

Snowbird: My Equine Teacher



Snowbird

Some animals come into our lives as blessings. These pets change us and teach us, and sometimes we understand the profound nature of the relationship only after they leave us. One such creature was a horse named “Snowbird”.

To understand the influence animals like “snowbird” have had on me, a brief history of some of the other creatures in my life follows:

My experience with pets started as a child living in suburbia with parents who both worked. An English Springer spaniel named “Bootsie” was my companion and inspiration for what was to become my career. During my university years, an Irish setter named “Nina” was my roommate. After graduating from veterinary college, I served in the Air Force and I had to leave “Nina” behind with a girl friend. When I returned, “Nina” was waiting, my friend had moved on.

While managing a practice in New York City, “Nina” remained in my life. During an attempted hold up, she actually saved my life.... But that is another story.

At the time, NYC was becoming less inhabitable and I ventured on a quest which turned out to be the journey of a lifetime. Leaving all worldly possessions behind, I researched and implemented a driving expedition thru Africa, camping alongside amazing species of animals and living with native tribal people who embraced me as part of the universal community of man.



When I met my wife, best friend and partner, Jacqueline, I inherited a new round of what we might call “step pets”. There was “Buzz Bomb”, a Doberman Pincher puppy with every inherited disease known to veterinary medicine. Also included in Jacqueline’s menagerie was “Otis”, a finger biting skunk and “Katie”, a delightfully neurotic parrot.

Africa had a profound influence on me, and one dilemma I returned with was cultural. I lost my desire for an urban environment and moved to the rural environs of Vermont. However, after an extended period of time, I became discontent with the

land locked environment, social attitudes and inhospitable climate. Cabin fever became my disease.



On the polo field with Snowbird.

During one of these dreary winter seasons of self imposed isolation, a friend convinced me to try an indoor polo clinic at a local stable. Even though I had scant experience riding horses, I returned home after the experience and reviewed every swing of the polo mallet, remembering in detail every time I hit the indoor polo ball which mimics a small soccer ball. I was smitten. Over that

winter, on a rented horse, I learned how to play indoor polo. I also learned how to balance myself while literally standing in a saddle while swinging a mallet and leaning far to one side or another while following the path of the ball, anticipating the “line” of the ball created by a teammate or opposing player. When one is totally absorbed by this process, fear of injury dissipates and learning to ride becomes a natural endeavor.

When the spring came, the sport moved outdoors. One of the advantages of living in Vermont was that the activity was not prohibitively expensive, although there was the small detail of finding a polo pony. Another acquaintance was a very experienced polo player. He had a large white horse that was trained as a hunter and adequate at the game of polo. Sadly, she was diagnosed as having a malignant melanoma on her tail, and when I examined her, I felt a reasonable doubt about the diagnosis. She became mine for a very fair fee and my relationship with “Snowbird” began.



“Snowbird” was a large statuesque white mare who had a soul that seemed bonded to mine immediately. I learned that a relationship to a horse was different than other animals as my safety and security depended on her. She taught me how to ride off opposing players and her size gave us the advantage of mass, opposing players trying to push us in one direction or another ran into her strength and willpower.

A disadvantage was that side of her that was independent. After a long hard charge down the field, the direction of play might change, but in “Snowbird’s” mind, we were advancing forward. My commands were just simply ignored. On occasion I was in the adjacent cornfield while my teammates were at the other end of the field. I

forgave her for her obstinacy and celebrated her individuality, because on many other occasions we were mutually effective.

Our communication had the magic many pet owners experience. I would bring her treats in the barn and she would snuggle her head up against me and prod me for more carrots or more caresses. It was a private time of peaceful meditation. On the playing field, she intuitively knew how to follow the polo ball and respond to signals I gave her. If I applied pressure to her side with my right knee, she steered to the right, and if I gently moved her reign while holding them in one hand to one side or the other, she responded to that touch...unless she decided to go for the cornfield.

My next lesson from her was how to jump over fences. This was really her forte. She was as graceful as she was physically beautiful, and we went on to win ribbons together. Trust me, it was all her. I was just along for the ride.



On one occasion, after a pre-jumping wine tasting, we entered a pairs over fences competition. This challenge required two horses

and riders to jump fences at the same time, simultaneously clearing the hurdle in unison. She was so steady; we were able to jump the fences while I held the hand of my female co-jumping equestrian. That stunt won a ribbon and unfortunately, a front page photo in the local newspaper.

Snowbird did all the work!

Love from animals comes in all shapes and sizes, and I have been fortunate in having creatures in my life that have changed me and taught me many lessons. Each experience is different, each taught me new things and all shared the common denominator of mutual respect and love. To be able to share a mutual trust and have confidence in the physical ability of another being is an experience I will never forget. I thank “snowbird” for giving me a way to endure the long and tiresome winters and the opportunity to do something that I considered beyond my reach.