

From Rescue to Endurance Horse

by Cherry Grubb

“Once you hear this horse’s story, you won’t be able to leave her here!” were the resonating words of Dominika Nawrot, former trainer at the [Standardbred Retirement Foundation](#) (SRF), that will always bring a smile to my face when I reflect on my equestrian journey with a retired Standardbred broodmare named Boston Kate.

The SRF adoption fee was a Christmas gift to me from my sister Amy in 2010, a full \$300 to put toward a Standardbred that I knew I would adopt, but clueless from among the 30 or so head which horse it would be. The week after Christmas and two days after a lofty snowstorm that hammered central New Jersey and left most of the spacious farm where the horses are housed for the program ensconced in over a foot of snow, we packed our horse-crazy daughters in the truck and struck out on a quest for my new horse: an endurance candidate.

I had decided months before that I wanted to delve into the endurance world, a spark that had ignited in my belly upon returning to horsemanship after a 20-year hiatus where life and the “real world” (college, career, bringing up baby) had been inserted into my former life as a pleasure rider and foxhunter. I found inspiration in my mentor and fellow boarder, Mike Keretzman, whom upon returning from the Fort Valley ride in October of 2010 made a passing remark to me that I might enjoy endurance riding. Be it kismet or coincidence, Dominika at SRF had already piqued my curiosity about the sport after regaling me with her story of a

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late-night arrival for a ride in Maine where she unloaded her Standardbred to the whispers of "What is that?" amongst the sea of Arabian athletes. She proceeded to hold her own on Oz the Great and finished fifth in a well-worn English saddle with a sponge and wearing nothing more elaborate than a tank top, regretting only the lack of bug spray.

A sponge? What the heck for?

And so I launched myself into the next chapter of life as a newbie endurance rider on a mare that had become a rescue success story on a local harness racing forum after her caretaker, Rose, put everything on the line and outbid an Amish man for her at auction. Her former owner had weaned Kate's most recent foal, number eight for the 14-year old mare, and threw her up on the block without a second thought. Rose had no means to feed or keep the horse, but saw something special in her. Enter the folks in white at SRF who realized the horse was a registered Standardbred and pulled Kate into their program immediately.

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I was concerned that I would not find an ideal candidate that fateful day at SRF, although my criteria were clear: I was looking for an athletic gelding, not too large, between 6 and 10 years old, with some trail experience, a calm temperament, and a zero spook factor. We had even brought balloons and umbrellas to make sure! And most importantly, the horse had to want me, too. The ones that turned or walked away from me in the pasture would likely not make the cut. As I walked through the gate to the last pen of candidates, I was almost immediately joined by a curious, gentle mare, who had chosen to quietly follow me as I toured the pasture. My sister informed me that I had just been adopted. A final call to Mike, whom I was leaning heavily on for advice and support, would be the deal maker or breaker. "Are we completely opposed to mares?" I remember asking, fingers crossed. Her age was another possible stumbling block at 14 years old, as well as the pin firing scars on her right hind leg, but after passing her pre-purchase vet exam with flying colors, Kate left SRF with a new job ahead.

And so it was that I launched myself into the world of endurance with so much to learn and a burning desire to find out exactly what it would mean to live up to the AERC motto of "to finish is to win." Conditioning commenced immediately during the snowy winter months as Kate and I began to understand the rigors involved in an endurance training program. Obstacles like stream crossings now became a challenge to my balking mare as she would have to process them as critical breaks for water and learn to enter without hesitation. Regulating the rangy mare's trot was a major concern, given her ability to trot at upwards of 18 mph. Helping her find a comfortable place for her footfalls and slowing to an 8-10 mph trot came with the help of equitation trainer Shawna Simmons, who showed us how to stay engaged and steady. Kate's canter left much to be desired until quite by accident one day I stumbled across a verbal cue that must have remained from her days on the track. And thus with a kiss I learned just exactly what my mare could do!

The 2011 ride season was not without its trials and tribulations, although Kate and I have forged our way along and never looked back. At Rabbit Run we rider optioned after 15 miles, no thanks to a tack malfunction that had rubbed my leg raw and an apparent colic episode on Kate's part that actually revealed itself to be marish behavior during her early spring transition. We entered each ride with no expectations, strictly a "finish to win" attitude and by June at the Old Dominion LD, finished ninth place, strong and ready for more. The true test would be at Ride Between the Rivers for our first 50, and while she was tired at the finish and had difficulty pulsing down, she placed 18th in her first ever endurance trial and earned every single accolade that would come her way. (As a side, we owe many heartfelt thanks to Natalie Muzzio, who without hesitation offered extra ice and much time and energy to help Kate pulse within limits.) And it is that attitude that embodies the riders, crews, veterinarians, and volunteers that I have encountered during my first season with the fabulous organization that is AERC.

The crowning moment this season for my mighty mare and me was at Fort Valley in October. Mike's horse had been pulled for a sore back, leaving Kate and me to continue alone on the third loop. With the change of seasons, the pending darkness seemed a vivid reality and with Kate's unfortunate aversion to the incline at Indian Graves (where she chose to balk and stand solid for what seemed an eternity), the time gap between ourselves and the dozen or more horses that passed us on the ridge after we finally reached the summit had closed. It was Kate's first foray alone on the trail without an equine buddy and the true test of trust in our own partnership. At the time we trotted out, we were most certainly contenders for the turtle award, but on that final loop, not only did Kate willingly move along as I endlessly coaxed and praised her, she actually made up time, crossing the finish line at what would average at an 11 mph trot. I could not have been more proud of my mare; we finished with daylight to spare.

Season One has ended and Kate and I have completed the first chapter of our endurance story with a mild sprain sustained at the Mustang Memorial ride in November. Kate is a very good patient, however, and will no doubt recover quickly and gladly begin the much needed rehabilitation that lies ahead. There is no doubt in my mind that Kate loves her new career. We have just renewed our annual membership with AERC, although this year's form has been submitted as a family membership for Mike and I, as we currently park both of our horse trailers in the same driveway and leave two pairs of muddy boots by the front door when we return from the barn. My daughter Katy has also caught the distance bug, placing second on her first-ever 30-mile CTR at Chesapeake Fall in September, and champing at the bit to continue in 2012 as a junior competing in limited distance AERC rides on her new Arabian, "Harley." The sport of endurance riding promises something different and exciting for each one of us as we add new chapters to our equestrian journey and we offer many thanks to AERC for making it all possible. 🌟