

Aged to Perfection

By Leslie Potter

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Our latest HI Spy question asks about the older horses that have had an impact on your equestrian life. If there's one topic that makes me sentimental, this is it. The equine senior citizens that have been in my life have been some of the greatest horses I've ever known.

There was Locket, the first lesson horse I ever rode, who plodded along lazily while I, a very timid eight-year-old, tried to master the finer points of keeping my heels down and posting on the correct diagonal. As a teenager, it was a fabulous twenty-something Morgan named See-Jay who gave me confidence in the saddle (but wasn't above dishing out a serious buck if I got too cocky.) One of the few over-fences classes I've ever competed in was courtesy of Polly Sue, an elderly but energetic Appaloosa. A year later, she carried me through my first fox hunt. After two hours of trotting and galloping through the woods and fields, my legs had turned to jelly and I wasn't sure I was going to be able to keep myself in the saddle. But Polly Sue, who was 30 years old at the time, had barely broken a sweat and was ready to go another two hours.

But my favorite senior citizen was a lesson horse I was lucky enough to have in the barn when I worked as a riding instructor. I taught in a seasonal program, so we leased horses each year and sent them back to their nearby home base for the winter. One of these horses was Streaker, an old Morgan gelding with a distinctive, bright chestnut coat and a flaxen mane, accented with generous amounts of gray. When he arrived, his owners told us he was 31, and I was pretty wary about putting him to work in summer camp. But he was so even-tempered, and sound as could be. He still had a sparkle in his eye and a work ethic like no other. He was the best horse for nervous riders or dead beginners, but had energy to burn and was more than willing to trot for as long as it took for riders to figure out posting, or to teach them to canter for the first time.

I remember one mid-summer day when a couple of the other instructors and I saddled up some horses to go out to a part of the trail that had been blocked by fallen branches. I rarely rode Streaker since he never needed re-schooling, but we decided we needed a bombproof lead horse for this mission, and he was it. When we arrived at the blocked trail, I dismounted and wrapped a lead rope around the branches to pull them off to the side. True to his Morgan heritage, Streaker stepped right in next to me as if to help with the heavy lifting. Spook at the noisy rustling leaves? Of course not. It was all in a day's work for Streaker.

When the following season began, I was excited, though admittedly surprised when Streaker returned. At age 32 he was still our best lesson horse, and still had that sparkle in his eye.

My most memorable Streaker moment occurred late in the fall of that year as the season was winding down. I had spread out several piles of hay in the pasture and turned the herd out for the night. Even though there were more hay piles than horses, herd dynamics always come into play, and the Alpha mare decided she wanted another horse's hay, and chased him away. That horse in turn chased another horse away from the next pile, and so on down the line until Sonny, an older pony with a permanent residence at the bottom of the hierarchy, got chased from his dinner. Streaker had been standing on the sidelines, watching the entire process play out. When everyone had relocated to new hay piles, he slowly wandered over to Sonny and stood between him and the other horses. He didn't eat, he simply stood and guarded his friend from the others. It was the most deliberate act of equine friendship I've ever seen.

Streaker passed away shortly after that night, just a couple weeks before the horses were to return to their winter home. It was a quiet Sunday morning, a day when we didn't teach lessons, and I was the only person at the barn. He had apparently suffered a stroke the previous night, and though he could still stand and walk at first, the scrapes on his side were evidence that he had fallen down during the night, and his expression was glazed and unresponsive. I called his owner and told her he didn't look good, with the vague hope that she might have some miracle remedy that would make him better again. But by the time she arrived, he was already gone.

If you've ever lost a beloved horse, I don't have to tell you how painful it was to see him go. But in a strange way, it was easier than if he'd colicked or had a catastrophic injury. I never had to make a decision and tell the vet, "Okay, it's time." He didn't have to suffer or go through invasive treatments. He was simply healthy one day, and gone the next.

I still feel grateful that I had Streaker in my life, even if he was well into his golden years by the time I met him. He made my job as an instructor so much easier. I trusted him 100%, and he never let me down. Dozens of kids came through the barn each season and learned the joy of horses and riding for the first time thanks to Streaker.

In two decades of riding and working with horses, he still stands out as the best.

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