

2013 My Special Arabian Award Winner

Bascat

Many horses are lucky to be raised, purchased, trained and shown for many enjoyable years of companionship with one individual. Often we hear the success stories of how after an accomplished show career these horses start a second job of training younger members of the family, often grandchildren, to become avid horseman. But, what about those horses that are raised and sold and filter into the horse world, leaving the breeder often pondering how and where that horse is? How many of you have had a horse, sold it and then for years try to “track” it down to assure yourself the horse had a good life?

This is a story of a special horse, named Bascat, born on May 27, 1985 on the Swinker family farm in Western PA. The sire was DCS Prophet and the Dam was Light-n Lovely. When “Cat” was two years old he became a 4-H project for a neighboring family. Due to family circumstances Cat was returned to the Swinker Farm. A short time later Cat and Marion Swinker traveled to North Carolina where he started a new career as an endurance horse.

Over the next few years Cat’s career would encompass being loaned out to families for a variety of activities from endurance training to pleasure riding. Not once, not twice, but three times Cat found himself in a new home with new goals. In 2003, at age 18, it was decided that he needed a retirement home. Willingly the barn doors were opened for him to return to the folds of the family, Ann Swinker and Dan Kniffen, at Windy Butte Ranch in Spring Mills, PA.

Cat’s first excursion was being a demonstration horse for Susan Harris at a clinic in the PSU AG Arena, where his body was painted to exhibit the anatomy of the muscle and skeletal system in the motion of all gaits. Then, Cat was taken to a Penn State University Summer Adult & Youth Horse Camp, to enable a very green 15 year old boy the ability to participate in the weekend’s clinic. It wasn’t know if Cat would be accepting of a strange place and a novice rider, since his past riding experiences were vaguely known, but Cat, like a trooper provided the youth a weekend to remember and performed like a seasoned veteran. Everyone admired the old boy and commented on how that old gray horse was a special one.

As the saying “time flies” implies, the next five years the old man sat idle at Windy Butte Ranch, basking in the sun and grazing with his buddies until a young twelve year old neighbor girl came to visit. Her dad is friends with the family and she came along to see the horses. Katharine Bierlein had taken a few lessons at a riding center, and dreamed of owning a horse of her own and maybe, possibly someday entering a real horse show. Her family is supportive of Katharine’s dream, but knows that owning a horse is a huge financial commitment. Ann introduced Katharine to Cat and as Kat was brushing him the gleam in her eyes shouted, “Wish I could ride him.” All of us know that look on a child’s face, and find it hard not to submit and give the child that golden opportunity.

Cautiously, Cat was saddled and after a few laps of leading the horse around the ring with a proud Katharine on top, a decision was made to see if the rider and mount could perform solo. The next hour was probably the best hour of Katharine’s life, for not only did Cat walk her around the ring like an experienced horse should, but also listened to the gently kicks and broke into a steady trot.

A couple of weeks later, Katharine came back to visit and of course Cat was asked to work his wonders again. This time, Katharine was bolder in her riding and guided Cat around the ring at the walk and trot. Cat seemed to be enjoying himself and suddenly a light bulb went off in Ann’s head. Ann and Rachael Baust had been busy preparing all year to take two young horses to the PA Arabian Games to be held at the end of June. After Katharine left, Ann discussed with Rachael the idea of taking Cat and Katharine as a combo to the games in two weeks. Rachael dug through her old show clothes, finding a hunt jacket,

jodphers and shirt that could accommodate a young rider. The invitation was offered and accepted, but due to uncooperative weather, Katharine and Cat had merely two more rides before the big day came.

This is where the story becomes endearing. Cat hadn't been on a trailer in six years, yet he hopped right on. Only Cat knows if he has ever been in a horse show environment, yet right into the stall he went, settled and started munching the hay. From the minute he stepped onto the show grounds until the second he left for home, this old gray gelding never batted an eye or raised a ruffle.

Katharine and Cat certainly stood out during the clinics, training show and rated show, and not because they were awesome, but because it was obvious how green a rider Katharine was, plus the attire wasn't quite tailored physique. The first day, as the clinician worked with the duo, Katharine's heels and hands were up and her shoulders were way back over the saddle, yet every time Katharine got back on the horse you could see vast improvement. How did Cat look? Well, he certainly didn't have the show type tuck, but he plodded along at a steady pace, staying on the rail, like he was thinking, "I am going to do the best I can to help this little girl learn to ride." He stood flawlessly in the line-ups and the best thing was once back in the stall, when Katharine would enter to fill his bucket or give him a pat, he would walk over to her and suggest another ride might be fun.

The most memorable part of the entire weekend was seeing the sparkle in the little girl's eyes and the amazement on her face when she won ribbons. And yes, amazement at how, as the weekend progressed, an old, out of shape horse seemed to slip back into youthful grace. Instead of appearing tired and aged, he appeared ready to go on forever and actually started to flex at the poll.

So, this isn't really a story about one special horse, for it is really a story about all those special horses out there whose value is measured in the way that they are the best educators and trainers for our youth. It is a story for us to remember that horses don't have to just retire...they really need and could provide an opportunity for a future rider to discover the wonder of being astride the noble steed, developing a skill and priceless memories that can never be forgotten. The next time you see that old aged horse and rider performing at their first show think of Cat and all those horses that provide a service more valuable than money can buy.

Submitted by Rachael Baust in honor of Bascat "Cat" owned by Ann Swinker-Kniffen