

Winner's Circle

Everyone has a favorite horse—and most have not made the pages of *Hoof Beats*. Now is their chance! Readers are encouraged to submit articles about an experience with their favorite horse. *Hoof Beats* editors will select the best for publication in the magazine. This month we feature a story by **Cheryl Rhodes** about her favorite horse, **Et Vous Prêt**.



Lucky Boy

Chance meeting gives pacer Et Vous Prêt a second chance

HAPPY AND HEALTHY: Lucky back to his normal weight, seven months after his adoption.

It was 10 days before Christmas in 2001, but no twinkling lights or pretty ornaments decorated the dimly lit auction barn. Groups of onlookers strolled the aisles peering into stalls and checking the horses. The last stall contained an abused, neglected horse, several hundred pounds underweight. It seemed every bone in his skeletal structure was clearly visible, and he was coated in mud.

Potential buyers gasped at his condition, then turned away. No one wanted to purchase this dirty rack of bones.

I was drawn back to the gelding sev-

eral times. His big brown eyes seemed to silently plead, "Can you help me?" Someone mentioned he might be a Standardbred, so I leaned over the stall gate and pushed up his lip, revealing his tattoo. I was shocked that a former racehorse had ended up in such deplorable condition.

At the auction office I asked a woman behind the desk to check the sale book for horse number 59, and she confirmed he was listed as a 10-year-old Standardbred gelding.

I returned to the horse and stepped into the stall with him. He looked at me

without much interest, but my presence didn't frighten him, and I saw there was still a little flicker of light left in those sad eyes. I gently ran my hands across his body, feeling every rib. His spine towered inches over his back, his hips stuck out like a cow's, and he had no rear end, making his matted tail dangle between his legs like that of a naughty dog.

His legs were swollen to two or three times their normal size. He had mud fever up to his knees, and I wondered how much of his legs' unnatural swelling was caused by the fever, or if there were old racing injuries contribut-



NEW PATH: The author's husband, Kerry Murphy, takes Lucky on a mounted orienteering course. (The paper plate in the tree is a marker.)

ing to this condition. He was covered in rain rot scabs, assorted cuts and bald spots.

"Are you planning to rescue him?" someone asked.

"I'm thinking about it," I replied.

The sale began, and I asked my husband if he wanted to go home.

"No," he said. "Let's stay and buy the horse."

He then went home for the truck and horse trailer, and I stayed to bid.

What was I getting myself into? I had no way of knowing if the horse had a terminal illness contributing to his condition. I went back to his stall and gave him a pat and asked him if he'd like to come home with me. I didn't know whether or not he would live. Maybe he only had a day or two left in him, but he deserved a warm, dry place to sleep and food in his belly, and to know that he was loved, if only for a short time until he died.

A lady whose horse was about to go into the sale ring came over with some hay and offered it to the starving gelding. Another climbed up into the hayloft to throw him down a flake. I returned to the auction, noticing that the meat buyers were starting to bid at the \$50 range. It seemed forever until the starved gelding was led into the ring. The auctioneer started the bidding

at \$200. No takers. He dropped to \$100, and there was no interest.

Next \$75. Nothing. Then \$50. I quickly lifted my bidding card so the auctioneer could see. He pointed at me, and soon after the hammer fell: "Sold for \$50 to bidder 112."

I was nearly in tears as I stumbled out of the sales area and back to my new horse's stall. I stroked his neck as

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he greedily gobbled down the donated hay. I named him Lucky, figuring he was going to need all the luck he could get to survive. Darkness had set in, and I paid the auction house and waited for my husband to show up with the rig.

Finally he arrived as the auction finished and owners were leading their new horses out of the barn. Lucky willingly came inside our trailer, smelling the hay that awaited him in the manger. It was a 20-minute drive to our stable, and I never took my eyes off Lucky.

As long as I could see his head I knew he was still standing. We arrived at the barn, and after taking photos to

document his condition, we set about getting his stall ready. I plopped a pile of hay in front of him, grabbed my softest brushes, and began grooming. It took hours to get all the mud from him and rub soothing cream into his lesions before leaving him in a dry stall with plenty of hay and water. When I arrived the following morning I was ecstatic to see he was still standing, still alive. I made an appointment with my vet and kept him on a regimen of unlimited hay and water.

I contacted Standardbred Canada for assistance in identifying the horse. I gave them the name of the seller on my auction receipt, but there was no record of anyone with that name registered in the Standardbred industry. I had trouble reading his tattoo number, as it had become faded with age. We agreed I'd take digital photos of the tattoo and forward them via e-mail.

My vet drew blood, and the test results showed no terminal disease. Lucky's condition was caused from starvation and malnutrition. He received shots of the vitamins he was lacking and began a feeding program

that included vitamin supplements.

Four days into ownership, I was leading Lucky back to the field for his short turn-out and he gave me his first nicker! Another time I went out to the field to bring him in and he walked away from me, reluctant to come back in the barn, because he was enjoying grazing. He even broke into a trot for a couple of steps but didn't have the energy to keep it up, and I caught him as he slowed to a walk. My new horse had spirit!

Day by day Lucky was improving, but we still had no idea who he was or how he came to be in such horrendous

condition. On New Year's Eve a local TV news station aired his story, but no former owners or trainers came forward.

On Jan. 2 the staff of Standardbred Canada e-mailed what they believed was Lucky's tattoo number, saying the horse with that number matched the characteristics of my horse. Armed with the tattoo number, I contacted the British Columbia Standardbred Association and asked for his racing profile.

His registered name was Et Vous Prêt ("are you ready" in French), and he was a foal of 1989—making him 13 years old, not 10 as they had said at the sale. A son of Trim The Tree out of the Falcon Almahurst mare Varsity Seven, he was bred in Wilmington, Ohio, and earned nearly \$200,000 in his nine-year career. With assistance from the local racetrack manager, we contacted Lucky's last trainer, Bill Davis, and learned his history.

A pulled suspensory ended his racing career in 2000, and the trainer placed

Lucky at a local riding academy as a lesson horse. Being a tall horse and not motivated in his new career, he was not a popular choice with the students. The facility owner thought he would do better in a home where he would be used more often. One of her students said she knew of a man looking for a riding horse for his 75-year-old wife. Lucky lived with that couple two months before being shipped to the auction.

As Lucky steadily put on weight and became more energetic, I began to lightly ride him a few minutes a day, gradually building up to a seven-mile walk around the local equestrian park. I let Lucky into a trot a couple of short distances, and one day he was ready to gallop. With a little squeeze he was off, galloping along the trail, zigzagging between the trees with ears perked forward and clearly enjoying the run!

Ahead on the trail I saw a couple of riders approach, and I pulled back on the reins. Lucky responded perfectly.

He immediately slowed his gait and drew back to a walk.

The night I bought Lucky, I promised him all he had to do was live and he would have a good home with me for the rest of his life. I spent dozens of hours bonding with Lucky as I groomed him and tended his wounds, being rewarded with an incredible sense of accomplishment as his stomach stopped growling and the bones became less visible. He held up his end of the bargain.

Lucky is a strong horse with a lot of heart and an incredible will to survive. And he'll never go hungry again.

Send your submission to "Winner's Circle" by e-mail to nkraft@ustrotting.com, or by fax at (614) 222-6791; or in writing to Winner's Circle, c/o Hoof Beats, 750 Michigan Ave., Columbus, OH 43215. To comment on this article, e-mail us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.

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