

The Horse of a Lifetime

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I WAS BACK WHERE I'D STARTED: BUYING TACK.

I'd driven to town to cash a check from my godmother, a generous birthday tradition she'd begun decades earlier. I was planning to use the money to help pay for my new saddle, exactly what I'd used it for the summer of 1967 when I was 15. I gave a prayer of thanks that I'd been led back to the thing I loved most in my youth: Quarter Horses.

I grew up in 1950s suburbia. The backyard at my folks' home was large but not roomy enough for the horse I longed for. At summer swim lessons, I became friends with another horse-crazy girl. My new friend, Susan, lived on an apple ranch and had two horses of her very own. I'm sure my envy turned me green under my sunburn.

She invited me over. I rode real horses for the first time — her gentle sorrel mares Trinket and Nancy. They were part Quarter Horse, she said. "My favorite!" I told her, based on all the reading I'd done about breeds. I'd also gone to a Quarter Horse show at our local fairgrounds, where I'd become hooked as soon as I saw those muscles and good looks in motion.

We girls spent many summer hours astride Trinket and Nancy. We'd skirt the orchards, careful not to raise dust that would linger on the fruit. Our conversations were always

Fifty years after hatching the dream,

I finally own an American Quarter Horse.

By Janet Herring-Sherman

about horses. When we became teenagers, talk sometimes strayed to boys, but never for long. My dad was convinced that once I started dating, I'd stop wanting a horse. Instead, Susan and I dreamed of the Quarter Horses we'd have some day and the husbands who would build our barns and set our fence posts.

We rode bareback, and falling off was like earning bragging rights or a badge of courage. Sometimes, we ate our saddlebag sandwiches at the still-standing rural one-room school house where my father and uncle had arrived by horseback in the 1920s and '30s.

Depression-era farm boys, neither had returned to that hardscrabble life after their World War II tours. Dad had set up shop near Main Street in his hometown. He and Mom built us a good, if horseless, family life there; however, Dad found a mountain vacation spot called Trinity, where I could get my fill of horses. Trinity was Paradise to me. It meant I could rent and ride trail horses every day, all day, if I wanted to. I loved the fact that most of the "dude" horses looked at least a little Quarter Horse.

When I got older, Dad would arrange for us to accompany a wrangler when he packed his string of mules and "rode supplies in" to foresters and Boy Scout troops in high-up wilderness camps. These horseback adventures were some of the best times I ever spent with my father. They would also shape my career. And later, my retirement.

My lessons in horsemanship were stepped up when I finally got my own horse in my mid-teens. Midnight was pure black and cost \$100. She was green-broke with many bad habits. I learned a lot from that mare.

A few years later, I "traded up" for a dark bay mare who looked more like a real Quarter Horse. We taught each other a few things. I sold her for a tall red roan, a dun, then a sorrel mare bred to a Quarter Horse. Her colt was as close as I ever came to owning a true, 100 percent Quarter Horse. Each horse came closer to being the real thing in looks and manners, but none were bona fide Quarter Horses.

I wove horses into my school work, writing or doing research about them whenever I could. When high school graduation neared, I found a college, Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California, that had its own on-campus stable and a program where you could actually earn credits for training a horse!

I majored in journalism and minored in animal science. In a magazine writing class, I wrote a piece about wilderness riding with Dad and submitted it to my favorite horse magazine. I anticipated a rejection letter; I got a check instead. They were going to publish my article! (Yes, I used that money on something for my horse.)

That early success helped me land an internship with a statewide horse magazine, which led to a big-city ad agency job where I worked on an agriculture-related account, corporate writing, a weekly and, finally, a daily newspaper and a regional magazine.

College degree in hand and off on my own, I'd managed to keep my horse for awhile. Each job took me further from horses as my subject and farther from my horse back home. Caught up in career building, I barely had time to water my house plants, let alone tend a horse.

I sold the young gelding I'd raised and trained at college, then my horse trailer, my saddle, my tack, my collection of horse magazines. For the longest time afterward, I felt off-balance, as if my stirrups weren't adjusted right.

I married, became a mother, and horses faded into my past. Sometimes, I'd see a young girl loping around a roadside arena or through a pasture, and I'd drift back to the days of Trinket, Nancy and Midnight. I'd smile and sigh. Getting older, stiffer, I seldom considered actually riding.

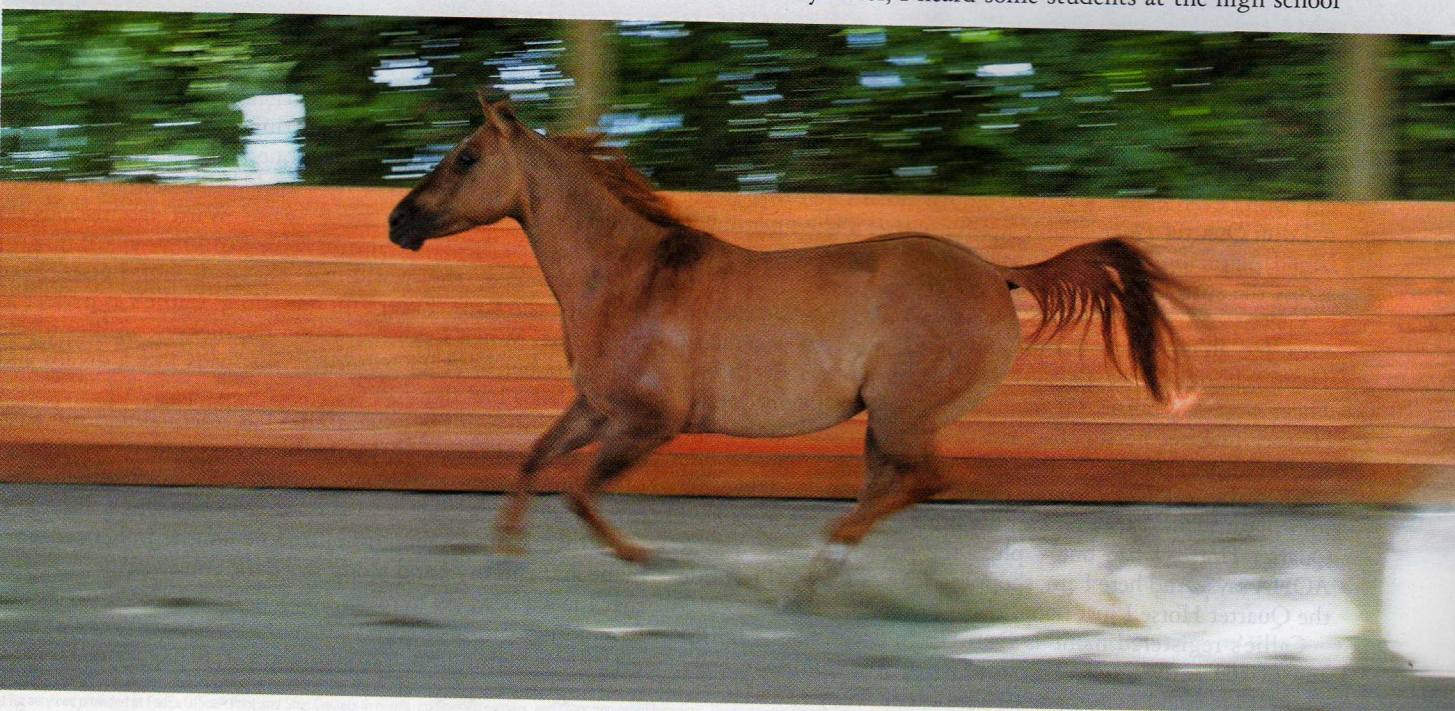
Then came unexpected early retirement and a move to a more rural state, and suddenly horses were everywhere! The school where I took a part-time job even had an equestrian team – a novel concept to this former suburbanite.

The area was awash in everything "horse" – mostly Quarter Horses. I enjoyed watching horse shows and the like from the sidelines with new friends. I hadn't planned to get personally involved with horses again.

Two of my recently acquired girlfriends conspired to get me back in the saddle. After nearly three decades, the thrill was still there. So was something new to me around horses, anxiety. To settle my horseback nerves, I started taking lessons, also a first for me.

Not long after, my riding instructor mentioned, in passing, a nice little Quarter Horse mare that was for sale. Coincidentally, a work colleague of my husband's told him that if I happened to decide to get a horse of my own, he knew of a sweet little Quarter Horse mare for sale.

A few days later, I heard some students at the high school





talking about So-and-So trying to sell his sweet little registered Quarter Horse mare. The words “sweet” and “registered Quarter Horse” caught my ear. Yes, it turned out that all these references related to the same horse. (In a small town, everyone knows each other’s business – and their horse’s, too!)

I hadn’t even known I wanted a horse until I met that sweet red dun Quarter Horse mare, “Callie.” After I tried her out, I began picturing myself riding a Quarter Horse of my own across the surrounding hills and meadows.

Visions of Callie’s famous ancestors – AQHA foundation sires Joe Reed, Poco Bueno and King and the legendary Thoroughbred Three Bars – filled my head and my heart. These were the horses I’d read so much about in my youth: History-making horses that had made a dramatic and long-lasting impact on the Quarter Horse breed.

Then Callie loped through one of my dreams and became mine. Nearly 50 years after I set my heart on having a registered Quarter Horse, I had one – plus “the papers to prove it,” as AQHA says. And here I am, shopping for a saddle, so I can ride the Quarter Horse I just bought!

Callie’s registered name is Dun Up In Style. She is unlike any of the early horses I bought with my ironing money. Those were usually horses with a problem. They reared at the

slightest excuse, fought loading in a trailer, would flee full-tilt when spooked, had to be chased and cornered to be caught. But they did teach me patience.

Now Callie’s the patient one, putting up with me as I re-learn horse handling and riding techniques that once were second nature to me. Let’s see, how do I buckle this new-style halter? What is that type of bit called again? What vaccinations do horses need in the 21st century? Whew!

I’ve changed, the world has changed, but horses have remained the same. Except for one thing: Callie’s as perfect as they come. When I call her name, she nickers, ambles to me and offers her head for haltering. She loads like a dream and seldom has a bad day.

In my post-midlife years, Callie has reacquainted me with something I’d forgotten in the busy-ness and seriousness of life: How to enjoy it. She has saved me from myself, you might say.

As I work my fingers through some tangles in her red-gold mane and run my hand along her dark dorsal stripe, I realize that I feel a new, yet familiar, sense of balance, as if my saddle fits and my course is true.

Callie is helping me feel young again. My Quarter Horse is teaching me to play. ■