

Branding of the Purebred Spanish Horse (PRE)

Written by Geoff Shawcross (2009-05-01)

updated with authors permission in 2016 by Mary McBryde

Introduction

Branding the PRE has been a tradition for many centuries and has been used to identify the **breeder** of a particular horse. This brand is always marked on the horse's quarters, with stallions being branded on their left side and mares branded on their right. Less commonly, an individual animal may be identified by imprinting an arabic number on the right shoulder but this is usually restricted to breeding mares that run in herds. Other breeds of horse (in other countries) use branding to identify the **breed** of the horse e.g. Hanoverian, or the **ownership** of an individual animal.



Hot Brands on PRE Mares. Left: Traditional Studfarm Brand on the Right Flank. Centre & Right: Numbers applied to identify Individual Mares within a large herd of similar type and colour. Different studs use different areas of the body for this purpose.

Types of branding

- Hot branding :

This is the traditional way of branding the PRE. The heat destroys the surface layers of skin down to the hair follicles, but not deeper. The hair follicles are destroyed and when the wound heals, it leaves a bald scar.

- Freeze branding:

This differs in principle from freeze branding, in which extreme cold (dry ice or liquid nitrogen) is used to destroy the melanocytes (hair pigment cells) within the skin, which give the hair its colour. The resulting hair growth is white, which is a drawback when used on a grey horse. This type of branding is used to identify an individual horses, in order to deter theft.

- Hoof branding:

This is a relatively new idea in which a postcode (or other identifying mark) is burned into the hoof wall and is used to deter theft of the horse. As the hoof wall grows, eventually the mark is lost and the branding process has to be repeated.



Brands on PRE Stallions. Left & Centre:- Traditional Studfarm HOT Brands on the Left Flank. Right: Studfarm Brand Freeze-branded on to this Chestnut - Freeze brands are more visible on the darker colours, but Hot Brands are more visible on Grey horses as can be seen above.

There are an increasing number of horses (of all breeds) that are freeze branded with a letter 'L' on the shoulder or wither; these horses have been subject to a total loss insurance claim. In addition, several countries will brand horses that have been in an area infected with African Horse Sickness.

Who is entitled to brand?

Before hot branding a PRE horse in the UK, the owner must be registered with BAPSH as a **breeder** (someone with one or more mares that are eligible to breed) and have a **breeder number** (Codigo Ganadero). The brand used must be registered with BAPSH and must be an original design. The various application forms needed for registration are obtainable from the BAPSH Registrar, or can be downloaded off the BAPSH website (www.bapsh.co.uk). Horses can be

branded at any age, although it is usual to brand young horses before they are sold. Occasionally, a mare will be sold with a foal at foot, which will not have been branded. In these cases, the new owner of the mare and foal will usually apply their brand to the foal.

Designing a brand.

The design of the brand should be as simple as possible. Complicated designs become blurred easily and difficult to read. Fully enclosed areas e.g. circles, triangles, should be as large as possible as the skin in the middle of small enclosed areas may die and slough, detracting from the appearance of the finished brand. In addition, healing of these wounds is likely to be protracted. When an application for a brand is received, the BAPSH committee check for the originality of the design but will also reject designs that are considered impractical.

Construction of a branding iron.

The branding irons are best made from mild steel strip, approximately 3mm thick and about 25mm wide. Stainless steel can also be used but it is a very difficult material to work into shape and weld without sophisticated equipment. Both these materials will withstand the high temperature necessary to achieve the brand without bending or distorting. Dissimilar types of metals should not be used in the fabrication of the branding iron. The various metals hold differing amounts of heat and the branding iron may become distorted when hot. They also conduct different amounts of heat, making the brand irregular. Overall, the branding iron should be of a substantial construction and have enough mass to hold on to the heat. The face of the iron must be ground flat and have no irregularities in its surface. The handle of the branding iron needs to be sufficiently long and preferably insulated, so that it is comfortable to use. 400mm-600mm is a practical length.

[**Freeze brands** are manufactured from copper or brass as these metals conduct heat very efficiently and can be cooled quickly. These metals will not withstand the high temperatures required for hot branding]



Branding Irons:- Left photo shows the Copper used for FREEZE Branding. Right photo shows the Steel used for HOT Branding.

Preparation for hot branding.

Clip the hair from the area to be branded. This applies whether the horse has a summer or winter coat. Hair will insulate the skin from the full effect of the branding iron and this will affect the outcome of the brand. There is no need to wash the skin unless it is particularly dirty. Do not use any spirit (alcohol)-based product on the site, as the residue will ignite (with harmless but spectacular effect). This also includes 'coat shine' products that may have been applied previously, and heavily oiled clippers that leave an oil residue on the skin.

Make sure that the correct quarter has been prepared! (Left side for stallions; right side for mares)

Before use, the branding iron should be cleaned with a wire brush so that it is free from rust and scale. It has to be brought to temperature using a proper gas or charcoal forge. It is unlikely that any other heat source will get the branding iron hot enough to be effective. The correct temperature of the branding iron is achieved by bringing the iron to an even, dull, red colour and then letting it cool slightly to an ash-grey colour. If the iron is too cold, it will not produce a brand. If it is too hot, there is a possibility that the brand will burn through the skin into the sensitive tissue layers beneath, which will be painful for the horse, and the wound will be very slow to heal.

For ethical reasons, the horse should be sedated with a sedative /analgesic combination e.g. detomidine & torbuterol. These drugs have to be administered by a veterinary surgeon, as they are 'prescription only medicines' (POM) and have to be given intravenously. Intravenous sedation takes effect within 3-5 minutes and lasts about 20 minutes. The more readily available oral sedative, acetyl promazine (ACP, Sedalin, etc), is not an appropriate alternative; although it is a sedative, it has no analgesic properties.

Application of the brand

It is important that the horse remains motionless during the branding process or the brand will be blurred. Stocks are a safe way of restraining large horses, but are impractical for restraining foals. Foals are best brought alongside a wall. Usually, the horse will try to move its quarters away from the hot branding iron and try to step forward. When properly

sedated, they are unlikely to kick but everyone involved must be made aware that the horse may behave in an unpredictable way and they must position themselves safely.

The horse must stand square, with weight on the leg to be branded. The brand is lined up with the clipped area and then applied very firmly. To produce an effective brand, the branding iron needs to be in contact with the skin for 3-5 seconds. The branding iron must be removed as soon as the horse starts to move - and it will not be possible to re-apply it.

Management of the wound

Horse's skin behaves differently from our own and horses do not produce the painful blisters that we associate with burns. Other than their initial response to the brand being applied, the horse shows no distress after the event and is totally unaffected during the healing process, paying no attention to the wound.



Left:- The appearance of the skin the day after application of a Hot branding iron.



Right:. Appearance of the skin 28 days after application of a Hot branding iron.

Around 10 days after the application of the branding iron the burned areas will begin to peel away from the underlying skin. Do not be tempted to interfere. In the unlikely event that the horse finds this itchy, baby oil or a lanolin-based ointment can be applied to soften the eschar. Note that the affected area is about 3 times wider than the actual width of the metal that was used to make the branding iron. This is due to dissipation of heat sideways but will have no impact on the appearance of the fully healed brand wound.

Branding faults and problems.

It is not always easy to achieve a brand that looks perfect, and the causes are various, but the most common reasons for a failed Brand are listed below Causes:

- 1] The horse moves during the branding process, 'smudging' the brand.
- 2] The branding iron is not hot enough to create an imprint.
- 3] The branding iron was not in an even contact with the skin.
- 4] The branding iron is too hot causing extensive scarring.

The ratio of the size of the brand to the horse's quarter will remain constant. The brand will increase in size as he horse grows but the width of the lines of the brand will reduce slightly as the scar tissue contracts. A smaller branding iron should be used on foals under 6 months.



Above: Appearance 3 months after being Hot branded. All fully healed with a clear brandmark..