



No bridle, no problem!

The story of Shuna Mardon BHSI and Strathdon

by Angela Dobb

When a friend relates a horse owning tale that starts with the words "I began to regret my decision before I even got her home" you expect an interesting tale.

When that is followed up by Ian Stark stating the horse was "a challenge others would not have taken on" you can be certain that the story will be interesting. That this horse subsequently competed successfully in dressage, showing, side-saddle, Western classes, show jumping, horse trials and endurance competitions, all without a bridle, then the story almost leaps into the realm of fable! But this is no fable. It is a true story about the strong emotional bond that can be created between a horse and its rider, and leads to almost telepathic communication between them.



Shuna Mardon had long thought about whether it was possible to form such a bond with horses, but she didn't know how to start training a horse to go without a bridle. After leaving school Shuna concentrated on building up a small stud farm, the Manar Stud, and studying for her BHS exams. During the summer of 1966 Shuna first encountered the horse with which she was to prove all her theories on "riding free". Strathdon (Don), was bred by Jean MacAulay at Dryden, near Selkirk. She was by the Arab stallion Horaya, out of her 23 year old Clydesdale-cross event mare, Flick. Although the filly was very pretty, bright chestnut with a pure white mane and tail, she wasn't what Shuna was looking for at the time.

Shuna already owned a broodmare out of Flick, so she knew the breeding well, and they were not horses to be taken lightly. As Shuna describes it, "all this family of horses have exceedingly 'high-couraged' temperments, and in the wrong hands they can be very difficult and even dangerous".

Gentle Persuasion

However, over the next three years Jean MacAulay lost three young horses to grass sickness (including Don's full brother) and decided that she must sell the filly in case she also fell victim to the disease. Knowing that Shuna trained her horses with patience rather than force, she eventually persuaded Shuna to buy her,

but only after she'd included the guarantee that she would buy her back if Shuna couldn't cope with her highly-strung temperament.

As Shuna describes it, "Against my better judgement, I bought her, and began to regret my decision before I even got her home". At this stage the filly was well handled but unbroken and had never been in a horsebox. The six hour journey from Dryden in the Scottish Borders to Shuna's home near Aberdeen sounds like a nightmare. Don kicked and pawed the box all the way home, and worked herself up into such a state that there was steam coming out of the windows. On reaching home Shuna turned her out into a large field and she appeared to be quite settled the next morning.

Fun and Games

But the fun was only just beginning. No sooner had Shuna brought Don into a loose box to begin to get acquainted than Don bolted out again. She did this several times. Firstly she broke the bolt on the door, the second time she broke the hinges and finally, when the fittings held, she just crashed straight through the door. In desperation, Shuna ran two iron bars the length of the front of the box, and when she failed to get through them she started to kick out at the wall between the boxes. She finally settled when she had made a gaping hole four feet wide in the wall and she could see the horse next door. Many people would have loaded her back into the lorry to take her back to Dryden at this stage, but not Shuna. As Shuna says "I considered the horse to be almost mad, and therefore it would be challenge to try to break her in".