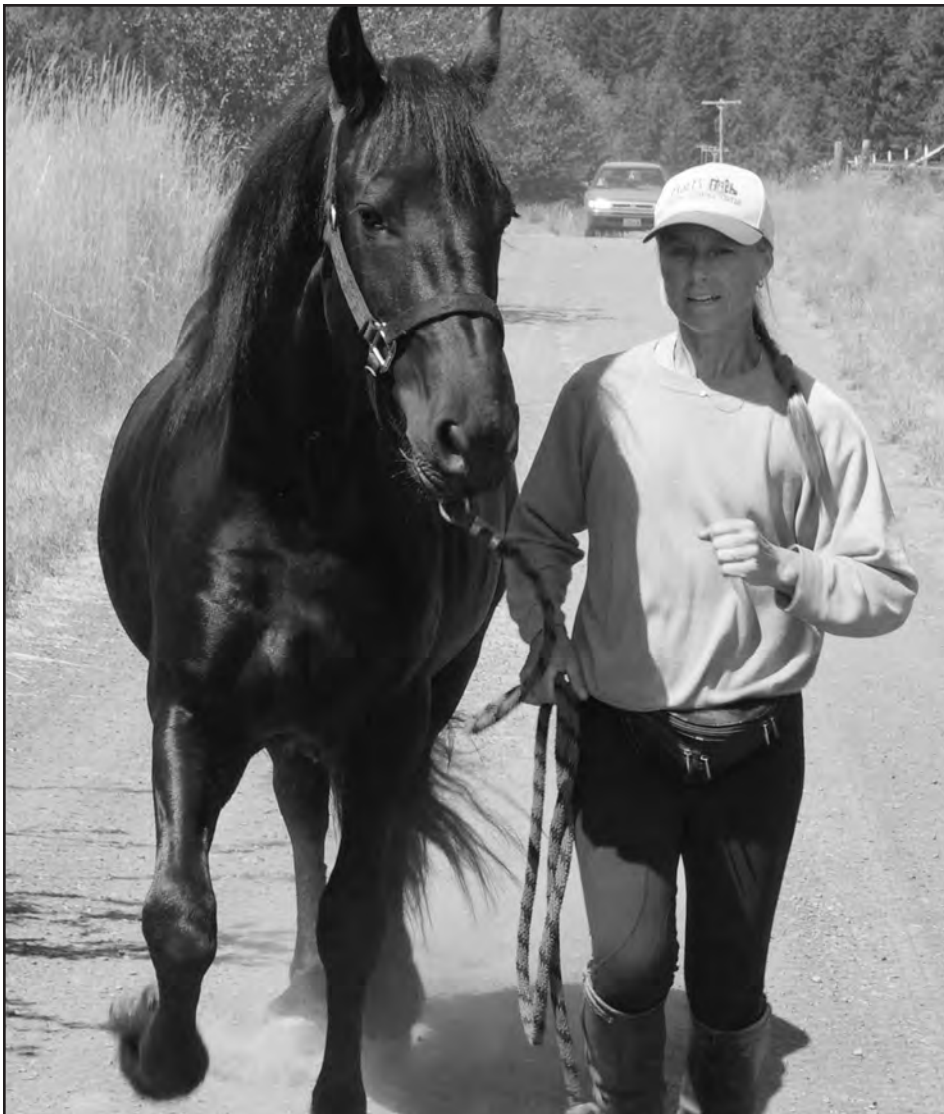
It's a sport popularized by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, whose interest in carriage driving grew after he was made president of the International Equestrian Federation and helped compile rules for the sport.

The prince has driven Friesians competitively. Iris has the book Philip published about his hobby—"30 Years On and Off the Box Seat."

The Bennetts' three-Friesian hitch has taken part in numerous local celebrations, including the White Salmon Centennial Celebration. Each year, it is part of the Manzanita, Oregon, Fourth of July Parade.

"Both Iris and I have had horses all our lives," Alan says.

Besides five Friesians, they own a mule, but they agree the Friesians are special. They bought the first one about a decade ago.



Iris Bennett takes a Friesian on a fast-paced stroll.



Above, the Friesian team takes Alan for a ride around the property. Below, manes fly in this carriage-seat view of the pull horses. Bottom, Alan bridles one of the Bennetts' horses for carriage.

The five they now have includes a 2-year-old foal born to one of their mares.

Iris shows one of the Friesians in dressage and eventing—a competition that includes dressage, jumping and cross country.

Alan and Iris live in a cottage on their property in the Snowden area, next door to a far larger and more elaborate horse barn.

They laugh about the contrast.

Originally from Nevada, they first came to the area to windsurf. Alan owned a contracting business and worked in the Reno/Carson City area.

They bought their Snowden property in 1994 and later brought the horses they owned with them when they came to stay for a few months.

Eventually, they decided they wanted to live in Washington full time. Now, they own B&B Home Inspections, working as licensed home inspectors in the Columbia Gorge and the Portland-Vancouver metro area.

Alan and Iris say their business is demanding, but the horses are their joy.

The Friesians' history is colorful.

Centuries-old legend says the Romans acquired some of the horses and took them to England, where they are thought to have influenced



the development of two English draft horse breeds, Shires and Clydesdales.

It's speculated that Friesians were involved in breeding that led to the Morgan horse.

Friesians are tall and sturdy, with strong bones, but without the body mass of breeds such as Belgians or Clydesdales. They are known as a warmblood breed, while draft horses are tagged coldbloods, and breeds such as Arabians and Thorough-



breeds are hotbloods.

“Although the breed’s conformation resembles that of a light draft horse, Friesians are graceful and nimble for their size,” the online encyclopedia Wikipedia says.

Alan and Iris say their horses—which range in size from 15.2 hands to 16.1 hands—are calm, agreeable and easy to work with.

During the Middle Ages, Friesians were popular as war horses. Actually, Alan says, wealthy landowners tended to prefer Andalusians as the horse to carry a knight in armor into battle.

Less wealthy knights “went into battle on these friendly old guys and hoped for the best,” he says. “Sometimes, you just play the hand that’s dealt you.”

In the first half of the 20th century, Friesians fell out of favor and their numbers declined as farmers turned to mechanized equipment and autos took over from horsedrawn vehicles.

During World War II, however, the horses became popular again in Europe, because of wartime fuel shortages.

Friesians have steadily climbed in popularity in the past few decades as so-called sport horses, used for competitions from carriage driving to dressage to jumping. ■