

News

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Grandson of a king

A horse sanctuary that houses a royal equine needs help

BY ROBERT A. MCDONALD

The red horse likes to play.

He nudged a *New Times* reporter hard in the stomach on a recent afternoon, driving the man back into a small electric fence. The reporter received a mild shock and asked, "Clever aren't you?"

The red horse tried the trick again, but this reporter had wised up and stepped away from the fence.

Red is a big, playful 21-year-old thoroughbred that lives in the hills east of Paso Robles. He's not much to look at anymore; he's got a sizable belly and he's not as limber as he used to be. Still, with his red coat and strong face, there's something beautiful and entirely glorious about him.

His formal name is Pair-O-Docs (pronounced "paradox") and through his veins runs the blood of champions. For a horse, he's a member of a family far more royal and glorious than any that lives in a gilded palace.

Red's cousins did very well at the racetrack. Affirmed, his second cousin, took the Triple Crown (winning the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and Belmont Stakes) in 1978, the last horse to do so. His first cousin, Seattle Slew, considered one of the great racehorses of his time, won the Triple Crown in 1977. Another distant cousin was Man-O-War, perhaps the greatest horse of his time.

Owners who hoped he would be something special bred Red, like most thoroughbreds, for speed. The bloodlines of the fastest horses in history came together in Red's family. And all that breeding came to fruition in Red's grandfather, Secretariat.

Secretariat was a big horse, considered in his early career to be too lazy, playful, and heavy to be a proficient racer. He proved his critics dead wrong, turning out to be greatest racehorse of the 20th century. He not only won the Triple Crown, but he won races in amazing times, establishing records that remain unbroken after nearly 40 years. Unlike most runners of any species, Secretariat tended to speed up the farther he went, finishing long races going faster than most sprinting horses could run.

Secretariat's owners aimed to breed him in the hope of capturing his magic one more time. The horse had a very happy and fulfilling retirement; he had more than 750 children. Of his thousands of descendants, one thing is known: None of them was remotely as fast as he was.

Red looks like Secretariat, but one trait he missed out on was speed. Like one of his great, great, great grandmothers who needed someone to open an umbrella behind her to get out of the starting gate, Red didn't care for the racetrack experience.

He lost three races and was sold, passed down from owner to owner who didn't know what to do with him. Eventually, he was made into a packhorse. One day, Red fell off a trail, plunging 300 feet down an embankment. He wasn't hurt much and was rescued, but, in the end, no one wanted a horse they couldn't make money from or ride.



LEGACY

Pair-O-Docs—or 'Red' as he's known—is a grandson of Secretariat and lives at Heaven Can Wait horse sanctuary east of Paso Robles.

PHOTO BY STEVE E. MILLER

Red is one of the lucky ones. The dark, sad side of racing is that it's a cruel world for a horse that doesn't win. Even the winners can end up in the slaughterhouse. Ferdinand, winner of the 1986 Kentucky Derby, was slaughtered for pet food in 2002.

Red lives at Heaven Can Wait, a horse sanctuary ranch north of Paso Robles, with 27 other horses. Susan Schwartz runs the place, and she knows the horses and their stories. Schwartz, who opened the sanctuary in 2002, treats the horses as well as any mother treats her children.

There are donkeys, mini-horses, Arabians, Mustangs, and thoroughbreds living peaceably on 14 acres. They all have one thing in common: They are either too old, too broken down, or just too bad tempered for anyone else to want them.

"Why should they die?" Schwartz said. "Just because they aren't usable or not fast enough or they don't have the right mentality. And it's not just the racing, it's every [discipline]. Just because they were not cut out to do what they were bred for, why should they be abandoned and thrown away?"

Schwartz uses the horses for something they seem to be good at: working with kids and the disabled. Even the thoroughbreds, traditionally skittish creatures, work well with visiting kids. Red seems to have a knack for interacting with autistic children.

The horses at Heaven Can Wait represent a rare exception to the usual, sad final chapter of every little girl's dream to have a pony, every breeder's desire for another Secretariat. When they're no longer useful, horses are sold down a dismal path of over-demanding owners who try to wring every last dollar out of them. Well-meaning owners sell or give away their horses, not realizing many end up euthanized in their youth or in slaughterhouses in Mexico or Canada.

Unfortunately for Red and his equine friends, money is getting tight at Heaven Can Wait. The cost of hay is going up, and the great recession has been brutal on the sanctuary's supporters. The strain shows on Schwartz.

She won't say what will happen if all the money runs out. She tends to change the subject back to the individual horses.

It's strange to look at Red and the other animals living among the mansions and vineyards expanding over the beautiful terrain of the North County while their futures could be determined by a few thousand dollars.

Red stood in the shade, admired by Schwartz and a *New Times* reporter.

"There will never be another Secretariat," she said, looking at Red.

Schwartz should know. She watched Secretariat at the most famous race of all time: the 1973 Belmont Stakes, where he won by 31 lengths. Unfortunately, she lives with the consequences of unrestrained breeding in the quest for another Secretariat.

"There are just so many of them," she said sadly. "They just keep breeding them. When is it going to stop?"

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