



DREAM HORSE

Horse lover lucks out when a Thoroughbred proves unsuitable for original purchaser

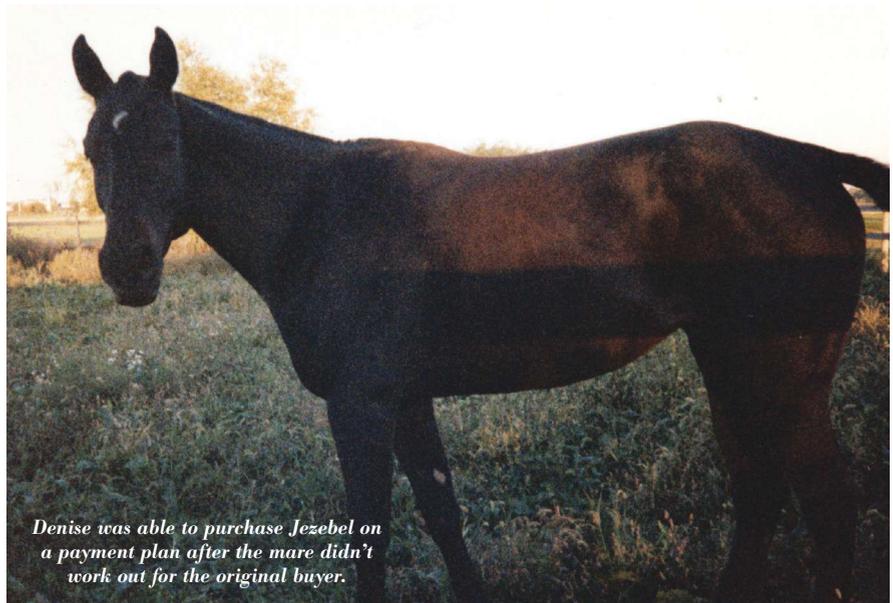
I was 25 years old, living on Chicago's Near North Side. My life was all about horses. Horses galloping on polo fields, horses trotting along Pearson and Michigan Avenues on Chicago's Gold Coast, pulling carriages I drove behind. Some horses I dreamed of owning someday, others I did. Every moment spent not with them I spent thinking about them. On weekdays at 5 p.m., I bolted for the elevator in that Prudential Building where the law firm held its offices, ran to the car and drove out to the polo club for the evening.

What else was there, I believed, but finding ways for horses to fit into my work and play life?

It was in these summertime days she came into my life. Jezebel, a 4-year-old black pedigreed Thoroughbred. Fresh from the racetrack. Not fast enough to win, place or show. Someone had pulled her, introducing her to green polo fields instead. Someone hung the polo mallet in her stall, took her to the practice fields daily, taught her to be unafraid. She was well on her way to becoming a seasoned polo pony.

And she'd wound up at the very polo club I belonged to. I say that because it's the one I worked at since my summertime high school days. It was owned by a real estate developer, who I'll call Ronald H. Purportedly, he'd made his fortune by turning the cornfields of a working class suburb into cheap strip malls and drive-throughs. Despite our obvious disparate backgrounds, he always was kind to me.

After graduation, I stayed on to become a player's partner. The polo club was small, maybe 20 members. The price of admission was \$2500 each season, on top of stabling your numerous horses. The sport of kings.



Denise was able to purchase Jezebel on a payment plan after the mare didn't work out for the original buyer.

In exchange for membership, including ground fees and stabling, my partner and I traded odd services—flipping burgers at clubhouse parties, driving golf carts to round up winning players at the trailers for photos, mixing Pimms' Chukkars for wealthy attendees. It seemed a modest price for the opportunity to play on the same polo fields I'd worked on since my high school days. We had a few grade horses (mutts, in canine terms) on which we played on the same fields as the paying members. It was a handmade "string" of polo ponies, but I was enthralled for the opportunity to play at all. Who else gets to have that in life?

Jezebel was rumored to have cost Ronald H some \$20,000. Horses of her quality were well out of my grade-horse budget. But the value of a horse is like everything else: it's the value to the rider. And for Ronald H, Jezebel's value decreased each time he fell off her back and onto those verdant polo fields. Thoroughbreds are full of fire. For him, she was far too much blaze.

It was somewhere between the third and the seventh fall I had the idea that I could have her for my own. So I raised the possibility one summer afternoon with my then-partner outside the tack room of our rented barn. Eager to teach me one more lesson of life, he dived into the art of horse trading:

Just go up to him, ask him, he motioned with his elbow.

"How? Ask him, how?"

"You say," he smiled, "You say, Hey mister, How much you gotta get for that horse?"

I shuddered. I was intimidated and afraid of Ronald H. He was the guy other players lost to on purpose in Sunday games. The guy that his groom, Guillermo, ran to hand a mallet to as he cantered off the fields. He was the one driving the Rolls Royce convertible after the games with a victory lap, a beautiful woman warming the passenger seat.

And these fields, they were the fields of my childhood. My father was an immigrant machinist bringing home \$250 a

week to pay for our rented apartment. My mother saved \$20 a month to buy me velour tops from JCPenney.

But as I was moving deeper into life and wanted more. The polo fields and all the horses galloping upon it were fast becoming the fields making my dreams.

When I'd worked there in high school, I had managed by the grace of life and the energy of determination to find myself a job at the polo club. One summer Saturday afternoon, I'd walked in with my friend, Nancy, after peering through the slats in the wooden fence looking for a job. I'd heard it was possible to start out hot-walking—cooling down horses after playing on the polo fields—and maybe even become a groom. I wanted to do anything with horses that would bring me money.

The man who'd later become my partner gave me a job immediately. For a teenage girl, hot-walking gorgeous, sweaty

Thoroughbreds fresh off the polo fields beats chasing any guy, any day of the week. The game of polo itself is one of the most rigorous and demanding sports of all the athletic equine events. A typical game consists of six periods, 7 minutes each, 2 minutes in between. The field is the size of 10 football fields combined. The horses go from cantering to galloping the entire time. They come off the field heaving and sweating. They require cooling down the way any athlete needs cooling down after a hard workout. After games they enjoyed full-hose baths. Non-game days, they're cantering along in workout arenas, enjoying short-work and full-on heats.

For a girl in love with horses who couldn't afford any of her own, I was living my dreams.

Six years on after high school, I was hot-walking my own polo ponies, short-working and galloping around the fields

to leg them up for the games I myself would play with a string of grade horses that were the best I could afford.

So it wasn't without a small measure of trepidation, that I decided to approach Ronald H about his \$20,000 polo pony. Jezebel's Thoroughbred bones, porcelain delicate legs and silken jet-black coat drew me into something larger. In her, I saw more of myself. With her, I said, I could find that missing piece for which I longed. Even more, I could feel seen. On her back, I felt, her speed and beauty would make a statement to others. While they had the means, I had something else money could just not buy—an alliance of horse and rider so well matched they formed one image. On her, I would never feel less-than, ever again.

I wanted that oh-so-fine horse for my

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very own. So I stepped forward one Sunday afternoon, as Ronald was coming off the polo field in the wake of the game. As he trotted past our barn, I skipped in his direction:

Mister H! I tripped running after him, my polo boots stiff. I was wondering ... I had heard ... I was maybe thinking ... Were you ever thinking ... of selling that horse?

He pulled up short on the reins. Jezebel threw her head to the left, catching him off guard. He pulled back too hard. She had a butter mouth. Ronald's hand was meant for a mule.

Dancing off to the side, she trotted in place. Excitement, fear and wanting combined in the moment. Tears welled up in my eyes. This was my chance.

Ronald shifted off to the left side of the saddle, losing his balance. He caught himself, reining her back in my direction, but not before she'd spun a complete, dizzying circle. Her nose touched my mouth. I took in the scent, her white, foamy sweat. Her suchness, that very scent, uniquely hers. She was still hot from the fields. Hot air breathed in my nose. We exchanged inhale-exhales for a moment. She was checking me out. Horses familiarize and inform through scent. They are masters of the process, detecting, discerning, deciding. Giving it off, navigating by it. Each inhalation informs choice of movement, fight or flight. Waves of wind blowing into nostrils communicates all they need to know. They take in their world one breath at a time.

My beginning love affair with Jezebel was interrupted by the continual exchange with the very man I needed to talk out of her:

"Who told you that?" He seemed offended. I shrank back in humility. Had I crossed some line?

Guillermo? I offered. I think maybe it was Morrie. I'm not sure ... The height of my nervousness expanded with every sentence.

"I thought you were hard up for mon-



Denise Boehler, second from left, with Jezebel after a Sunday match.

ey," he reeled. "I made you guys a deal, in exchange for ground fees, for stabling. Are you telling me you can afford more, and just didn't say?" he demanded.

Blood filled my face. I was embarrassed. I didn't have much money. I was working two jobs, my then-partner, barely one. He'd nary a dime and I had little more. He was that older guy, the one driving a rusted Cutlass Supreme he'd bought for \$50, then promptly backed it into a tree in a self-proclaimed blitzed moment one fine Sunday afternoon, dramatically denting the trunk forever. An otherwise handsome, charming and dynamic personality, he was also the guy teaming up with a girl 25 years his junior, the one who had been his groom, the one now working 70 hours a week while he spent his mornings drinking 20 ounce cups of Dunkin' Donuts coffee—heavy cream, no sugar—driving around that same dented Cutlass Supreme listening to Morning Edition on NPR. He followed it up with a stroll through the Lincoln Park Zoo for mornings on end, watching the sea lions splash in the center, while his partner answered the phones, typing endless legal documents for fledgling Korean lawyers at an international law firm.

No, my then-partner didn't have a dime to contribute towards Jezebel, nor to a shoe to put on her fine Thoroughbred

foot. It was my debt to incur. But I was more than willing.

I don't—addressing any misunderstanding before it grew—I could make payments. I was sinking. My hope of having this horse were evaporating with each pause. But then, something happened. Something she did, or a moment he had. Somewhere, he realized he was more than happy to give up this one, the one leaving him more off the saddle than on. The one prancing endlessly, for the energy coursing was more than for the asking. He dismounted in that unceremoniously, yet ceremoniously Ronald, kind of way. Ronald always came off a horse by throwing his right leg right over her hind quarters, but before he could get his left foot loose from the stirrup his boots caught and the stirrup leather twisted. She danced the opposite direction sending him landing promptly on his rear end.

I reached down to offer a hand, but he recovered his dignity from efforts his own. Dusting off his Sunday whites, he uttered: "\$4,000. You can make payments ... Give me a check for \$800 next week. I stood silent, Jezebel's reins in hand. \$4,000. \$4,000.

Alright, I agreed. Thank you. Ronald turned on his worn Argentinian custom polo-booted heels and left, walking up to his own private barn. Motioning to Guiller-



Denise, right, and a friend take Jezebel and a stablemate out for a leisurely ride.

mo to go retrieve his saddle and bridle, Guillermo ran back down promptly after with her halter in hand for exchange. Loosening her girth and handing him Harold's saddle, I walked her into a freshly bedded sawdust stall in our rented barn. I breathed into her nose as she rubbed her sweaty, white-starred face on my back.

Back then, polo fields, as the one she spent her summer days on, saw mostly appendix horses, a blend of quarter horse and Thoroughbred. Their tougher legs, thicker barrel chests, beefy hind ends endure where more delicate ones fail. Simply, with horses as with dogs, mutts are sometimes better than purebreds. The stress and strain of any polo game, the quick starts, rapid stops, the flat-out galloping across mowed fields in pursuit of a plastic ball at the asking can create wind puffs and bow delicate tendons. The trotting, legging-up conditioning goes on for weeks before any season's opening. Strength of legs is a major aspect of a polo pony's fitness.

I played every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday game I could on the back of Jezebel. Her body flew through the air one moment, stopped on a dime at the flick of my wrist, turning in the opposite direction the next. She leaped from the start of any period by the subtle nudge of my heel at her side, sprawled her jet-black

body as length would allow at every rise of my own body forward. On her I made every play a young athletic polo player dreamed to make. The game is always 70 percent horse, 30 the rider. Having a fine Thoroughbred as she was like having a Lamborghini on a racetrack. Life was possible in full technicolor dream.

In winter months, I stabled her at the carriage barn in Old Town Chicago in lieu of compensation for driving carriages downtown. I rode her in the tiny arena after everyone else had left, bridle-less and bareback. She responded to my body movements for forward and onward, slow and stop, the way a dressage horse responds to its artist. Trainers watched her from afar in silence. I drank in every moment like it would be my only one.

I would have my dream horse for only two years from that exchange with Ronald H. The bones of a Thoroughbred break easily. Far more delicate than those of other breeds, their legs are not nearly as thick in diameter. Horses evolved to land literally on just one toe. For an 800-pound horse, that's 200 pounds per.

The more delicate the horse, the more carefully you must mind the legs.

My time with her drew abruptly to a close one summer sunset-filled Sunday evening. The intense passion with which she exploded into her days lost out to the

fragility of her rear leg. It was a wrong turn she took, a moment checked, turn left, let's go this way, stop for the last time. I heard it snap underneath me on that green polo field. Jumping down, I watched as she stood, just then, holding it up in air. I was sickened in the way only a young girl drowning in love for her horse can be sickened. It was over before I hit the ground. She bowed her head to me. Oddly, she never screamed or whinnied, the way many horses would. I took in her silence, hugged her neck, and screamed for help to the barns far away.

It would be a cold and windy two-hour ride down to the equine clinic in southern Illinois in a borrowed horse trailer far from the polo fields. I held onto her tightly the entire way.

When we arrived at the clinic, the veterinarian ran to the trailer to help us walk out. I knew that for her, the journey was one-way.

Her leg is broken in two places, the veterinarian informed after X-rays. Her anklebone is shattered. It'd take months of stall-rest, suspended in a sling and thousands of dollars to have her come out to be a brood mare, he offered.

I knew what I would say before he finished. It was over, my time with my dream horse. I would never lope across those green polo fields on her silky back again.

In the moment of loss, time slows. Moments in the night last forever. In reality it was likely only moments as well, when I took off her halter for one last time and hugged her sleek neck, breathed into that velvet brown muzzle. Fingering her delicate mane, I whispered in her ear. She bowed her head to me, one final time.

I walked out of the clinic, leaving her to the fates of medicine and the peace she would have thereafter.

Every time a horse I've loved dies, all the horses I have ever loved come back to life to die just once more. It's in the unfolding of life that I can ever open again to let another back in. There have been others since her that have come and gone. None though as special as that dream horse that was once mine. ♦