

SPECIAL HORSES AND SPECIAL PEOPLE

By Mike Hammitt

For those of us who own and love Rocky Mountain Horses®, they are very special horses. In many ways, the owners of Rockies are a diverse group. We are breeders, trail riders, and show people. Some enjoy riding in a carriage, a buggy or a cart. Others enjoy competitive /endurance rides, barrel racing, jumping, dressage, working cattle, and other activities. Our Rockies are truly “One Horse for all Occasions ®.” However, once you become a part of the Rocky Mountain Horse community, you discover there is something more than just our Rockies.

The special characteristics that define the Rocky Mountain Horse®: friendly, loyal, tolerant, and gentle may also say something about us. It is so typical when owners join a Regional Rocky Mountain Horse Association Club, attend a show or meet other Rocky owners on a trail ride to leave excited about not just the horses but also the people.

“I’ve met so many wonderful and friendly people. I felt like I belonged from the first day,” is a common refrain. New friendships are often forged within hours. Many friendships will lead to frequent email exchanges; some to telephone calls just to talk about common interests; and some will lead to lifetime friendships. Occasionally, there will be some relationships that exceed the norm.

For Debbie Miller, a lifetime rider of non-gaited horses, one could say she had a disability that could cause others to give up their lifetime passion. For Debbie, it was just another challenge. It was also something that would lead her to “Mugzie”, her Rocky Mountain Horse.

When Debbie told us about her twenty-two day “Ride of a Lifetime” (Rocky Mountain Horse Magazine, Post Show Edition 2008), we were able to share her experience riding through Northern California and Oregon. What most readers do not know is that Debbie is a peritoneal dialysis patient.

Peritoneal dialysis is a surgical procedure lining the abnormal cavity with a membrane which allows waste products and extra fluid to pass from your blood into the dialysis solution. This allowed Debbie to continue trail riding, but, she said, “bouncing in the saddle caused the fluid collecting in my stomach cavity to slosh around, and it was distracting and there was the worry that the membrane could rupture. I started researching all of the gaited breeds and quickly concluded that the smooth gait and wonderful temperament of the Rocky Mountain Horse® was the answer.” On a trip to Indiana, Debbie quickly found “Mugzie”, her Rocky.

Once back home in Southern California, Debbie and her longtime riding partner, Chris Balan (who owned a non-gaited horse) rode the trails. It wasn’t long before they decided

Chris needed a Rocky. Debbie was looking for a Rocky for Chris to buy and wanted her to see “Tip Top” owned by Gloria Northcote in Arroyo Grande. Gloria told Debbie that she would never sell her favorite horse, “Tip Top”. Gloria said “Come on up, there are other Rockies here that Chris can look at and ride.”

Almost all owners have one Rocky so special to them that any offers to purchase, regardless of price, falls on deaf ears. Gloria is no different. From ocean surf to the mountains and deserts to forests, Gloria and “Tip Top” had logged thousands of miles together. Meeting Chris changed Gloria’s feelings. “Here was a wonderful woman who loved horses and had never given up riding even though she wore a prosthetic to replace a leg lost years before. I know that God spoke to my heart. “Tip Top” would have a good home, and Chris would have a great horse that would give her an easier ride for years to come. They belonged together.”

With both Debbie and Chris on Rockies, they were riding places and distances that had previously been limited. At times on a long ride, Chris’s prosthetic would bother her. She would stop, remove it and strap it to the saddle while “Tip Top” stood quiet and waited patiently for her to remount and proceed. They could go wherever they wanted. It was time for the next step.

With the Rocky Mountain Horse Association International Show coming up, Debbie and Chris journeyed to Lexington, Kentucky. The show was an attraction, but the main event was finding the right Rocky for her sister, Carol. Carol’s riding had been hampered because of an automobile accident that crushed both feet and damaged a knee so severely that the knee no longer moved normally.

Once in Lexington, with the help and suggestions of others, Debbie visited the late Morgan Riggs. Debbie explained Carol’s injuries and needs. As a well-known trainer of show champions and trail horses, Morgan was also known for matching the right horse with the right person. The horse would not only need to be a good trail horse but would need to stand quietly as the rider mounted from a mounting block or on the trail from a nearby rock or log. Morgan thought he had the right horse. After a checking out the horse for Carol’s needs, the deal was struck. Carol would have “Hershey” her Rocky.

Now, all Debbie had to do was make two telephone calls. The first would be to her sister. Once the conversion started and the preliminaries began, Debbie moved to the subject of the call: “Yes, Carol. The show is great but that wasn’t why I called. I got you a present for your birthday.”

“But it isn’t my birthday!”

“Well, it is actually for your birthday, Christmas and all of the future ones. You are now the owner of a Rocky Mountain Horse.” Needless to say, Carol was overwhelmed.

It was time for the second phone call, to Debbie’s husband. “Hi Hon, how’s everything at home? Yes, I’m having a good time. It’s been a good trip. I need you to do something

tomorrow. Would you go to the bank and transfer some funds into the checking account? I bought Carol a Rocky Mountain Horse.” Whew! That went well.

In a short time, this trio with their Rockies would be riding with the West Coast Club as if nothing in their lives had ever affected their ability to follow their passion. It would seem to be that this narrative would end here, but as Paul Harvey always said, “Now for the rest of the story....”

Enter Dawn Foster. Carol and Dawn both live in Kern, California, and are members of the West Coast Rocky Mountain Horse Club (WCRMHC). With all four of these women belonging to the WCRMHC, it only took a short time until they became close friends and were able to ride together frequently. It was on a ride on a Pacific beach when Dawn was following Chris and suddenly, “I saw her leg fall off. I couldn’t believe what I saw. Was it my imagination? Until then, I had no idea that Chris was riding with a prosthetic leg.”

As time passed, the friendships grew. Dawn began thinking about Debbie and her dialysis. Debbie’s family members had been tested as a match for a kidney transplant; however, no matches were found. With much thought and prayer, Dawn knew what she wanted to do. She called Debbie and told her she wanted to be tested as a match for a kidney transplant and, if successful, wanted to donate Debbie one of her kidneys. After emotional conversations and Debbie worrying about what her friend was willing to do, Dawn convinced Debbie that it should be done. The waiting began to determine if the Dawn would be a match.

For Dawn, the commitment went beyond a simple blood test. Many tests had to be performed. For many months, she traveled 170 miles round trip numerous times to the hospital and laboratories in Loma Linda, California. As each step in the testing progressed with positive results, Dawn’s hopes rose. As the final tests were completed, her hopes were shattered. An emotional and tearing phone call to Debbie was made to inform her of failing the last matching test. “The call, as I look back, was hard to believe. Debbie’s loss of a chance for a working kidney was the last thing she was thinking about. Debbie was spending her time comforting me for being upset that we wouldn’t be able to proceed.”

As things sometime happen, a few laboratory tests were repeated in case something had gone wrong during the testing process. When the new results were back, Dawn made another call. “Debbie, there was a mistake in the last test. We’re all finished testing. We need to schedule a transplant.”

The West Coast club members waited breathlessly and prayed for their friends and fellow members as Linda Clark (WCRMHC President) kept everyone posted by email. The final email must have caused a collective sigh of relief, “Dawn is home and doing fine. Debbie’s new kidney is functioning normally.”

April 2009, in the bunkhouse at the Northcote Ranch, I met with these four inspiring women to talk about their experiences. I had previously talked to each individually and

wanted to talk to them together. They all agreed. They accepted my suggestion that their stories could inspire others to reach for their goals, regardless of the roadblocks placed in their paths.

We spent close to two hours talking. They all had stories about the Rockies and how the horses sense their riders' special needs and responding accordingly. Each talked about the others and not their own struggles with events that would intimidate others. We talked; we laughed; and yes, at more than a few times, emotional tears glistened on our faces.

For someone who has written and published interviews, this was a new experience. For this writer, it was the privilege of a lifetime. As I headed back to my horse trailer for the night, the thoughts that filled my mind were "Yes, these are very special people who feel fortunate to own and love very special horses. The Rocky Mountain Horse®."
