

An Old Beau

BY STEPHAN MICHAELS



Kim Schnackenberg lunges Viento de Washoe at her place in northwestern Washington. The photo truly captures their shared "spirit."



Kim Schnackenberg's loving Arabian helped her to battle cancer and he leaped to great heights

“Stallions are a lot like dogs,” remarks 43-year-old Kim Schnackenberg as she combs through the charcoal-silver mane of Viento De Washoe+ (DG Viento x Egyptian Sugar), her Arabian stallion she affectionately calls Beau. “They’re really smart, like a border collie. They always have to have a job to do.”

Stephan Michaels



Photos courtesy of Kim Schnackenberg

At age 16, Kim Schnackenberg's 4-H barrel racing team took first prize at the Northwest Washington Fair.

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—Kim Schnackenberg

Schnackenberg would know. A fourth-generation resident of Whatcom county in Washington state, the self-described, red-blooded-American horse rancher has been riding, training and caring for horses since she was a little girl. Her great uncle owned a chain of hardware stores, but the only hardware that interested Schnackenberg was the makeshift gear she would rig herself in order to ride. “I’d been riding bareback everyday of my life from five to 15. We didn’t have any money growing up, so we pretty much rode with bail and twine for bridles.”

As a senior in high school, Schnackenberg’s 4-H barrel racing team took first prize at the Northwest Washington

Fair. Then, the 17-year-old got the notion to train polo horses. It was an auspicious indication of things to come.

By 1989, Schnackenberg and her first husband bought a ranch on gently-sloping nine acres just 10 miles south of the Canadian border. Beneath the towering backdrop of snowy Mount Baker, nestled along rows of alder trees, cottonwoods and tall cedars, Schnackenberg raised her daughter, Ariel, and a stable of proud horses. A few years later, they added two stallions to the mix.

“Stallions are always teaching you about animal instincts,” Schnackenberg says matter-of-factly. “They have the same instincts as wild horses. They’re

unpredictable. That's the beauty of them; it's always a challenge."

Enamored with the free-spirited breed, Schnackenberg drove to a disbursal sale in 1993 and, for a few hundred dollars each, drove back to her ranch with two Arabian foals, Rashaad and Beau, the first Arabians Schnackenberg ever owned.

Her fondness for Beau was immediate. "I was working with him when he was baby," she chuckles, "and he kept turning on the faucet in the barn. We had water all over the place."

Raised as the family driving horse, and also trained in Western performance and dressage, Beau would pull the carriage or sometimes he would pull Ariel and her friends around on a sled through the snow. In 1998, on a whim, Schnackenberg entered him at the Northwest Washington Fair in the Western. "I pulled him out of the field and he won first place," she marvels. "It was amazing."

Yet as the emotional connection between horse and master grew stronger, Schnackenberg grew physically weaker. Two years after adding the brothers Beau and Rashaad to the stable, she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. The disease progressed quickly, and her thyroid had to be removed.

In remission, Schnackenberg was able to overcome a deluge of personal challenges. And Beau was there, a constant and unconditional companion. "He's seen me go through a mortgage fraud, divorce, the passing of my father and cancer." When her cancer returned about five years ago, Beau seemed to soften, and he became even more sensitive.

"He knows when I'm depressed,"

says Kim. "He'll push on me and peck at me like he's saying, 'come on let's get to work, let's get going, let's move it.' He just gets me out of that slump." And on those days when Kim was feeling particularly ill, "He'd just drop his head, put it against my chest and let out a loud breath. It was very moving."

Now, if that sounds like some kind of Walt Disney tale or raises the eyebrows of the anthropomorphic hard-liners out there, consider the emerging use of horses in modern psychotherapy. Hundreds of riding stables across the U.S. now facilitate emotional healing, self-awareness and

confidence building for children and adults suffering with a broad spectrum of maladies.

Sonja Wingard, co-founder of Animals As Natural Therapy in Bellingham, Wash., is among a growing number of practitioners who are documenting remarkable benefits from equine assisted therapies. "Horses really reflect and mirror what's going on with the person," says Wingard. "We ask people to pick their own horse, and they usually choose the one that challenges them the best."

There is no convincing needed with Schnackenberg, who credits Beau's uncanny ability to "read her"



Viento de Washoe pulls the Schnackenbergs' wedding carriage.

Courtesy of Kim Schnackenberg

with helping her to summon the strength to fight the disease. She was astonished when the perceptive and independent-minded Arabian presented her with another gift.

Schnackenberg showed up with Beau one morning to watch her daughter's riding lesson and found herself eyeing the jumping course. "We'd always been out there jumping logs on the trail," Schnackenberg laughs, "so I thought 'why not?'" According to Schnackenberg, Ariel's instructor was stunned to see Beau, who had been in the pasture for the better part of a year, suddenly clearing three-foot fences in a western saddle.

After a few more unorthodox, back-country training sessions—leaping

across streams and over fallen trees—Schnackenberg decided to enter Beau into the Hunter Hack classification at a local competition. Hunter is largely about presentation. At 6-foot, 2-inches, Schnackenberg's legs were far too long to ride Beau, but a skilled teenager named Hannah Moore proved just the right fit.

On their first outing, Beau and Moore pulled the blue ribbon. Next, they handily won two more regional championships in Auburn, Washington, and that earned enough points to qualify Beau for the Sport Horse National Championships in Nampa, Idaho. But before getting to that competition, Moore received a scholarship to a riding academy on the east coast.

"That kicked us out of going to nationals," Schnackenberg sighs, "because we didn't have a rider." Once again, Beau retired to his rolling pasture, for nearly a year.

But it was not meant to be. Schnackenberg decided that Beau deserved another shot at national competition. Worried that her 13-year-old stallion might be too rusty for the big leagues, she nervously approached professional trainer Morgan Carr in Auburn, Wash. Carr had a couple of riders in mind who were suited to the event, but after an initial workout, he made another decision: he would ride the feisty Arabian himself.

"He was just a great quality horse, very athletic, with a great mind," says Carr. "He possessed really good characteristics and went right to jumping the way I wanted."

Carr and Beau showed at a regional Hunter competition that same weekend, and Viento de Washoe, the horse that had cost Schnackenberg a meager \$400, won yet another title. Undefeated in competition, he was headed for the nationals in Nampa where the odds-on favorite was a prestigious stallion named Shogun PGN, the reigning national champ for the previous three years. In all, 31 pro stallions competed, and Schnackenberg thought for sure they had been dusted as the announcer began the awards by honoring Shogun's winning streak.

"'But this year,'" she recalls the announcer vamping, "'we have a



LEFT: Kim Schnackenberg stands with Morgan Carr, astride "Beau," following his win in the Arabian Hunter Hack Championship at the 2006 Sport Horse Nationals.



Courtesy of Kim Schnackenberg



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ABOVE LEFT: Beau never ceases to amaze his owner. Here, he helps pull hay across the snow-packed ground.

ABOVE: Schnackenberg and Beau go for a walk around her property.

LEFT: Schnackenberg shares a special moment with her “Beau.”

new national champion.’ He paused for several seconds and then boomed, ‘Viento De Washoe from Ferndale, Washington!’”

Schnackenberg reports no clear recollection of what happened next, except that her husband Randy had to catch her. “I just about passed out. You could hear people saying ‘Who?’ ‘From Where?’ With all the adversity we’d had, it was just mind-boggling.”

Since that Cinderella day in August 2006, she has received several lucra-

tive offers to purchase the family horse that once pulled her wedding carriage. Rest easy, Schnackenberg is not biting. “There’s no price you could put on him,” she gushes, “That would never happen. He’s my boy; he’s my baby.”

Let’s face it, he’s her Beau. 🐾

Note: Unfortunately Beau was injured in training about a month before 2008 Sport Horse Nationals, and Schnackenberg decided not to risk aggravating the

injury. Hopefully, Beau will compete at the 2009 Sport Horse Nationals.

Stephan Michaels is an award-winning broadcast journalist. His feature articles on ecology and animal behavior have appeared in many notable publications, including the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle and the Seattle Times. He was awarded top honors by the LA Press Club for Best Entertainment Reporting on LA Radio in 1989.