

FOREVER, MAX

Marge Tautkus Gunnar, written in 1996; updated in 2021

On an unusually steamy day in the summer of 1986, my dear friend, Dayle Marsh, and I headed to Tempel Farm, where arrangements had been made to view their sale horses. We had been “horseless” for a couple of years, and Dayle strongly felt that it was time to get back in the saddle. I was hesitant; Dayle was adamant.

Greeted warmly at Tempel, we were escorted to one of the outlying barns. As a stall door slid open, we lit our eyes upon a tall, handsome, and dark steel gray. He took his first step out of the stall, turned his head, and stared at us with large intelligent eyes. Dayle and I looked at each other and smiled.

“I like that horse!” she said.

“Me too!” I replied.

One of the Tempel employees leaned over to me and whispered, “Some of us think Neapolitano IV Farica (pronounced Farisha) is the best-looking Lipizzan on the place.”

He stood with his nose defiantly pointed skyward as they attempted to bridle him. It took about 20 minutes to finally get the bit in his mouth. I swung happily into the saddle, at the very least fulfilling my ambition to ride a Lipizzan. His walk was a little uneven, and his trot felt like that of a camel. I asked for a canter, and he almost fell down.

What were his prospects as a competition horse?

“None,” I was flatly told. “And, for his age, he’s too immature for the Tempel exhibition. But he’s got a real nice personality.” Seemed perfect to us!

Our first trainer received his early training at Tempel Farm, so we knew he would be thrilled with our choice. “Is he a Neapolitano?” he asked.

“Yes,” I proudly answered.

He nodded, approvingly. But upon watching his movement, we were horrified when our trainer gasped, “You’ve got to be kidding!” He argued his point - the uneven walk, the camel trot, the falling down at the canter.

We argued our point. “He’s pretty!” Besides, there was something about him, that indefinable something.

“Fine! Just don’t come to me in a year and complain because you can’t show him,” was our trainer’s response. Dayle and I agreed. So off we went to the pre-purchase exam. However, Max (as we nicknamed him) had other ideas. He had never seen, much less traveled in, a two-horse trailer, and proceeded to fall off the ramp of the rented ride. He thought he would pass on the whole idea and decided to just stay home. The pony they loaded as a lure didn’t impress him much either.

An hour-and-a-half later, thanks to the help of countless Tempel Farm employees, we were finally cruising down the road to the clinic. We smiled confidently as the exam progressed smoothly. Then came the flexion, and there was no denying that limp.

“Sorry,” said the vet, “but he’s obviously got a problem in that right front. I can’t pass him.”

“What?!” I wailed, and then quickly explained the trailer incident. “It very well could be just a trailer injury, but the fact is he’s lame. Much as I’d like to pass him, I can’t.”

We called Tempel. “Bring him back,” they said. “We can’t sell you a lame horse. You have to bring him back.”

“What?!” After carrying on about how much we loved this temporarily lame Lipizzan, they agreed to let us have him for 30 days, after which time we were to have him rechecked. I think everybody knew we had no intention of bringing him back, even if his leg fell off.

In a couple of days Max stopped limping and began serious dressage training. Apparently, nobody had explained to him he wasn’t supposed to be a competition horse. Nine months after we bought him, and at the urging of our once dubious trainer, Max made his debut in the show ring. He finished third in two of his three classes. In his next show he won his first class over 23 other horses and missed sixth place in his second class by less than one point.

Max, Dayle and I first met Nancy Lewis (now Lewis-Stanton) when she joined our second trainer as a working student. As a teenager, this gifted young horsewoman had trained and campaigned her Anglo-Arab gelding, Carrousel, through the FEI levels. With her second horse, the impressive and highly successful Hanoverian gelding, Izaiah, she has won many national awards including the gold medal at the 1993 Olympic Sports Festival, and USDF Horse of the Year at Prix St. George and Fifth Level. In 1995, they had all but locked up a position on the Pan Am team when Izaiah pulled a muscle in his back during one of his last warmups. They finished as first alternates.

From the start, Nancy loved Max and her confidence in him was unshakable. Max virtually blossomed under her guidance. Here, at last, was the combination we had been looking for. So, when Nancy decided to begin her career as a professional trainer, Dayle and I confidently put Max in her charge.

In 1991, their first full show season together, Max and Nancy came out strong. Although Max was not fully confirmed at third level, they won many of their classes and ribboned in most of the rest. They won The Tempel Lipizzans' Perpetual Trophy, and Max was Reserve Champion USLR/USDF All-Breed Award winner. Not bad for a horse with no competition potential!

The next year they were even more successful. Max was now confirmed at third level and he and Nancy garnered many more wins, including several reserve championships. They qualified for the Regional Finals, and once again Max won a Reserve Champion AllBreed Award. In addition, Max helped Nancy's sister, Sharon, complete her scores for the USDF Bronze Medal. At the end of the season, Nancy debuted Max at fourth level. It was at the Finals, however, that we noticed something terribly wrong. Max's lateral work had always been beautiful to watch. He would glide effortlessly across the arena with swan-like grace. So it was with horror that we watched him stagger painfully through half pass to the left.

Max was diagnosed with a severely injured stifle, so weak that he almost fell over when the vet leaned his own weight against him. True to the stoic nature of his breed, however, Max had refused to show any pain. We had no indication before or during the show season of what was undoubtedly a deteriorating situation. No prediction could be made about his recovery. Weeks gave way to months of treatment, with no improvement.

Reluctantly, Nancy left with Izaiah for the Florida winter show circuit. I drove to the barn every night to nurse Max. As is often the case, one injury was compounded by others. Time after time, the vet's visits resulted in bad news and bitter disappointment. No improvement, none. Max was frequently confined to his stall and only allowed hand walking. He took everything with his characteristic good nature. But the months without work and weeks of stall confinement were taking their toll on his body.

The powerful muscles atrophied. Bone protruded everywhere. The vet suggested an excellent chiropractor to assist in Max's care. A new blacksmith was added. Nancy called frequently. We were sure now that his show career was over.

Max was all we cared about. But thin glimmers of hope continued to give way to larger setbacks. Nancy came home in March and was shocked by Max's physical appearance. By this time, we had, however, made slight progress. After three internal blisters, the stifle seemed stronger, and I had begun riding him lightly. Lovingly, Nancy took over the big stallion's rehabilitation. Walk, trot, minimal canter, and lots of stretching - no circles, no lateral work. Max began to make steady improvement. Muscle began to cover bone, strength began to increase, and Max began growing increasingly bored with his light workouts. Still, Nancy insisted on sticking to the basics. It was late spring when the vet decided it was time for the first real test. "Half pass to the left, Nancy," he instructed. I held my breath, but there it was. That wonderful glide, a little stiff but there it was! Nancy beamed. I cried. We all knew, however, that it was much too soon to celebrate. One time across the arena did not assure that the stifle would hold when repeatedly tested.

Nancy refused to be aggressive with Max's training, opting instead to continue the strengthening exercises. There were still no thoughts that Max could return to the show ring.

Things seemed finally to be going well that late summer in 1993, when disaster struck us again. During what was supposed to be a routine surgery, I was diagnosed with Stage II ovarian cancer. The pathology showed the cell-type to be very aggressive. From surgery, I immediately entered chemotherapy. As Max grew progressively stronger, I grew weaker from chemo. Since I was unable to drive, my sister decided one day to take me to see Max. As I entered his stall, he looked at me with big soft eyes that seemed to question, "Where have you been?"

Tears slid down my cheeks as I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his mane. Max wrapped his neck around me and squeezed. Kindred spirits! Nancy called me often, cheering me with reports of his continuing progress.

In January 1994, Nancy took Max to Florida to continue his training, and I finished my last course of chemotherapy. For me, as it was for Max, the road back was difficult and frustrating. The chemo which saved my life also destroyed the nerves in all four limbs. I couldn't hold anything in my hands, and I had lost my sense of balance. But by summer, some feeling had returned, and I was feeling a bit stronger.

Nancy decided it was time for me to ride again. I could barely feel the reins in my hands or my feet in the stirrups. My lack of balance caused me to flop around in the saddle like a rag doll. Sensing something was wrong,

the usually fiery Max proceeded patiently and cautiously with me, slowing his trot when he felt me slipping. In time, through Nancy and Max's love, patience, and perseverance I learned to ride again.

Because his progress had been so remarkable, we decided to return Max to the show ring. Although he was shown lightly and cautiously, it was enough to prove that he was fit enough to handle the rigors of both training and showing.

In 1995, Nancy and Max resumed a full show schedule. It was an impressive season. Again, they ribboned in most of their classes, won The Tempel Lipizzans' Perpetual Trophy for the second time, won the difficult Prix St. James at St. James Farm, and won the USLR/USDF fourth level All-Breed Award with an impressive average of 63.22. Max also made his debut at Prix St. George.

Max was obviously excited to be back on the road with his equine pals, standing patiently and proudly as he was preened for the show ring, making new human friends, giving pony rides to eager children, mooching anything he could from passersby, and "turning himself loose" to romp merrily around the show grounds.

January 1996 marked my second year post-chemotherapy. Max and I are both hale and hearty. We have been together through our most difficult times, perhaps drawing strength from each other. Kindred spirits? I think so.

The Lipizzan horse is steeped in over 400 years of history and tradition. These are the horses of royalty - the imperial white horses of the Hapsburg Court. They are the first horses of dressage - the classic horses for dressage. In Max is manifest the legacy of this rare and noble breed - beauty, courage, intelligence, gentleness. He has made us laugh and made us cry. With him we have turned tragedy into triumph. It is his essence, not his show record, that will remain forever etched in our minds and our hearts. He is Neapolitano IV Farica. To those of us privileged to have had this splendid horse in our lives, however, he remains simply and forever, Max.

UPDATE: My beloved Max passed away in May of 2010 at the age of 29. The powerful connection that I felt between us inspired me to want to bring that same healing power of horses to others. It was then that the seed for BraveHearts – the not-for-profit I founded – was sown. BraveHearts is now one of the largest therapeutic riding centers in the country and is the largest center serving military veterans and their families at no cost to them. Max's daughters, Karma and Phaedra, were among our first therapeutic riding horses. Now retired, their daughters, Dharma and Pharra, carry on their grandsire's legacy and that of the Lipizzan breed. That legacy is also carried on by Max's half-brother, Neapolitano IV Almira (Huey) who, upon his retirement from the Tempel Farms quadrille at the age of 22, was generously donated to BraveHearts by Tempel.

Our mission: BraveHearts brings hope, joy and unlimited possibilities through the healing power of the horse. BraveHearts website: www.braveheartsridding.org