

Blind Ambition

Being blind doesn't limit this little mare's abilities.

PALOMINO MARE MISS GOLDWOOD Five lives for speed. Whether it's running barrels or team penning, she loves to kick it into high gear.

Sounds like a lot of Quarter Horses you know, right?

What makes "Goldie" different is that she's completely blind.

Kris Klasen of Bemidji, Minnesota, purchased the Doc Bar granddaughter while on vacation in Florida in 1995. With less than an hour to kill before heading to the airport to catch her flight home, Kris stopped at a riding stable with a sign posted, "horses for sale." Kris saw Goldie, looked at her for 10 minutes and bought her on the spot.

Goldie was blind in one eye when Kris purchased her, but she didn't find that out until the horse was shipped to her Minnesota home. Had she known, Kris says, she still would have bought the mare, who was intended as a 4-H horse for Kris' 8-year-old son, Casey.

The first summer at her new home, Goldie injured her other eye while out in the pasture and became completely blind. But the Klasens were not fazed, and Casey and his brother, Josh, continued to show and trail ride Goldie,

winning high-point awards in the Minnesota Palomino Horse Exhibitors and 4-H.

"She absolutely trusted Casey," Kris says. "And he learned to be incredibly responsible because she was totally dependent on him."

The Klasens found that caring for Goldie was much like caring for any horse.

"Having Goldie wasn't like having a blind horse," Kris says. "We hauled her everywhere. We competed with her and trail rode. She was the most sure-footed of all our horses."

Goldie was also the Klasens' best broodmare. She never stepped on a foal, and she was the most level-headed mother.

Kris says the bond you form with a blind horse is a tight-knit relationship built on trust.

"Goldie is so responsive to the rider," Kris says. "She listens. She's willing to do anything. She loves to run. She would trot around her pasture, but when someone got on her, she had the freedom to run, because she had someone to tell her where to go."

The Klasens planned to keep Goldie for the rest of her days, but the Texas-bred and Florida-raised mare never grew a thick winter coat like the Klasens' other horses. As Goldie got older and the winters got harder for her, the family made the difficult decision this year to sell the mare to a warmer home. And Kris knew just the perfect place.

Last year, the Klasens sold their Quarter Horse gelding Buttershot, who was blind in one eye, to HorseFriends,



Miss Goldwood Five at work at HorseFriends.

COURTESY OF HORSEFRIENDS.

a nonprofit foundation that works with mentally and physically disabled children and adults. Not only is HorseFriends in warm Greensboro, North Carolina, but president Emilie Storch also has a passion for blind horses. Luckily, the foundation was looking for one more blind horse to add to its herd of therapy horses.

Emilie's passion for blind horses began after one was donated to HorseFriends in 2007, and she developed another foundation, Flurry's Hope, to help educate the public about the usefulness of blind horses.

Emilie says that blind horses, such as Goldie, transfer well into roles as therapy horses because their increased dependence makes them bond quickly with humans. She also says that people with disabilities can relate to horses with disabilities.

When Goldie first arrived at HorseFriends, Emilie wondered if she should prepare the children for the horse's appearance, in case they were shocked that Goldie is missing one of her eyes.

"I didn't say anything, and not one child has ever said anything about her missing eye," Emilie says. "They don't worry about her being blind. People with disabilities understand that a disability is not an inability – it's just something you work around. Other people expect blind horses to be worthless, but here is this beautiful palomino horse who is a fantastic trail horse, plus she's a therapy horse, plus she's a barrel racer, plus

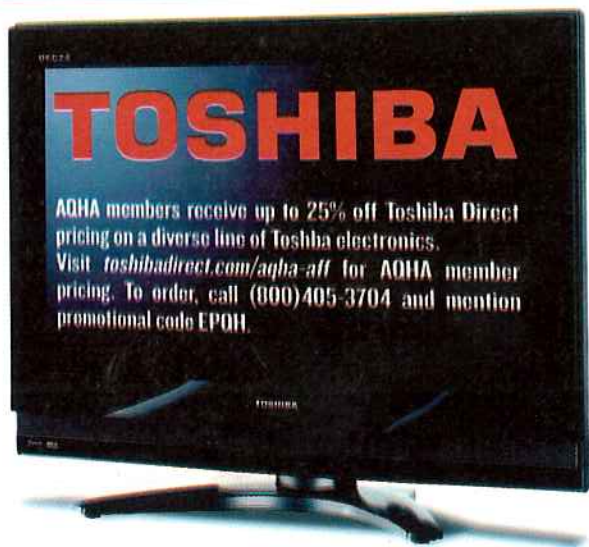
all these other fantastic things."

HorseFriends has three locations in North Carolina, and Goldie and two other blind horses all reside at the location managed by Emilie, who is also a practicing clinical psychologist. In the short time Goldie has been in North Carolina, she has adapted to her new home and excelled in her new role as a therapy horse, even while being pregnant. Recently, the mare impressed Emilie during a therapy session that required four side-walkers and a leader to assist a disabled rider.

"I just started to weep, because here is this profoundly handicapped person riding above all these other people, something she has probably never experienced in her life," Emilie says. "And teenage volunteers are serving this person, and a blind horse is the one that's taking them all around. I was weeping in amazement at what God can do – this thing that the world would have never allowed to happen. It just speaks to the power of blind horses."

— BY ERIN SULLIVAN

For more information about HorseFriends, visit www.horsefriendsnc.org. Emilie also provides information about blind horses, including training tips, on her Web site, www.flurryshope.com. Her book, "Horses Who See With Their Hearts," a story about blind horses, is available through the Web site to raise money to further educate the public about the uses for blind horses.



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