Horse care is serious business

Gabriela Rodriguez’s mission: to educate people about the commitment required to keep horses healthy and happy.

By DEBORAH SAYE
Staff Writer

When Gabriela Rodriguez first met Blue, a thoroughbred horse, she was merely seeking to face her fears by taking horseback riding lessons. Little did she know, her mount would become her mentor and those lessons would also help the horse face a few fears of his own.

Long story short, Rodriguez, with no prior experience with horses, went from taking riding lessons to learning about what makes for responsible horse ownership. A few years after taking those initial lessons, she found herself the owner of Blue, a 17-year-old retired racehorse, who, having by the world’s estimation “fulfilled his usefulness to society,” had been relegated to a stable where he was overworked as a riding lesson horse weekdays and put through the paces for show competition on the weekends.

Toward the end, Blue was labeled “death on four legs” by stable owners who said he had a “vicious attitude,” the cure for which they decided was isolation from other animals, and effective enough to continue using for lessons and show.

Rodriguez later discovered that major contributors to Blue’s sore “attitude” were chronic overwork that left him with painful arthritis and 400 pounds underweight. All the clues were there for anyone who cared to look.

Rodriguez turned out to be that someone. On the advice of staffers at the stable, she purchased Blue, relocated him to greener pastures at her home and did research on how to make his latter years quality ones.

Though told “my horse was so vicious that he’d never get along with another horse,” Rodriguez did her homework to discover that horses are herd animals that need the company of other equines. So, Rodriguez purchased Lexie, a 6-month-old chestnut Arabian mare, who had an equally assertive nature. And though both horses had dominant personalities, they bonded almost immediately.

Through a nearly two-year process, Blue regained a healthy weight of 1,100 pounds and a posture of trust with Rodriguez. And, as Lexie grew, so did Rodriguez’s perception about the role of horses as pets who did not need to be ridden but required exercise to remain fit. She opted not to ride the mare and keep her as a companion horse.

Rodriguez began taking the horses to Kennebunk Beach a few times each week as part of their fitness regimen, putting the pair through the paces using voice commands, a bitless bridle for Blue and a leader rope on Lexie to “pony” the mare to match his cadence. Their outings drew the attention of curious onlookers who approached the threesome to inquire about their actions. And, from there, the business Blixx (pairing the names of Blue and Lexie) was born.

“The mission of Blixx is to teach (people) about responsible horse care, whether they are leasing, own or simply ride them,” said Rodriguez. “This is a business but it’s also a passion. This is really about people being able to step up to the plate and take care of horses. We offer (horse care education) clinics, seminars and workshops, by appointment, for groups or privately.”

Rodriguez cited statistics that approximately 90,000 horses are surrendered for slaughter in the United States each year, many of them by owners who are unable or unwilling to continue to care for their animals. She said that the country’s present economic condition, hampered by high fuel costs and resulting price increases for food, are forcing people to give up their animals.

“People are literally dropping them off at rescue centers, who don’t have federal funding (to care for them),” said Rodriguez. “Part of what I do is educate people of the level of care needed before they get a horse, so that they understand what this horse is going to require in terms of time, money and companionship.”

Rodriguez encourages clients to consider such things as breed, temperament, age, physical condition and what can be known about a horse’s history before purchasing it. She promotes a lifelong commitment to the animal.

“(A horse) is a living, breathing thing that feels pain and anxiety like you and I but they can’t speak or communicate, only by relaying if in pain, uncomfortable or scared,” said Rodriguez. “Can you imagine being a horse, full of arthritis and trying to jump when they’re 17? At that point they should be given a good home, making sure that the best interest of the horse is kept in mind.”

Sadly, Blue died in May at age 26. And while Rodriguez is content in knowing his last nine years were happy ones, she makes it her aim to teach others quality care for their horses.

“Blue lives on through what I’m doing in education,” said Rodriguez. “He inspired it and taught me everything in terms of riding and the things that I can now pass on to people about horses and what we can learn from them.”

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