

FINDING COURAGE

Today, Ene Schoep and Colonel Twist O Luck share a tight bond, but it took some work to get there.

Taking up riding again after a 22-year absence

wasn't easy, but it was so worthwhile.

By Ene Schoep with Shawn Hamilton

AS A YOUNG GIRL, I HAD MY HEART SET ON ONE DAY OWNING A horse – but not just any horse. I wanted a Quarter Horse.

At 21, my dream finally came true. I purchased a 4-year-old Quarter Horse gelding, fresh off the racetrack, named Maximum Charge. He was dark brown, almost black, with a white star on his forehead. We spent 19 lovely years together until he had to be put down due to a digestive tract illness that caused him to be unable to maintain weight. I was so heartbroken, I vowed never to own another horse again.

Then years later, at the ripe age of 60 and newly retired from my real estate receptionist position, I thought about getting back into the horse world. I was very apprehensive after not riding at all for 22 years, but I started to browse on the Internet to see what was available in my price range.

One day, I came across an ad for a 9-year-old black Quarter Horse gelding named “Valour.” His registered name was Colonel Twist O Luck, and I was drawn to him instantly. The price was too high for my budget and, discouraged, I simply stopped looking.

As the weeks went by, I could not stop thinking about this horse, and I returned to the ad to see if he had been sold. Not only was Valour still available, but his price had dropped in half! I was so excited that I immediately emailed a response to the ad. The reply revealed that he was only an hour from my home in Whitby, Ontario, but unfortunately, I had to wait a week to see him, as the owners were on vacation in Florida.

My first view of Valour was a little shocking, as he did not look at all similar to the horse in the ad. His coat was dull and shaggy. He was extremely difficult to catch, and he seemed to have some attitude. The owners did not have the time to devote to him and had lost interest. My gut instinct told me that they had been good to him and were sad to let him go.

I managed to gather up the courage to ride him to see what he was like, and when I slid into the saddle, I knew he was the one. After such a long absence from riding, I felt like I was where I should be. I felt calm and connected to him. I knew I was going to buy him

I made the purchase, moved him to a local boarding facility and soon became acutely aware that I was no longer the confident rider I had once been. I became anxious and frightened about what lie ahead for Valour and me, but we persevered.

The more time I spent with him, the easier things became. But then I moved Valour to a larger barn with more boarders, thinking it would be fun. It didn't take long before I realized I had made a mistake. The arena was constantly busy with lessons and other activities, so there was little time for me to ride.

I had broken some small bones in my foot and hand, unrelated to riding, and was diagnosed with osteoporosis. In addition, I suffered a concussion after falling off on the trails when Valour spooked. To add insult to injury, Valour bucked me off at a horse campground, and I broke my pelvis.

During the eight weeks of recuperation, I did not visit Valour. With everything that had happened, I decided to get rid of him, as I did not need all these problems in my life at this age. I was angry because I had treated him so well, yet he hurt me. I had hit rock bottom.

While I was home recuperating, a friend brought me a beautiful card titled “Get Well Soon, Ene” with a photo of Valour and some prose from his perspective.

The card read:

“My life is likely to last 20 or more years. Any separation from you will be painful for me. Remember that when you take me home.

“Give me time to understand what you want from me.

“Place your trust in me. It is crucial for my well-being.

“Don't be angry with me for long. Don't lock me up as punishment. You have your work, your entertainment and your friends. I only have you ...

“Talk to me sometimes. Even if I don't understand your words, I do understand your voice when it is speaking to me.

“Be aware that however you treat me, I will never forget it.

“Remember before you hit me that I am powerful enough to hurt you, but choose not to.

“Before you scold me for being uncooperative, obstinate or lazy, ask yourself if something might be bothering me. Perhaps I have a problem that you are not yet aware of.

Colonel Twist O Luck is a 2002 gelding by Colonel Wrangler, out of Lil Twist O Luck by Kansas Cat Twist.

"Take care of me when I am old. You, too, will be old one day.

"Go with me on the last journey. Never say 'I can't bear to watch' or 'Let it happen in my absence.' Everything is easier for me if you are there."

This made me realize that I could not give up on him. I decided to do something that I should have done from the very beginning. We returned to the original boarding barn, and I hired a trainer, Terry Betts of Hampton, Ontario, to help bring Valour and me together.

I needed help to regain my lost confidence and overcome my fears of riding.

The first two months, Terry trained Valour while I watched from the sidelines and learned. I then started to ride, and he worked with the two of us, increasing my level of riding with each ride.

At times, I had to work through tears as my trainer patiently guided me along. Finally, my anger was replaced with a deeper understanding of my horse and the realization that it had been my fault that Valour bucked me off.

After three months of working under the direction of the trainer, Valour and I bonded, developing a strong relationship and understanding of each other. I became a much better rider, Valour was on his way to becoming a knowledgeable, reliable and trustworthy mount, and we became a team.

That was three years ago. My relationship with Valour just keeps getting better and better. I can never thank my trainer enough for the happiness he has given me with Valour. Each and every day, I spend two to three hours with Valour and ride five days a week, on average.

I'm happy just being around him and couldn't imagine my life without him in it. The highlight of my day is hearing him whinny as I approach the gate to his paddock. ■

Getting expert help can make all the difference when you run into issues with your horse. Visit www.aqha.com/find-a-trainer to find an AQHA Professional Horseman near you. Or go to www.chainstructors.com for a list of instructors in the Certified Horsemanship Association, which is an AQHA alliance partner. The text on Ene's card was adapted from "The 10 Commandments From a Dog's Point of View," written by dog behaviorist and obedience trainer Stan Rawlinson. You can visit his website and articles at www.doglistener.co.uk.