

Rocky Mountain Horses

Beautiful, easy-going and smooth, they've been called the perfect working and riding horses.

By Summer Best

It was September 14, 2005, and Kathy Parrish was at the Kentucky Horse Park, hiding from her horse.

She wasn't goofing off or playing a game. No, no. This was a serious situation. Kathy was in Lexington, Kentucky, for the Rocky Mountain Horse Association's International Championships. In the fancy show ring below, her horse, Mountain View's Seminole, was performing under the direction of his trainer in the 3-year-old stallion under saddle class.

She knew the phenomenal stallion could put in a flawless performance. But there was one small problem.

"I had noticed at past shows, there was a tendency that if Seminole knew I was there, he would be out there in the ring looking around for me," Kathy explained. "When he looked for me, it usually distracted him and it cost him the class. So I hid, and I tried to just be another person in the crowd."

You can call her crazy for her thought processes, but Kathy, a horsewoman with 20 years' experience owning horses and studying their behaviors, is intuitive - and sensible - about these sorts of things.

"I thought hiding from him would work, but you never know," she said. "It was the first time I'd ever had a horse shown under saddle at the International. I was trying to keep myself realistic. If we came out with a ribbon, I figure that's pretty good at the International."

Pretty Good

Seminole was better than "pretty good" that day. Besting a class of the world's premier young Rocky Mountain Horses, the chocolate stallion with flaxen mane and tail strutted around the ring with trainer Tim Little as though he was born for it. Ultimately, the judges agreed: Mountain View's Seminole would be named the 2005 3-year-old stallion under saddle International Champion.

Kathy, who purchased Seminole as a weanling from breeder Paul Pence, recorded the entire class with her camcorder. As the results were called out, she remembers leaping out of her seat and whooping and hollering, all the while holding her video camera to document every moment.

Photo by V.W. Perry

Mountain View's Seminole, shown by Tim Little, is the 2005 3-year-old stallion under saddle International Champion.

Photo by V.W. Perry

"When they called the numbers, I was taping, and the last thing I expected was for them to call his name first," Kathy said. "He got called, and I started jumping up and down! The camera starts jiggling up and down, and I'm screaming."

A friend grabbed the camera while Kathy tried to compose herself. Up until that point, Kathy was pretty sure Seminole was still oblivious to her presence at the show.

"Then I let out a whoop, and it was one of those moments when the crowd went quiet," Kathy said. "Seminole heard me, and you could tell he knew it was me. His head turned straight toward me, and you could see he was mad at me for not visiting him sooner."

Later, Kathy went to visit her horse, and she claims the personable stallion was holding a grudge. "He was like, 'Huh, now you'll come to see me.' It's like he knew I had been there the whole time. I think he was a little upset with me."

Meanwhile, Kathy had a lot of phone calls to make. One of the first people she left a message with was Maye Carter, her longtime friend who was back home in Clermont, Florida, caring for the Mountain View Farm. Maye, a nursing student, had class obligations and couldn't make the trip to Kentucky. When Maye heard Kathy's voicemail, she worried that the stallion hadn't performed well at all.

"Her voice in the message just didn't sound that excited," Maye said. "Kathy wasn't really 'up'. Her message said, 'You'll never guess what he did.' And I thought, 'Oh, man, he must have bombed.'"

Maye returned the call to Kathy later that day, expecting bad news.

"She told me he won, and I literally dropped the phone," Maye said. "I just couldn't believe it. It was great."

Meeting the Rocky Mountain Horse

Much of Kathy Parrish's involvement in the horse industry throughout the past two decades has revolved around riding, driving and showing Saddlebreds.

In 1998, a chain of events convinced her to look into Rocky Mountain Horses.

"I was at a Saddlebred and Walking Horse show in Kentucky," Kathy explained. "A friend had talked me into going to this little one-night horse show, and they had a demonstration with Rocky Mountain Horses. I wasn't really paying that much attention to start with. I kind of ignored the demo, to be honest."

Kathy explained that the breed was represented as a "chocolate" breed, and she frowned on the color emphasis. She would later learn that, although the rich chocolate color is unique to the breed, Rocky Mountain Horses are not considered a color breed.

"We look at a good horse, and it shouldn't matter what color it is," she said. "I've always said that you can't ride color. A good horse is a good horse."

She couldn't ignore what she saw next. The stallion in the demonstration walked quietly out of the ring with his rider, and stood completely still and nonchalant as a crowd gathered closely around him.

Photo by Summer Best

"Instead of getting away from the crowd, he stopped 30-60 feet from the gate, dropped his reins, and let the crowd come right up and start talking to him," Kathy said. "First, I was thinking, 'Oh, no, someone's going to get hurt.' I was getting ready to help if I needed to. Then I thought, 'Maybe it's really not really a stallion!' "

Sure enough, the stallion was the real deal.

"I thought to myself that this is the kind of horse that I could actually take camping with me, and have a lot of fun," Kathy said. "I got serious about it then. I was attracted to the disposition right away. I had experienced the part of the industry with the glitz and the glamour. I was becoming more interested in a horse with a great disposition."

Kathy continued her research of the breed, and within months, she owned her first Rocky Mountain Horse - a sweet, dark bay mare named Cleo. Cleo was in foal, so Kathy experienced the joys of a Rocky Mountain Horse foal the next spring.

"The foals are so kind and easy to work with," she said. "They are curious, outgoing, and they're just fascinating. Each one has its own personality."

History of the Breed

The Rocky Mountain Horse appears to have originated in the United States in the late 1800s in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in eastern Kentucky. Basically a utility horse, the horses (between 14.2 and 16 hands) were saddle horses to be used for all seasons. Sure-footed, easy-gaited, they were the mount of choice for postmen, doctors and traveling preachers.

"They were the universal working and riding horses," Kathy explained. "The horse you would ride up and over the top of mountains comfortably all day long." Photo by Summer Best

Rocky Mountain Horses were smooth, sane and displayed stamina to get the job done, day in and day out. Unlike owners of elite Thoroughbreds in Kentucky at the time, families owning Rocky Mountain Horses were typically not wealthy and didn't spend a lot of money on their horses' upkeep. The result? Only the hardiest of the horses survived. Harsh winters divided the weak Rocky Mountain Horses from the tough ones, which represent the breed today.

Today, more than 12,000 Rocky Mountain Horses have been registered with the breed's registry, the Rocky Mountain Horse Association (RMHA).

According to RMHA:

"The Rocky Mountain Horse Association's rendition of the history of the breed states there was a gaited colt brought from the Rocky Mountain region of the United States to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in eastern Kentucky around 1890. He was referred to as "the Rocky Mountain Horse" by the local Kentucky people because of the area of the country from which he had come. He is the horse credited for the start of the Rocky Mountain Horse breed. Little is known about this foundation stallion, but oral history indicated he was chocolate-colored with flaxen mane and tail, and he possessed a superior gait. The stallion was bred to the local Appalachian saddle mares in a relatively small geographical area and the basic characteristics of a strong genetic line continued. This prized line of horses increased in numbers as years went by, and these are the horses known today as Rocky Mountain Horses."

Today, each Rocky Mountain Horse must be examined by a certified RHM authority before being considered as breeding stock. DNA testing is used to verify bloodlines. The association registration policies include a white rule, ensuring no white above the knee or hock, and other specifications. Although chocolate is a popular coat color, the array of possibilities adds

another dimension to the breed.

"The public is sometimes attracted to the chocolate with flaxen mane and tail because it's so unique," said Kathy, who is the chairperson of the RMHA Genetics Committee. "But they come in all shades."

Most American breed associations allow the breeding of any horses that are registered, without prior certification requirements. Their requirements for registration of their horses are defined by one of two conditions; either by heritage (the parent stock are fully registered, e.g. Arabian), or by characteristics such as color or gait (the breed standards are met, e.g. Palomino, Paint). The Rocky Mountain Horse meets both conditions.

Prior certification is required for any Rocky Mountain Horse over the age of three to compete in RMHA shows. The reason? The goal of the RMHA is to select show ring champions according to which horse best meets or represents the standards of the breed.

To be certified, a Rocky Mountain Horse must be at least 23 months old and pass inspection by three official RMHA Examiners for:

- (1.) Correct gait under saddle, with a graceful way of going
- (2.) Conformation and color that meets the breed standards
- (3.) Possessing good temperament
- (4.) Verification of parentage by an appropriate laboratory testing method
- (5.) Stallions must have both testicles below the external (inguinal) ring
- (6.) The only exception to the minimum height requirement of 14.2 hands is for mares that are under 3 years old at the time of certification, and are from two certified to breed parents. These mares can be certified at a minimum of 14 hands.

Must trail Ride

All those qualifications are well and good, but to Kathy Parrish, the main reason to have a horse is for mutual enjoyment. If you can't head out on the trails on a Sunday afternoon, what's the use?

"When I bring my horses home, I want them to be able to be a horse," Kathy said. "We go on trail rides. My feeling is, any horse I own has to be a trail mount for me."

Disposition is key for all the horses at Kathy's Mountain View Farm in Clermont.

"You can have a really ugly horse, but if he's wonderfully sweet, he's special," she said. "A beautiful horse with a horrible disposition is just a horse with a horrible disposition, in my opinion."

Photo by Summer Best

Maye Carter and Kathy Parrish spend quality time with Seminole, their International Champion Rocky Mountain Horse Stallion.

According to Kathy and Maye, Rocky Mountain Horses tend to be extremely level-headed.

"For most of them, if something startles them, their response is not to split and run," Kathy said. "They don't have a big flight response. They tend to not be afraid of things."

The Naming of Seminole

Mountain View's Seminole was born with the name, "J.D. Sambo."

"I wanted to give him a new name when he was 2," Kathy said. "So we started to think about what is special to Florida. I thought well, the Seminole Indians. So we called him Seminole."

Interestingly, the stallion thrives on Seminole Feed. Years ago, Kathy learned of Seminole Feed products when she was conditioning a broodmare, and she's been a steady customer ever since. All the Mountain View horses thrive on Seminole Blue Ribbon 12+, supplemented with a bit of ground flax seed and beet pulp. Seminole grass balancer mineral is provided free-choice, along with ample supplies of coastal hay.

Mountain View's Seminole bred six mares in 2005. As of this printing, the foal from Seminole's first foal crop, a 2005 filly, a chocolate filly with flaxen mane and tail, is being offered for sale. Her name is MVH Sara. (Visit www.mountainviewfarm.net for more information.)

Kathy plans to selectively book Seminole to a limited number of mares in the future.

Double-Identity

If you met Kathy Parrish at the mall on a spontaneous Saturday afternoon, you'd find her to be a warm, friendly lady. Someone who would make a great neighbor. A lady with good judgment and high scruples. You could chit-chat with Kathy about the weather, or about your animals, and she would swap stories about her Rocky Mountain Horses.

She would seem just as normal as anyone else at the mall. But her life is actually like something out of a James Bond 007 movie.

Kathy, you see, is a lead software engineer for Lockheed Martin - i.e., she develops computer software for weapons systems. Lockheed Martin, a private company with many government defense contracts, designs things

like the Hubble Space Telescope, rockets, missiles and space systems.
(And other things we're not allowed to ask a lot of questions about.)

At Lockheed Martin, Kathy's job is, well, classified. She can explain a few of her projects, but she's tight-lipped about the details. Her patriotic work with the company for nearly 20 years has brought about career accomplishments that also prove positive for America's defense.

Kathy also operates Mountain Horse Productions, a Web design and hosting service. She is a chairman of the Rocky Mountain Horse Genetics Committee, and she is a member of the group's nominating committee. Kathy was the founding president of the Florida Rocky Mountain Horse Association and currently serves as treasurer.