The Tale of a Mare’s THREE CAREERS

How an off-the-track Thoroughbred mare found a new home and won acceptance by the American Hanoverian Society.

By Allison Rogers

Once upon a time, a Thoroughbred filly named Stirring Up Demons ran race after race and only ended up in the winner’s circle once. In the photo from that day, the filly is less than impressive looking. With a large head, skinny body and underdeveloped hindquarters, she looks as though she might tip forward at any moment. With her lackluster race record and looks, not many Prince Charmings in the racing world would be beating down her door.

Eventually, with the help of her new family, the filly blossomed into a beautiful mare, and her Prince Charming (for this season) is the Hanoverian stallion Escudo II. Her Cinderella story shows how some off-the-track Thoroughbred mares can have a second and even a third career. Last year, Stiring Up Demons became one of only six Thoroughbred mares to successfully complete the American Hanoverian Society’s (AHS) stringent Mare Performance Test, opening up the world of warmblood breeding to a nice mare who just ran a little too slowly.

Finding a New Home

Stiring Up Demons’ transition began in 2003 when 14-year-old Heather Bellis-Jones needed a new mount. She was an active rider and competitor in the Lexington, Kentucky, area. Heather likes forward, fast horses and, since her family lived in the Thoroughbred capital of the world where ex-racers are abundant and inexpensive, a Thoroughbred made sense. In addition, they wanted a mare that would fit into their existing herd (including a camel).

As her mother, Cynthia, and father, Hugh Bellis-Jones (Executive Director of the American Hanoverian Society) tell it, the family had looked at a variety of promising horses but were having no luck finding the right fit. Then Sarah Reilly of Punchestown Stables in Lexington called to say she’d just gotten a mare in who might interest Heather. She was by 1987 Kentucky Derby favorite Demons Begone out of Stir Fry. The 8-year-old mare had raced 24 times, winning only once at Hoosier Park in Indiana. She had been out at pasture for at least a year and appeared to have little training as a riding horse. She wasn’t much to look at either, Sarah told them.

When Heather and parents arrived to look at the mare, they agreed with Sarah’s assessment. “Her head was not her top feature. She was very underweight, had no rear end and looked totally out of balance,” Cynthia remembers. “And we just looked at each other and said, ‘That’s not the horse.’”

But they stayed to watch Heather ride and a transformation occurred. “We watched the mare suddenly come up off of her forehand, use her rear and start to reach,” says Hugh. “That mare had incredible movement!”

Cynthia studied the mare’s pedigree and noted that she traced back to the prominent racing sire Court Martial. “Forget that!” Hugh remembers saying. “Just look at her trot and write the check. If nothing else, she could be a broodmare.” Then, when Heather rode over to her parents and proclaimed her love for the horse, Stirring Up Demons had found a new home.

Heather and “Demi,” as they dubbed the mare, bonded and within a month were competing in the Bluegrass State Games, a hunter show. This was Demi’s first big competition and she was a little nervous. Heather overheard par-
ents telling their kids not to ride near the “crazy mare.” But by the following summer the pair was winning gold medals at the same competition. In 2005, they finished second in the state 4-H Finals, and Heather was high-point junior in the starter division. At horse trials, they never placed lower than second in dressage.

**Hanoverian Approved**

Every warmblood breed registry has a system in place for determining if a mare has the qualities prized by that registry. All Jockey Club-registered Thoroughbred mares (and even stallions) are eligible to be inspected and possibly accepted as breeding stock for various warmblood registries, including the Hanoverian. This is not a new development. In fact, virtually all of today’s warmbloods were created using Thoroughbred blood. The amount of Thoroughbred influence waxed and waned as the needs of the breeders changed.

Typically, to be approved by a warm-blood registry, any horse must go through an inspection process where conformation and movement are assessed. With AHS, a non-Hanoverian mare must be presented at one of the approximately 30 inspections around the country and score at least a 7.0 overall to pass. In the case of Thoroughbreds, the mare is also required to obtain a subscore of 7 for impulsion and elasticity (in the trot). A Thoroughbred mare approved after this first inspection is entered into the Pre-Studbook and thereby becomes eligible to produce a Hanoverian foal. In 2006, 43 Thoroughbreds were presented for AHS inspection. Of those, 27 were accepted. The previous year the numbers were slightly higher, with 55 mares presented and 32 approved.

A Thoroughbred mare that is accepted after the initial inspection can then go on to participate in a Mare Performance Test (MPT) to see if she is athletic and rideable and to see where her aptitude lies for future breeding decisions. If an AHS Thoroughbred Pre-Studbook mare earns a score of 7.0 or better in the Mare Performance Test, she will move up to the Studbook. Unlike Thoroughbreds, Hanoverian mares are not required to meet the 7 or better subscore at the trot upon inspection.

Hugh Bellis-Jones explains, “When the AHS was establishing its breeding program in this country, many of the stallions that came over here were the heavier type, and to introduce the refinement that riders and breeders in this country want, we introduced the light blood through Thoroughbred mares. In the first cross between the Hanoverian stallions and the Thoroughbred mares—the F1 cross—we found over time that these F1 mares were not moving as well as their Hanoverian fathers. The trot movement was lost in this first generation. It was determined that maybe we should place a greater emphasis on the mares’ trot movement, on impulsion and elasticity. So eight or nine years ago, the membership voted to raise the requirement for the trot for Thoroughbred mares to at least a 7 on a scale of 10. We’ve found that since that time, the F1 generation has vastly improved.”

Once approved, registered Thoroughbred, Arabian and Anglo-Arabian mares must be bred to an AHS Elite Stallion with the Hanoverian foal brand or an AHS Elite Stallion whose pedigree contains at least 50 percent Hanoverian blood in order for the result-
ing foal to be registered with AHS.

Demi’s Inspection
In the summer of 2003, Cynthia had planned to take her Hanoverian mare to an upcoming inspection [how old was the mare now?]. On a whim, they threw Demi on the trailer as well. The family traveled to Oakwood Farm in Lawrenceburg, Indiana, the nearest inspection site. While Hugh knew the mare would not be given special consideration due to his involvement with the American Hanoverian Society, he nevertheless made himself scarce throughout the inspection.

At the inspection, each mare is presented in-hand and judged on conformation, including head, neck, saddle position, frame, foreleg and hind leg. Mares should be impeccably groomed with braided manes and pulled or trimmed tails. The AHS Breeders’ Guide gives specific instructions for the presentation process and even offers suggestions, such as “Bring extra shirts in case they become soiled, and choose colors that flatter the horse.”

The separate conformation scores are averaged, and that figure is then averaged in with the scores for “typiness,” correctness of gaits, impulsion/elasticity, walk and overall impression.

Demi’s average score for conformation was 7. Her highest score, an 8, in conformation was for her saddle position — the requirement of a long, sloping shoulder with reasonably prominent withers that gradually taper into the back. Her body had by this time muscled up enough to make her head more proportionate, so even though that brought her lowest score, a 6, even her head passed muster. In the movement categories, Demi earned 7s in five of the categories and an 8 for impulsion/elasticity — quite an achievement for a Thoroughbred mare. With a final score of 7.16, Demi was now approved for the Hanoverian Pre-Studbook.

Breeding was the last thing on Heather’s mind. She and Demi continued to compete, almost always finishing at or near the top, for three more years.

The Mare Performance Test
By 2006, the Bellis-Jones family was looking toward the next fall when Heather would begin her pre-med studies at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky. She and her parents worried that she wouldn’t have time to ride much once she started college. Demi was athletic and talented enough that she needed to be ridden regularly, but the mare had bonded tightly with Heather and would not let anyone else in the family ride her. Perhaps she could spend the year in foal, until Heather had a better idea of just how much riding she’d be able to fit into her schedule.

At the same time, Cynthia’s Hanoverian mare was now ready to tackle the Mare Performance Test and, once again, Demi went along. This time, though, the surprise was on Heather, who’d been away at academic camps for six weeks. She returned home to find out that they’d be leaving in the next few days for the testing and Demi hadn’t been worked. Heather’s reaction was, “I am not prepared for this! I was extremely nervous. But I thought we could do it.”

Despite excellent movement, Demi was a 12-year-old Thoroughbred with 24 races under her belt. She would be the only Thoroughbred participating at the MPT at Oakwood. How would she stack up against Hanoverian mares who’d spent months and even years preparing for this day? And at 17, Heather was decades younger than any of the other horse owners participating. In the days before the test, Oakwood Farm owner Meg Williams introduced the mares (and Heather) to the free-jumping chute, the first phase of the test, to make sure that all would go as well as possible during the actual test. The free-jumping chute is made up of three jumps, with the last being an oxer. Each time a mare completes the chute, the jumps are raised.
During this phase, the judges look at the mare’s technique—how she jumps—and her ability—how high she jumps.

The day of the performance test, Hugh was in Wisconsin, so Cynthia and Heather were on their own. While some might argue that they are warmblood insiders, both mother and daughter felt like novices at the testing. “Meg was so aware of me needing to be in the comfort zone with my animals,” Cynthia says. “And I so appreciated that.”

The second phase is completed under saddle. In two groups of four, mares are asked to walk, trot and canter, shorten and lengthen their stride, and circle, to demonstrate their rideability.

Meg Williams and others helped ease Heather’s nerves. “Everyone made me feel at ease.” Afterward, the judges tally the scores, then bring each mare back in to offer a critique. Much like a dressage schooling show, the judges list the horse’s good points and bad. Demi scored a 7.5 for rideability, a 7.0 for her gaits, and a 7.25 for her jumping, for a final score of 7.25. She had now passed from the Pre-Studbook to the Studbook.

And so in May, both Cynthia’s Hanoverian mare and Demi were inseminated by the jet black German import Escudo II. If all goes well, this spring the Bellis-Jones menagerie will include two Hanoverian foals. And, hopefully, Heather will have a better idea of how riding and competing will fit into her life. Neither she nor her parents want to retire Demi to the broodmare pasture just yet. If Heather won’t have time to ride, they feel they owe it to the mare to find someone to keep her active and fit. But the parents will leave that decision up to Heather. All three, however, are comforted knowing that when the time does come to retire the mare from competition, her Hanoverian credentials will offer her a third career. Hugh encourages all Thoroughbred mare owners to give the warmblood approval process some thought. “There’s a lot to gain, and very little to lose.”