

BRENDA—CLASS AND COURAGE

By Eileen Watkins

I rode up the center line of the dressage arena and saluted the judge with more confidence than I'd ever felt in a show ring. Yes, I'd memorized and practiced the training level test, but more important, I totally trusted my mount.

I felt that the chestnut Thoroughbred mare trusted me, too. She stood quietly beneath me--calm, but alert and eager to do her job. In less than a year of working together, we'd bonded to the point of knowing each other's every move. The unfamiliar surroundings and crisp winter weather today did not make Brenda nervous, only a little sharper. She expected this to be fun, and so did I.

We moved through the test easily, executing every change of gait at the right spot, picking up the correct leads and staying "on the bit." Brenda lacked that extra bit of energy, or "impulsion," that dressage judges prize, but no one could overlook her perfect obedience or willing attitude. That day, we beat out every competitor in our class but one, and took second place.

To me, that red ribbon meant as much as a blue. This was the kind of rapport I'd always hoped to feel with a horse. I'd been equine-crazy all my life, but not until well into middle age had I been able to afford even this "half-a-horse"--because I shared ownership of Brenda with my trainer.

I can't say I fell in love with Brenda at first sight. When she arrived at the boarding stable on consignment, her ribs and hipbones stuck out, her ragged mane flopped over her skinny neck in both directions at once, and her back showed dark, balding patches. Her papers gave her age as twelve, but she looked older. She'd come

Class and Courage - 2

from a rundown stable where she'd worked as a lesson and trail horse. The former owner explained Brenda was "allergic to hay," and had been fed silage, a kind of cattle feed, instead.

The first time I rode Brenda, though, I was amazed by her game attitude. She moved with easygoing energy, and the minute I asked, she gave me a passable leg yield and shoulder-in. My trainer didn't want to sell her, but neither of us could afford the rather outrageous asking price. So we decided to share her.

It soon became clear that Brenda suffered from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder, commonly known as "heaves." She actually seemed to be allergic to summer pollen, and although she could eat hay, it had to be rinsed of all dust. She suffered most when confined to a stall. On the vet's recommendations, we kept her outdoors round-the-clock and gave her supplements to build up her strength.

Under this regimen, Brenda did well for several months. She gained two hundred much-needed pounds and her coat improved. We pulled her mane and trimmed her tail to make her presentable for showing.

I schooled her in dressage, visiting the stable about three times a week. Also grooming her and hanging out while she grazed in her field, I fell in love with her. Most horses I'd dealt with before could be classified as either smart and energetic but high-strung, or calm and reliable but a bit boring. Brenda was close to "bomb-proof," yet she noticed everything around her and learned quickly--in hand or under saddle, she was good company. What was more, she radiated a gentle spirit that impressed everyone who dealt with her. (On one of the scorecards I collected after a dressage test, the judge had written "Sweet horse!")

She bonded strongly with one gelding at a time, seeming to need a “boyfriend”; if that horse left the stable, she’d soon become joined at the hip with another. She could even empathize with another horse in trouble, once stopping in the middle of a training session and whinnying in protest, because she’d seen an equine friend being corrected with a smack from a riding crop.

During her second summer with me, Brenda’s health worsened. After even mild exercise, she labored for breath, her nostrils huge and her lungs visibly heaving behind her ribs. We put her on steroids to open up her lung passages, and hoped that as fall approached her allergies would ease as they had the previous year. But this time she stayed sicker for longer. That September, only a few months after we’d won that red ribbon, she struggled to perform for me in another dressage show. As usual, she did everything I asked, but at the final halt she was breathing so hard I feared she might collapse. Feeling terrible for having put her under such a strain, I scratched her from her second class, sponged her down and trailered her back to the barn.

My trainer moved her operations to a stable in the next town, where things went from bad to worse. Brenda could no longer be left outside at night because of the threat of bears in the area. She was fed with a group of several other horses, and the stablehand wasn’t about to wash all of the hay, so she inhaled dust particles that aggravated her condition. For a while I still tried to ride her in the ring, and she’d start out eagerly, but after only a few minutes she’d end up gasping for air. She dropped weight again until she looked as bad as when I’d first seen her.

I still came to the stable three times a week to groom her and hand-walk her so she could graze. Brenda always greeted me with a gleam in her eye and a spring in her

step, having no idea how sick she was. Her situation was her situation, and she accepted it bravely. Alone with her in the stable aisle, I'd run the brush over her skeletal ribs and listen to her struggle for breath, tears running down my face. I'd hug her neck and whisper to her, "I'll get you out of here, I promise!"

I bought my trainer out of her share of Brenda, and moved the mare to another stable where she could have a shedrow stall for maximum ventilation. The vet at the new farm recommended a "senior feed" that helped her regain some weight, and the stable help faithfully rinsed her hay. She recovered to the point where I could ride her a little, but I feared her "useful" days already were behind her, and I worried about what that would mean. On the meager income of a freelance writer, I couldn't afford paying for her full board and heavy-duty medications much longer.

The owner at the new stable suggested tactfully that it might be time to put her down, but I couldn't reconcile myself to that. With the right care, Brenda could still enjoy life. Turned loose in a paddock, she still loved to gallop, even though she quickly became exhausted. She had the heart of a Thoroughbred, after all. If she refused to give up on life, how could I give up on her?

Thanks to the Internet, I found a wonderful farm in Pennsylvania, Bright Futures, that took horses with problems. If they could be rehabilitated they'd be offered for adoption, but if no one wanted them they could stay at the farm.

This last part was important to me. I suspected no one would want to adopt a very sick, unrideable mare. And I couldn't risk letting Brenda to go to a home where they might eventually give up on her and, instead of humanely euthanizing her, send her off to slaughter.

I phoned Beverlee Dee of Bright Futures, and she sympathized with my dilemma. We agreed she would take Brenda and I'd send a monthly sum to cover her medication. I cried the day Beverlee loaded Brenda into her van, but only because I was losing a dear friend. I felt sure Beverlee would take good care of her.

Over the next year-and-a-half, Beverlee and I communicated by phone and e-mail about Brenda's progress. Once, I made the eight-hour drive to the farm to see for myself that my mare had settled in comfortably. She followed her usual pattern, though, of suffering through the summer weather and improving dramatically in the winter. She also stuck to her M.O. of charming everyone who dealt with her, and of bonding with a special boyfriend--in this case, another Thoroughbred name Shifter.

After a few months, the arthritis in Brenda's legs precipitated a health crisis, a septic hock that needed surgery. Beverlee called to tell me that, unless I had some objection, she planned to send Brenda to the respected Ohio State University Veterinary Hospital for her operation. Beverlee also had experienced the chestnut mare's unflagging spirit, and believed she could overcome this setback; like me, she was willing to go the extra mile to give Brenda a chance. The operation was a success, and Brenda came back to Bright Futures, on all four legs, shortly afterward.

The following summer, her heaves grew so severe that we worried she might not make it to the fall. She did, but just when her allergies had subsided and she'd started to regain her winter weight, she suffered a final crisis.

Because of her COPD, she spent nights out in the pasture with several other horses, including Shifter. One morning close to Thanksgiving, when Beverlee called the horses into the barn for breakfast, they all came except for Shifter and Brenda. Beverlee

found Shifter standing guard over Brenda's lifeless body. As far as anyone could tell, Brenda had laid down during the night, had difficulty getting up and died of a heart attack. Judging from marks found on her blanket and hoofprints on the ground nearby, it looked as if Shifter had been trying to help her to her feet.

Neither Beverlee nor I ever had to make the decision to put Brenda to sleep. She died out in the pasture with her last "boyfriend" close by, no doubt the way she would have wanted to go. Thanks to Bright Futures, she probably had a couple more happy, peaceful years of life than she would have experienced otherwise.

Some people who would say the skinny chestnut mare was lucky to have encountered people like me and Beverlee, willing to make the extra effort to help her. But we feel we also were privileged to have known Brenda. In a tribute to her on the Bright Futures web site, Beverlee called Brenda "one of the most courageous beings I have ever known."

As for me, I'll always have the memory of that cold March day at the dressage show, when Brenda taught me how it felt to perform in harmony with a truly noble spirit.

(A version of this essay appeared in 2006 in the anthology CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE HORSE LOVER'S SOUL II. Learn more about Bright Futures Farm at the Web site www.brightfuturesfarm.org.)