

Beginner's Luck:

A Saddlebred Rescue Success Story

BY TRISH PIERCE

Editor's Note: This article is the beginning of a series that American Saddlebred magazine will feature on how people became attracted to the breed. ASHA encourages its members to submit their own personal experiences of how they were introduced to and came to love American Saddlebreds. The following is a first-hand account of how Trish Pierce of Corning, New York, became a Saddlebred enthusiast after never having ridden horses before 2005.

At 36 years old, I decided I had to take riding lessons. Drawn in that way that all horsewomen are, pulled by that force that is at once inexplicable, yet endlessly fascinating to try to explain, I found myself calling the local hunter/jumper stable to learn to ride horses. I was terrified and exhilarated in equal measure, and I eagerly awaited every lesson, though my knees shook in the car on the way to the barn.

After three months of twice-per-week lessons, I was completely hooked, and my knees began to shake in eager anticipation and less out of fear. I advanced from the beginning diminutive white Arab mare, just barely horse-sized, to the sturdy, older Thoroughbred gelding with the upright head. Though he had a terrible lean to the right, a tendency to spook at the tractor and a miserable habit of jerking his head up out of my hands as I tried to bridle him, he remained my favorite through six months of lessons, despite opportunities to ride several horses—including two very seasoned, very expensive Quarter Horses and a delightful grade horse with the silkiest coat I'd ever touched. The Thoroughbred gelding had something that made this short-legged, long-wasted beginner comfortable – a big, high head that he carried upright. If there was going to be a horse of my own in my future, it'd be high-headed like this. I just liked having that dashboard in front of me!

But in this era of the ubiquitous Quarter Horse, everywhere I went,



Photos courtesy of Pierce family & Saddlebred Rescue

Trish Pierce, who had never taken riding lessons prior to age 36, with Bayou Roux, who she adopted from Saddlebred Rescue and rehabbed.

people were trying to sell me on the Quarter Horse. My hunter/jumper instructor champions them as kind, quiet, steady horsey companions. While I recognized their attraction for the general public, they just didn't do it for me. I didn't know it then, but there was a brighter equine star on my horizon. As a coonhound owner, I've come to realize that there's not enough joy in an animal that's too simple, too easy. If *everyone* can manage one, then it's not challenging enough for me.

I poured through breed books, looking, learning, absorbing everything about all the types of horses. I kept stumbling across one – the American Saddlebred – that had the upright head carriage I was looking for. I kept finding references to how they weren't really as “hot” as their reputation; they

were really more versatile than years of show-ring display had reduced them to. I, of course, heard the *real* message in the denials of these stereotypes: there was something to the reputation or else the stereotype wouldn't exist in the first place. I kept saying, “Uh, well, maybe not for a beginner like me...”

Looking for advice, I mentioned my interest in the American Saddlebred to my hunter/jumper instructor, and she said, “They don't jump.” Quickly realizing that neither did I as of yet, she went on to reiterate some of what I'd already heard – hot, spirited, show-ring horses. So again I said, “Maybe not.”

But I couldn't look away, and it wasn't too long before my evening Internet surfing had found a focus: Saddlebreds. Within a week or so of serious browsing, I came across a video



The improvement of this 20-year-old mare since last July is obvious.

of a horse on the *trot.org Rescue Me* forum. He'd been named Mr. Goodwrench because of the unique wrench-shaped blaze he bore. I am a journeyman stagehand in the theatre, and our number-one, most-important tool is our crescent wrench, so his name and his mark seemed to be speaking to me right out of the heavens. I watched the video of him trotting around the North Wind Stables (Blairstown, NJ) ring over and over. I emailed it to friends. I showed it to people at work. I was a woman obsessed.

But there was no way I was ready for a horse of my own! Beyond the questions of finances, what the husband thought and where I'd keep one (obviously not at the hunter/jumper barn; that would be too uphill a battle for me. I couldn't prove both that I was ready for a horse and that it should be one "outside the discipline" at the same time!), I still had a nagging question about this breed. Yeah, they were pretty and looked like what I wanted, but what the heck did I know? I'd been involved with horses for all of six months.

So, again to the Internet to find a stable nearby that had Saddlebreds. While not quite nearby, there was a

trainer in my hometown, about an hour-and-a-half away. A quick email, a little bit of phone tag, and I was set for Saturday lessons. I promised my husband I'd try it through the spring and make a wise, economical decision about all that road traveling before winter came.

Though I started my saddle seat equitation on a trusted Morgan within the stable, I watched several Saddlebreds being worked every weekend as I always went early to soak up everything and make the most of my journey. My trainer was wonderful. His stable was friendly and welcoming, and the horses were just gorgeous. Though, I myself wasn't headed for the show ring – always a stagehand, never a performer – this facility really tempted me with its beauty, grace and enthusiasm. And, of course, the Saddlebreds!

Then came the whirlwind that was July 2006. After a particularly grueling fundraiser weekend at my theater, one that took six weeks to prepare for and four straight 14-hour days to run, I was called by a force stronger than explanation to Saddlebred Rescue to look at a horse I'd been following on the Web. I was physically and spiritually exhausted by the preceding month's

work schedule; I was empty, washed clean and worn out, evidently waiting to be filled. There was no rhyme, reason nor logic to my decision to travel to New Jersey that Thursday morning. I can still see the look on my husband's face when I said, "I think I'm going down to look at a horse" as casually as if I were headed down to the market to pick up some milk. He looked at me as if I was crazy, and, I suppose, fearing I was, said he'd go along for the ride if I wanted him to. I did, he did, and we pulled into North Wind's driveway at 10:30 a.m. on Thursday, July 20th.

I knew the minute I saw him in person that the horse I'd come to see wasn't the right one. He'd drawn me there, but he wasn't right for me, and that he was wrong was as enigmatic as the call to come see him had been. The folks at the stable were kind and patient as they tried not to size me up as a flake – all hot to see this horse one minute, then uncertain and unaccepting of him the next. But something else was going on there that day, something cosmic and miraculous, and the good women and men of Saddlebred Rescue had the good sense to let it flow.

I perused the pen of rescue horses, some pulled from the New Holland

auction just three days earlier. Whoever it was who had brought me here, *was in that pen*. I tried a gelding named Andy, and while he was physically gorgeous despite his thin, thin frame, and despite the fact that my husband really loved him, he wasn't the one. He was close, but not quite.

Behind all the boys in the pen, Mr. Ears and Stormy and Ned, all of whom crowded the gate with friendly enthusiasm, there was a mare with the saddest, weariest, most down-trodden expression. Nealia (Nealia McCracken of North Wind Stables) said, "Why not give Sweet Pea a try?" Well, okay, but just to be polite. After all, these people had given me their time and attention and had never stopped teaching me and talking about Saddlebreds and Amish horses and saddle seat training and any number of other things in which I had so little experience. I should at least humor them and try this one horse they suggested. But that wasn't going anywhere. I wasn't looking for a mare. I'd only had riding success with geldings. I'd only ever gotten along with boys in school and men in the workplace. A mare? No thank you, but, yes ma'am, I'll try her.

Well, so much for knowing what I wanted and for thinking I knew what was best for me. Sweet Pea, and oh, how I hated that name – it was all girly and pink and mushy and just too sugary for me – well, she was *the one*. I wasn't out of my first turn in the ring, and I knew she was the one. We have video of me mounting and walking off, almost running down one of Nealia's lesson students who walked in front of us. I was so in another world with this horse. It was a spiritual experience. This was the horse who'd called me down there; this was the horse I was meant to bring home!

But still, the intellect doesn't like to let go. I was well aware that I had no ability to judge a horse, that this horse was at least 20, had been worked hard for the last 11 years, was dreadfully underweight, had some sort of blackened spot on her gums, a tumor on her tail and a swollen right rear ankle. So what if the gods were telling me she was mine; there were health and conformation issues to consider. As I hosed Sweet Pea down after our outside ride,



Before being named Bayou Roux, Sweet Pea at Saddlebred Rescue.

Before being purchased by the Amish, Bayou Roux was registered with the American Saddlebred Registry. However, Roux's Registry identity is unknown after all these years. Trish is trying to learn her mare's true identity. Anyone recognizing Bayou Roux wishing to help may contact Trish Pierce at trpierce@stny.rr.com or (607) 936-8404.

she stood quietly and clearly grateful for the relief from the brutal July heat, I knew I couldn't decide then and there based on my heart. I had to come back with my friend, a horsewoman with impartiality and experience, and the woman who owned the private barn where I would keep my horse.

We came back three days later. My barn owner – a Quarter Horse owner, PMU (pregnant mare urine, which is used to produce hormones for humans) draft mix rescuer and devoted fan of stocky, heavy drafts – was appalled at these rail-thin, camel-necked beasts. She, as always, was rational, logical, impartial, neutral and reasoned in her evaluation of the horse. She also knew the emotional draw of the rescue, the rose-colored glasses of the first horse

buyer. She evaluated her as in fair condition for a horse of 20 years, but reminded me that 20 is getting a little old for a horse. She agreed that Sweet Pea was pretty smart under saddle, even with no physical strength, no recent training and overly long feet. On the drive home, knowing that despite my assurances I really hadn't made a decision, she asked, "So... have you picked a name?" I had chosen two, Zydeco Zoe and Bayou Roux. She insisted this horse didn't have enough *oomph* to be a Zydeco Zoe, so it should be Roux. And so it was.

In the nine months she's been home, that's the only decision we've had reason to question. After two weeks of rest and the slow introduction of regular nutritious meals, this old horse began to put on weight and shed the years. Through the month of nose-to-nose quarantine, where we kept her within sight of but a safe five feet from the resident horses, Roux paced and ran her big Saddlebred gaits along the fence line, wanting so badly to meet and play with the others. She won over my barn owner with what she called "the big trot" in from the pasture when she heard the scoop hit the feed bin. Big, long, high roundhouse strides, and she'd come loping in to the run-in shed, looping her long body around in

an awkward skidding, piston-pumping stop at her food dish. In February, we took her to a local western barn to have a look at cow-penning games. All the Quarter Horse owners were impressed at her stature, and two even asked if she was just a four-year-old. You should have seen their amazement when I told them she was 20!

And not only is she not old at 20, she's all the wonderful things all those early Web sites tried to assure me Saddlebreds were. She's trustworthy, level-headed when at work and steady. She's the been-there, done-that trail horse extraordinaire. She's the lead horse any time there's a challenging obstacle of any kind – through the doorway, over the wooden bridge, past the cows, onto the trailer, across the creek, past the dog.

And she's smart, so smart. I know everyone thinks their horse is smart, but this girl is nothing but brains. She's constantly learning something new or revealing something she knew from before her buggy days. Only weeks at home, I had her in the round pen, and she'd demonstrate that she knew walk/trot verbal commands, which I reasoned could easily have been holdovers from buggy days. I just thought I'd try something, so I quietly said, "Canter," and she broke into it without missing a beat, held it for a few strides before her poor atrophied musculature couldn't hold it. You could tell she'd once known it, done it and her mind remembered, even if her body didn't.

Over the winter, due to the bad winter mud, we did a lot of in-hand ground work – backing up, backing over poles, yielding, turn on the fore-hand, etc. Every time I threw her a new task, I got the same response. Her head would go up, ears go pricked, eyes go wide for three seconds, then there would be a subtle shift, a softening of her features and a tentative move in the direction I'd indicated. When she got praised for doing it right, she snorted and crackled and sighed her relief. A second try would go much more quickly, and by the third go at it, she was practically rolling her eyes in boredom at my pedestrian attempts to keep her agile mind occupied – *I know this one already, can we move on?*

For more information
or to make a donation to
Saddlebred Rescue, contact:

Saddlebred Rescue, Inc.

13765 Old Post Rd.

Hortense, GA 31543

Phone No. (908) 304-3560

E-mail: saddlebredrescue@earthlink.net

Her desire to move on and to keep learning new things made it clear that life on the farm was just too sedate and laid-back for this old gal, who still has so much to offer. Her need for work prompted me to move her to my dressage trainer's barn in early March when a stall became available. After the initial transition to the new barn, where she's still the tallest – towering over 16 resident-registered Morgans – Roux has settled into a delightful routine of regular work and occasional leisure. We ride four days a week, often for two hours at a time, working hard on our 20-meter circles (okay, they're still mostly *eggs*, but that's my fault!) and walk/trot-walk/halt transitions, trying to bring all those miles of Saddlebred spine into a collected frame, while trying to bring down the huge buggy-pulling trot into a nice, graceful, relaxed one. I come home exhausted, saddle sore and in dire need of Tylenol after these workouts. Roux prances off to pasture for a good roll and an evening of grazing, never sore, and rarely even breaking a sweat. I limp around the next day, but she doesn't. After six weeks of watching both of us work to build up our winter-layoff muscles, my trainer asked if she could give the big red horse a try herself, and I got the treat of watching a professional get Roux to gracefully bend her neck into the elegant swan arch of a

1st-level dressage horse. It was a gorgeous, golden light from the heavens moment, and it took my breath away.

In addition to the physical changes, the careful disciplined tutelage of this trainer and our very regular riding schedule has mellowed Roux's smarter-than-thou attitude. She has stepped down from *you're boring me* to a challenged and satisfied *okay, I can do that...what shall we do next?* When I arrive at the barn, she runs from the rear of her pasture to greet me at the gate, often starting a three-pasture stampede. She's so anxious to get back to work and be asked to do the next great thing! We recently traveled to a local dressage clinic to see how we'd do trailering in to unfamiliar circumstances with unfamiliar horses. Roux shone her Saddlebred best, so if all goes well, we may be headed to our first schooling show mid-summer. Look out, Harry Callahan, we've got you in our sights!

Our first six months together were about recovery, rehab and discovering who this old horse is, and what she could still do. The last three months have been about understanding that the sky's the limit, she's got plenty left to give and I'm going to have to work my butt off to keep up with her strong, lithe body and brilliant mind.

Honestly, I think that's a lot of what's behind the Saddlebred image as hot and wild. They *get it* so much more quickly than we realize, and we bore them. They want to be in on the action, to excel and be challenged. If we let them down, they begin to challenge us. The Quarter Horses at the farm appear to be happy just being horses – eating, rolling, dozing – being the reliable lab asleep on the rug by the fire. The Saddlebred, however, is ever-ready to be in on the action and if there isn't any to be had, she'll make up something, just like coonhounds trying to tree the UPS man – there's got to be *something* to keep them entertained! You should see Roux's ears prick up when someone heads for the truck – *Are we going to hook up the trailer? Are we going out? Come on, let's go!*

For my money, these smart, gorgeous, long-necked steeds are the only way to fly. **as**