

Gus: In the Right Hands

by L.A. Pomeroy

He was a buckner whose luck was about to run out when Theresa Gagnon took in Gus. Since a trailer accident months earlier, he had become a horse who could not be trusted under saddle and finally his owner decided she had been thrown one too many times. The gelding had two weeks to find a new home or was going to auction.

It would be an unkind end for a seven-year-old, double-registered Paint/ Quarter Horse whose pedigree boasted such legendary ranch horse bloodlines as American Quarter Horse Hall of Famer Doc Bar and Joe Reed P-3. A flashy chestnut with an apron face and four high white socks, Gus carried AQHA papers as AR Little Bit and APHA registration as Dry Doc Peppy.

With the clock ticking, Gus desperately needed to get into the right hands. Which is precisely what Theresa, who is director of animal programs at the Bancroft School of Massage Therapy in Worcester, had to offer.

Handed Off

"One day his owner called and said Gus had bucked her off for the last time," Theresa says. "She needed to find him a home or he was going to auction. Did I want him?"

How could a woman who had devoted her career to making others feel better say no? Theresa's work with the Bancroft School included its Equine Massage Certification Program, recently added to the school's 58-year-old tradition of quality of life through complementary medicine.

Gus had been one of her clients since a horse trailer accident in the fall of 2005. "He was being taken to a lesson in a stock trailer when, no one is sure how or why since he was traveling alone, he fell," says Theresa. "When he got back on his feet, he came up under the partition."

"The bad part," Theresa says, "was that there were no apparent injuries, no blood, cuts, or scrapes that would make someone think he should have veterinary care."

Gus was, however, clearly aching, so the owner of the farm where he was boarded called Theresa to treat his discomfort with massage. "His back was quite sore, and I worked on him three times, scheduling the treatments two weeks apart," says Theresa. "They had been doing groundwork with him, and after my last session, they started riding him again."

The worst seemed to be over until the farm called her back that spring after a bucking incident. Theresa returned every six to eight weeks to treat the gelding but the bucking continued through the summer. Gus's owner concluded that he was simply too dangerous to keep any longer.

In New Hands

Once in Theresa's hands, Gus's problems were more closely scrutinized. "I worked on him one or two times a week and had him doing ground exercises to increase flexibility:

circling on turns, working over cavaletti and ground rails," says Theresa. "After about three weeks, I started riding him. I had one bucking incident and went back to groundwork and more massage. I thought he was going to be a quick fix, but I was wrong."

Despite no outward signs of injury, Gus's behavior continued to suggest that the gelding was desperately trying to tell her something was wrong. The prognosis by her veterinarian was bleak: "He moved very short in both front legs because of the pain in his back," says Theresa. "The vet said that he probably could not be rehabilitated and would have permanent lameness. From the way he was moving in front, he most likely had navicular."

Theresa's staunch belief in the benefits of massage and bodywork kept her from giving up on Gus. "Since he belonged to me, there was no harm in trying," says Theresa. "I continued massage — craniosacral, fascial, and structural integration." Craniosacral and fascial bodywork comprises therapeutic techniques that address the relationship between the brain and the spinal cord and release abnormal structural tensions throughout the body, encouraging self-adjustment and a return to a healthy, physiological balance. Structural integration seeks to realign and balance a body in harmony with gravitational forces. The terminology may be unfamiliar to many horse owners but the result was clear to Theresa: "Gus kept getting better."

A Handful of Problems

Nearly two years after his trailer accident, Theresa was still discovering underlying damage. Gus had also been psychologically injured. "It shook his confidence," Theresa says. Perhaps it was because he was alone when he was hurt, but she found that the gelding did not like to be away from other horses: "Riding him on the trail by himself was an issue. He would balk and try to get back to the barn if you took him out alone." Amazingly enough, however, "he would still get in a trailer without any problems."

Since Gus would load, Theresa decided to seek outside help to address his training and behavior issues, and began taking him to clinics at Bunkshere Farm in nearby Hubbardston. She started by riding Gus in a Bruce Guinard one-day clinic, and later that spring returned to ride with Jeff Griffith in a four-day clinic. "Actually, I expected to hit the ground that weekend," says Theresa. "If Gus was still hurting, it would show up then, but he was great. My goal was to get the horse out where someone would see him, fall in love with him, and buy him."

The pair continued to progress until September, when Gus showed problems during a four-day clinic with Greg Eliel. "I had some trouble with a saddle that did not fit right, and he had a setback after the clinic," says Theresa. "Gus had been doing very well, but was still having trouble picking up his left lead."

So Theresa called a friend. Auburn-based chiropractic specialist Cheryl Tarateta's clients include humans, dogs, and horses, and her assessment revealed what Gus had been trying to demonstrate all along — his problems were deeper than originally assumed.

Second Hands

No wonder Gus could not pick up that lead: his pelvis was twisted. "The left side was tilted back while his right tilted forward," Cheryl says. Her first two treatments,

scheduled within days of each other, worked on bringing his left side forward and addressing the misalignment in his head, poll, and spine that had resulted from compensation for his pelvic pain. Additional adjustment corrected problems that had spread to his stifles.

Within a month of weekly body balancing work using Activator Methods Chiropractic Technique (AMCT), Cheryl says, "Gus was up and running. He responded after the first treatment with a smoother, more even gait." AMCT uses orthopedic, neurological, and chiropractic exam to identify joint dysfunction in the spinal column and extremities, and treatment consists of low-force/high-speed chiropractic adjustments. AMCT is the most widely used chiropractic therapy in the world.

"The approach works in communication with the brain and encourages the body to reset itself according to the unique needs of the individual," says Cheryl. "A body needs to be in balance; otherwise it creates strain on muscle and ligament."

The positive effects also showed in the horse's attitude, which Cheryl says is common among four-legged clients: "I love working with horses. It is gratifying to help them heal and open up emotionally. By decreasing pain and increasing comfort, they can go from cranky to willing partners. Gus was trying to say he was in pain, and bucking was the only way he could say it."

Thankfully, Theresa was listening. "It took all winter to get him on the right track physically, and follow-up chiropractic work to get him right," Theresa says. "There was something about him that made me believe that I could not give up on him. He's been a great horse."



Helping Hands

In addition to trouble picking up the left lead, Gus's setback after the Eliel clinic had demonstrated that his back demanded extra attention to saddle fit. "Gus has high withers and a narrow back," says Theresa. "My saddle did not fit Gus correctly at his shoulders. It sat too low and interfered with the movement of his scapula."

Theresa had come too far in Gus's rehabilitation to give up now. She made a phone call to Len Brown, the inventor of the OrthoFlex saddle. "He was very nice and incredibly knowledgeable," says Theresa. "He recommended a new product he had designed called the Corrector Saddle Pad. He explained how to use the pad and how to fit it. It worked like a charm."

The Hands-on Approach

While on this path of healing, the bond between Theresa and Gus grew from that of caretaker and patient into one of true companions. She no longer hopes someone will fall in love with Gus. She's done that herself.

"He's very sweet and tries very hard," Theresa says. "That's what made me take him in the first place. I haven't found anything that he won't try. He is still anxious about going out on a trail by himself, but getting better.

"Being Doc Bar-bred, he has quite a work ethic. He gives one hundred percent to everything he does, including getting into trouble! He has opened bags of shavings and spread them all over the barn, and takes delight in chasing the other horses with empty shavings bags or my blue tarp. They don't appreciate his sense of humor."

The joy with which Gus approaches each day is a far cry from the horse of two years ago. It's as if Gus understands that Theresa not only gave him back his wellbeing; she probably also saved his life.

"Two other horses take turns coming to the Bancroft School to be massage-demo horses for students, but Gus comes every time," says Theresa. "Even after all he has been through, he still loads in a trailer, and if he needs bodywork, he will show me by not letting me go by that area while brushing him.

"I am always amazed at the amount of heart that horses have. Gus is the first one to come in from the fields when I come home, and puts his head on my chest."

To learn more about the Bancroft School or its 10-month Equine Massage Certification Program, visit www.bancroftsmt.com. You may see Gus at a demonstration!