

Horses Helping Heal

Tam Cordingly, December, 2005

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For most of us the freedom to go where we wish is a given. We can get up and walk across the room, go into buildings, take hikes in the woods. My good friend, Mickey, knows no such freedom.

Mickey is a young woman who had always been active. She wanted to have a horse of her own and be able to trail ride with friends and family. The one day the world changed. She was thrown through a plate glass window and lost one leg above the knee and most of the muscles in the other leg. Now she uses a wheelchair to get around. The dream of having a horse and riding into the sunset seemed lost.

Then the miracle happened. Mickey met Joan. Joan is a horse trainer, not just your ordinary show horse trainer but a trainer who teaches horses to become performers. The realm of possibility is endless. Joan had trained a horse for a young paraplegic Dr. a few years ago, maybe one for Mickey?

Joan had just bought a paint stallion, 6 years old. She didn't really need him but felt the pull to get him anyway. He was a quiet horse, big and strong, but totally untutored. In a discussion the thought came up that maybe Mickey should see this horse. It was love at first sight. Mickey loved the big sorrel paint and Pawnee seemed to recognize that this was what he had been born to do. He walked to this pretty lady in the wheelchair and put his head down into her lap to be petted. There wasn't a dry eye in the place as we all realized why Joan had bought Pawnee.

Mickey and Joan agreed on the details and Pawnee started on the road to being an assistance horse. You see Joan doesn't just teach horses to be nice so the handicapped can ride them, she teaches them



to lie down next to their wheelchair so they can mount independently. The indignity of being put on a horse, needing a ramp, having to be placed in a hoist is not for Joan's students. They can mount, dismount for a picnic or rest, get back on the horse anywhere, and be truly free and self reliant.

These assistance horses need to be taught to overcome the horse's natural fear of being approached by a moving object (the wheelchair), having someone get on them while lying down. The horse needs to lie down readily on command, stay down quietly while the rider mounts, get up very gently so the rider isn't unseated, then become a gentle and well trained pleasure mount. The horse also has to learn to stand motionless while the wheelchair bound person dismounts, untacks the horse, and grooms him. Pawnee can be easily and safely led from a wheelchair.

This training takes about three months. Naturally Joan teaches the rider to manage the horse safely. From breeding stallion to assistance horse is quite a transition. And, yes, he is no longer a breeding stallion. For ultimate safety he was gelded after the initial training.

The joy that shines from Mickey's face as her horse rises up and carries her where she wants to go is profound. The bond between these two is touching as Pawnee gently nuzzles his person and Mickey kisses her horse. Four legs are better than 2 and, as Mickey says, "Now we have FIVE".

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Smooth Ridge Fox Terriers

Tam Cordingley has been an involved and active member of the dog fancy since 1954. She has been a trainer, groomer, Animal Shelter employee, boarding kennel operator, Animal Control Officer, and State Humane Officer. Her first breeds were collies and shelties which she exhibited successfully in both breed and obedience. Active in club work, she also helped form the International Australian Shepherd Assn. to seek AKC recognition.

Tam has shown Champions and Obedience title holders in six Groups but is best known for finishing and rehabilitating those that were thought to be beyond redemption, one of which went on to become the top dog in his breed.