



Return to the Pass(t)

By Robert Geller

Why is there a horse shoe attached to a tree deep in the Cascade Range near Mount Rainier's National Park? Hikers and sledgers circle around on trails oblivious and even the most accomplished of treasure-hunt enthusiasts would be hard-pressed to discover its location. Its virtual obscurity is by design. This morning I accompany the woman who placed it there on a rare pilgrimage back in time to this unsuspecting location one year later.

She and I both share a strange irony. Neither one of us ever witnessed a single live race of the champion Thoroughbred to whom it belonged. My first encounter with the horse fell on the very day after the opening of Washington State's premier racetrack Emerald Downs, June 20, 1996, oddly enough, the same date on which he had made his career debut 15 years earlier. The crowd was tickled pink when his name was announced, even if my Aussie accent put a strange twist on the end. Fans lined the rail to watch him pirouette to music in sync with rider, Jill Halin, herself decked out in the most dapper of British attire.

It was not long before I was up close and personal with the dedicated pair in the Emerald Downs paddock at a morning workout show. They then began

turning up in the oddest places; before a lunchtime crowd in Seattle's downtown Westlake Mall and for movie buffs inside the Oak Tree cinema in Greenwood for the special screening of Seabiscuit. Celebrity status followed them wherever they went and every appearance went off without a hitch.

Racing fans who witnessed his accomplishments first-hand, remember him as the fastest horse in the world. The sport of kings has had no less than 28 years to better his record time of 0.55:1 for 5 furlongs but there have been no takers. He was already four years removed from the racetrack when Jill started riding him. Even when they teamed up for dressage, his legacy from the track would follow him and their penchant for public exhibitions ensured that his past was never lost to present time.

He changed her life and she changed his. They read each other like a book right the way up to the ripe old age of 31 when he told her it was time to go. Jill listened and was ready, at least as ready as anyone can be. His temporary decline five years prior had sent her scurrying on a fact-finding mission as she feared the worst. The shift to a softer diet brought his plummeting white blood cell count back up and Jill came through the scare better prepared for when the dreaded day should arrive.

As we begin our east-bound drive, the memories are already on high alert. Jill had decided today was the day to revisit them. She would have gone it alone if necessary. I listen closely.

"Normal respiration for a racehorse is 12 to 14 breaths per minute. When going out to feed on the morning of Memorial Day, 2010, I noticed his breathing was heavy, labored and effortful. I counted his respiration rate at almost 40 breaths per minute, about four times what was normal. I'd always said that should he ever struggle with being able to lay himself down in his bedding to take a nap or have trouble eating, that I would do the right thing."

This was an exceptional horse and stars of his caliber do not go to rendering. A world-record-holder, an Eclipse Award winner and voted Washington Horse of the Century by the WTBA, the state's Thoroughbred breeders' association, he wasn't just any other horse, he was an icon. Years earlier, Jill decided on cremation and had plans in place for that when he died. Her only dilemma was where to spread the ashes. Soon I would find out precisely where. As one of the newer additions to his extended racing family, I felt humbled to join Jill in such a symbol of respect. We have arrived at our destination, Chinook Pass.

Cremation is a normal procedure for loved ones that Jill first had to deal with in 1992, when first husband Curtis passed suddenly from colon cancer. Curtis had been a groom at Longacres for numerous top barns that included Mike McCann and Jim Penney. Curtis and Jill were together 16 years and enjoyed a deep connection. By the time the medical specialists diagnosed him, there was little hope. The can-

Get Down Bambi

4/30/2010
sorrel filly
Hip #211

by Get Down Perry -
Chilly Force,
by Red Hot Rhythm.

Consigned by
Famous Lane Farm



2 Locations to Serve YOU Better!

FREE Lifetime Maintenance! - RENTAL CARS

RUIDOSO FORD-LINCOLN-MERCURY
575-378-4400 • 107 Hwy. 70 • On the border of Ruidoso and Ruidoso Downs
575-378-1100 • 124 Hwy. 70 • At the Y • www.ruidosoford.com

cer had metastasized through the lymph nodes to his liver and a mere five weeks later, two days in fact after the official closure of Longacres, Jill was widowed.

"When Curtis died, I scattered his ashes into the waters of Orcas Island in the San Juans. Because they were scattered in water, it feels like he is always around me. With Chinook, I didn't realize until after his death when they brought the ashes to me that it would be something like 60 lbs. When any species is cremated, the weight of its ashes approximates its weight at birth. Ashes are ashes. They have to be scattered. What better place to sprinkle Chinook's ashes than at Chinook Pass, the place for which he was named."

Jill and her friend Kathy went up to the Pass on July 18, 2010 and hiked up until they found an appropriate spot, a group of cedar trees off the trail and overlooking the actual mountain pass. They brought a plaque made out of a piece of slate with a horse head etched on it, rested the plaque on a nearby rock and placed a poem of dedication behind it. One of Chinook's shoes was nailed to a nearby tree amongst a group of cedars and firs. That same summer, daughter Christa headed back up there with Jill to take a look. They were pleased to see everything was still in place but wondered if the Chinook items would remain there over the winter.

We must venture off the trail in order to reach the actual spot. The altitude exceeds 5,000 feet but it is mid-July. An anemic start to summer has however, ensured walls of snow. Even Lake Tipsoo a half mile away, remains frozen over. Jill and I chuckle over the Christmas-in-July feel. As luck would have it, her husband's size 10 hiking boots come in handy for me as I turf my running shoes to the back of her car. Jill has been with Michael, her second husband, almost as long as she had cared for Chinook; 17 years.

We remain light-hearted, vowing to head back up after our picnic lunch on the east side of the highway, taking in the breathtaking beauty and expanse of nature, delighting in the occasional chipmunk or humming-bird, with me flinching at oversized red ants. Perched less than 5 feet away from a massive sheer drop to more forest below that bears the skid marks of a recent avalanche, we begin to thumb through three binders of photos and dedications to the great Chinook.

"You could only get on him 'on the

***Jill Halin with the WA great.
Each changed the other's life.***

run'. He would never stand still long enough. It was a habit that carried across from his racing days when he was 2 years old. Chinook never outgrew that." It just goes to show you how deep the impressions we make on the mind are, a horse's or our own children's for that matter.

"We were in downtown Seattle one year, 1991, as part of the Seafair Torchlight Parade. A group from Longacres was trying to help save the racetrack and banded together a complement of pony horses. They had worked out a show routine and we had our very own spot in the parade order. Before the parade started, we were hanging out in a holding area. I told them not to call on Chinook until the last minute because I knew once that he began to walk, he would not come to a stop. As they started to set in order, they called me into position and there we were, standing right underneath the monorail. Chinook and I stood there for a tense minute. The car in the sky went by. Chinook looked up, watched it go past but he never spooked. He just went everywhere that night, right over to the sidewalk where the spectators were lined up. He was in his element. He would do anything to get more pats."

Chinook thrived on the attention. Jill understood his temperament and embraced his self-important attitude. The elevated status from his glorious Thoroughbred career never left him. He headed the pecking order of the horses on her farm in Renton. Throughout the years, Chinook lauded over Thoroughbreds Hellerhighwater and Turban, appaloosas Cody and Charles and his pony friends Tabitha and Popcorn. "If I had a bag of carrots, they would all come up to the fence and Chinook would arrive last. The others would part and let him go first because he was the boss."

Amid the array of album photos of Chinook performing to audiences, my gaze sticks on a simpler scene at home. There is nothing special going on yet the captured moment reflects the quieter, down times he and Jill knew.



"Fans remembered him as this champion racehorse which he was and would come out to see him when we made an appearance but that only occurred every now and then. Most of the time, he was simply out there in the field being a horse, just like any other retired racehorse."

"Think about Chinook, three years on the track and 28 off. That means he spent 10 percent of his life as a racehorse but 90 percent away from it. My job was to keep his life interesting. He loved to perform. Really, he was just an average show-horse and yet he loved it so."

"I had him at the Emerald AM morning workout show one year. When it was over he thought he was done. There he was sulking in the back of his stall. He didn't know I was going to ride him later in the afternoon on the racetrack in an exhibition to music. I went to braid him later on and had only just started to get stuff out and he perked right up."

Jill's own love for riding had European roots. Born in Sacramento, northern California, her father was a YMCA director involved in youth programs, summer camps and fund-raisers. When she was 8 years of age, her father took a post in Rome, Italy. In the four ensuing years of his contract there, Jill would spend summers in England, in both Kent and Yorkshire, where she would learn dressage, show-jumping and cross-country in addition to the varied riding styles of continental Europe. Jill knew then that her dream was to make a living with horses. By the time her family returned to the States when she was aged 13, she had her heart set on being a riding instructor. After high school, Jill worked one summer at Longacres where she was exposed to the backstretch mentality. Equestrian circles and horse-racing circles

remain distinctly separate yet Jill has managed to straddle both worlds and through Chinook Pass, narrow the gap.

Jill worked at Donida Farm in Washington managing the aqua-tread. Chinook Pass came there to be rehabilitated but upon retirement, went back to Rainier Stables, where he had been born and raised. Chinook intrigued her and she began riding him at Rainier Stables, sometimes sharing the field with the cows. As a result of her interest in him, farm owner, Dewaine Moore offered Chinook Pass to Jill as her riding horse, when she accepted a job at Reba Ranch as full care racehorse manager, which included a stall for him. Jill began training Chinook for dressage, competing up to first level. One of the highlights was their return to Donida for a competition. Standing around in the crowd was trainer Howard Belvoir who stopped his training chores to watch Chinook compete. "Having a racehorse trainer watch the dressage test may seem like a small thing but it meant a lot to me. Somehow we'd manage to bring the two worlds closer together."

Today, Jill continues to move freely between the two mindsets, combining her role as a riding instructor with that of investigator at Emerald Downs for the Washington Horse Racing Commission, a post she began just this season. Jill remains active as a riding instructor, part-time. Some of her past students who took lessons from her as children and teenagers, include jockeys Stephanie Keever and Kate Repp Fales.

It is hard to imagine Jill anywhere but on a horse farm such is her love for the animal and for open spaces. I am somewhat surprised to learn of her two years in the suburbs with second husband Michael in their first home when they were mar-

Happily retired, Chinook lived a long and healthy life.

ried in 1994.

"Michael did not grow up with horses at all. He was a city kid but really understood how much Chinook meant to me and horses in general. He is so accepting. I encouraged him to move out to our current property which keeps him busy. He puts up with the activity of kids and horses, lessons and shows. He and Christa help run the place and they are both welcoming to everyone who comes out."

One of those visitors was Hall of Fame jockey Laffit Pincay who made a special trip out to their property to see the horse he himself described as "the fastest horse he has ever ridden." It was a touching and heart-felt gesture by a man who is a legend himself. In 2009, Laffit was a guest of Emerald Downs as honorary steward for the Longacres Mile. The previous year marked the 25th anniversary of Chinook Pass' own win in the great race. He led the field into the paddock for the 2008 Longacres Mile and its post-parade. This turned out to be his last official public appearance at Emerald Downs.

"I thought long and hard about a return trip to Emerald but decided that it would be better to have people come out to see Chinook rather than him going out and being on exhibit for them. It was easier on him both physically and mentally."

In the passenger seat on the return trip, I commend Jill on having moved on after Chinook. Jill is such a realist and so very modest. My intent is not misunderstood yet the words land abruptly. I turn



to see Jill's eyes welling up with tears and am reminded of what this return to the Pass was all about. Chinook is gone but will never be forgotten.

*Somewhere in time's own space
There must be some sweet pastured place
Where creeks sing on and tall trees grow
Some paradise where horses go
For by the love that guides my pen
I know great horses live again.*

– Stanley Harrison

(The poem that Jill dedicated to the great Chinook.)

Robert Geller has been the one and only voice of Emerald Downs since the track's inception in 1996 and has also been track announcer at the highly successful Sunland Park Racetrack & Casino for over a decade. Prior to moving to the US, he served 6-1/2 years as the English commentator for the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club and learned his craft in his hometown of Melbourne, Australia. His articles have appeared internationally in magazines such as Racetrack and Racing World.



www.qhnoticias.com