

Retired race horses ready for a new ride

New Stride retrains steeds and finds them a new home

BY BRIAN LEWIS, THE PROVINCE MARCH 7, 2010

A thoroughbred race horse's competitive career is short and sweet, like that of any high-performance athlete.

But until about a decade ago that was where the similarity ended, since the thoroughbred's post-career days were often equally short and anything but sweet because its brief life ended in a slaughterhouse.

For many, the horsemeat option remains unconscionable, since the average thoroughbred is usually done with racing as a five-year-old but, given the opportunity, can live a productive life until well into its 20s.

It's this simple concept -- that a thoroughbred isn't washed up after just a few years -- that led a small group of Fraser Valley horse lovers to found the New Stride Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation.

The charity group's mandate is to ensure that non-competitive and injured thoroughbreds, primarily from Vancouver's Hastings Racecourse, get a second chance through retraining, rehabilitation and subsequent adoption by private horse lovers for recreational riding or other equine activities.

Since it was established by co-founders Catherine Sheppard and Meril Agrey in 2001, the volunteer-run foundation has rescued more than 80 thoroughbreds and although a few unhealthy ones have had to be put down, 54 have been successfully adopted.

Currently, 18 thoroughbreds are in its care, most of them boarded at Allbury Farm in Abbotsford, where they're now being prepared for adoption.

"Ex-racing thoroughbreds are very versatile because they're really high-performance athletes," says New Stride president Kim Inglis, whose own horse, "Youdaman," is one of the ex-racers. "I've just been blown away by what these horses can do."

These horses are generally not recommended for novice riders, the foundation warns, but they're not "crazy" or "hyper" either, as some mistakenly believe.

"We take great care in fitting the person with the proper horse based on rider experience level and what they're looking for," Inglis says.

"Right now, we have a couple of horses prepared for adoption that are completely sound and ready to move into virtually any riding discipline."

Most horses in New Stride's care are given to the non-profit foundation by racing owners and breeders who have chosen this course rather than disposing of their "retired" thoroughbreds through the regular auction process.

A two-year adoption process begins once a New Stride horse and its new owner have been matched. "We're in regular contact with the new owner for those two years to make sure the horse is being properly looked after," Inglis says. "Only at the end of that period are the horse's ownership papers transferred."

New Stride charges an adoption fee of \$750 but, as Inglis explains, that's not much money for such a high-calibre race horse. One ex-racer currently at the farm, for example, won more than \$300,000 during his short career.

However, since thoroughbreds are high-energy animals, they also eat more than other horses and cost an average of \$500-\$550 per month to keep. Consequently, it costs the foundation about \$100,000 annually to run its operations, so it's always actively raising funds and looking for volunteers.

You can see what they do and how they do it at New Stride's open house from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. this afternoon at Allbury Farm, 4799 Olund Road, Abbotsford. More information can be found on their website at www.newstride.com.

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