

Chincoteague Pony Swim Blends Equine Lifestyle and Nostalgia

The Legends and Nostalgia Behind the Annual Chincoteague Pony Swim

By Adrienne Wolfe

With yips and yells the Saltwater Cowboys drive the milling, nervous herd of Chincoteague Ponies into the water. The ponies must swim across the channel from their home on Assateague Island to neighboring Chincoteague Island.

Sound like the filming of a romantic western story? Actually, this is the start of the annual Chincoteague Pony Swim and Auction that's been happening for 81 years off the Virginia coast. Each year the residents of Chincoteague, Virginia and spectators from around the world witness this legendary event.

Much of the equine lifestyle we strive to experience today is embedded in nostalgia. In 1946 Marguerite Henry, famed children's author heard about the pony penning event and visited Chincoteague Island to find a story idea for a book. The popularity of these ponies was cemented in the American collective memory with her popular children's novel, *Misty of Chincoteague*.

During the last week of July the tiny island of Chincoteague is inundated with over 40,000 spectators to celebrate the nostalgia and buy a piece of the history. On Tuesday of that week each year the Cowboys round up all the herds of wild ponies from the Chincoteague National



PHOTO: TOM BUCHTA

Wildlife Refuge and place them in holding pens on Assateague Island. Potential new pony owners start eyeing the foals that they will bid on in the upcoming auction.



On Wednesday the ponies are driven into the channel and make the 5 to 10 minute swim to Chincoteague Island. The Saltwater Cowboys ride a ferry and take any foal that is too young or weak to make the swim. After an hour's rest they are paraded through the town to holding pens at the fairground. Energy runs high

as mares search for their foals and stallions fight to reclaim their harems.

On Thursday the foals are auctioned to the highest bidder. Foals too young to leave their dam are held for sale in the fall.

The entire week long affair is a fundraiser for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company. In the early 1920's the town of Chincoteague was devastated by fire since they had no fire department. Determined not to let history repeat itself, the Fire Company saw the ponies as a potential source of revenue for their venture. They obtained the rights to the ponies and started the annual event as their major fundraiser. Proceeds from the auction are used to fund the volunteer Fire Company and to take care of the herd.

The ponies are rounded up, wormed, vaccinated and have their hooves trimmed twice a year. Thanks to the registry initiated

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by the Fire Company (Chincoteague Pony Association), the ponies are now seen as a legitimate breed. Their prices have climbed steadily over the years. The highest priced foal ever sold at the annual event brought \$10,500.

Each year the more desirable foals sell for \$5,000 and up.

How these beautiful ponies got to Assateague Island is a mystery. The legend is that a 16th century Spanish galleon shipwrecked off the Virginia/Maryland coast. Seventeen surviving Spanish Barb and Arabian horses swam to shore on the barrier island. Another theory is that 17th century settlers turned their horses loose on the island to avoid paying taxes on them.

Either way, the ponies have been breeding and living wild for hundreds of years. Since their breeding has been left to natural selection there is no true breed standard. The harsher conditions and poorer quality food has bred the horses down to large pony size. Most are between 13 and 14 HH.

Today there are two herds of ponies living on Assateague Island, kept separate by a fence across the middle of the island. The Maryland herd is in the Assateague National Seashore Park. They are left to their own devices and their numbers are managed through birth control. The Virginia herd is owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company and is kept on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge.

Funds from the annual pony auction are used to maintain the herd's health and support the all-volunteer fire company. The commitment of the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company and Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce has established and preserved an outstanding breed of ponies and carried on a lifestyle and nostalgia cemented deep into the American fabric by the legendary Misty of Chincoteague.



About the Author

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Special thanks to Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce for supplying photos of the Pony Penning

www.chincoteaguechamber.com



Chincoteague Ponies come in many colors with pintos being a strong and colorful force. People still seek out foals with the famous Misty Palomino Pinto coloring. Chincoteagues are renowned for their beauty, intelligence, hardiness and love for people. Most resemble Welsh or Arabian type ponies. Since

it has always been survival of the fittest on the island these ponies are exceptionally strong, hardy and disease resistant.

Chincoteagues have been sought after for their willingness to work and their natural affinity to people. For many they make the perfect introduction for children into the world of horses. Many women appreciate their slightly smaller size and smaller barrel. Their athleticism makes them very rewarding to show. They have consistently done well in 4-H, dressage, Pony Club and in open shows across the country.

Today these ponies are relatively rare. Only about 200 purebred foals are born each year. There are less than twenty

breeders scattered across the country who raise purebred Chincoteagues. They are all small family farms that may produce from one to six foals a year. Owning one of these ponies is definitely a unique and rewarding experience.

Organizations That Support the Chincoteague Pony

- **The National Chincoteague Pony Association**, Bellingham, WA, is a private, non-profit registry and small breeding farm. www.pony-chincoteague.org
- **The Chincoteague Pony Association** is an all volunteer organization and registry in Chincoteague, VA. www.chincoteaguechamber.com/map-assn.html
- **Chincoteague Pony Breeders Association** is focused on preserving the breed and educating horse enthusiasts about this outstanding pony. www.chincoteagueponyba.org
- **Misty's Heaven** is a fun web site for those who want to rediscover their "inner Misty". It traces all Misty's offspring and relatives and tells the history of the real live Misty. www.mistysheaven.hostingrapid.com