

Can a 10-year-old “baby mama” jump up and win a national title in Western pleasure? Don’t bet against it.



FROM
TO

BROODMARE CHAMPION

BY ROBIN GOLLEHON, WITH J. FORSBERG MEYER

It started on a whim. Our Appaloosa mare Zippin Flash Annie had spent the last six years in our broodmare band, producing one lovely foal after another. Then, when circumstances called for us to sell her, I decided first to see how she felt under saddle.

The answer: *Awesome.*

The upshot: Before you could say “go for it,” I was pointing her toward challenging Western pleasure events at her breed’s toughest venues: the Appaloosa World and National shows.

What was I thinking? Why would I believe an older broodmare could hold her own against the nation’s toughest young show horses?

I’ll answer those questions in this exclusive *H&R* report. I’ll also tell you how Annie and I managed the comeback, and what the results were.

Her story is inspirational, but I hope you’ll also find it instructive. If you’ve ever wondered whether *your* broodmare could make a showing comeback, my strategies may well help you guide her transition from pasture dweller to show-pen phenom.

LIFE CHANGES

Here’s how it happened. In February of last year, my husband Roger and I moved our breeding and training operation from Trafalgar, Indiana—where we’d been for 20 years—to Versailles, Kentucky. We wanted to expand the breeding part of our business and take advantage of the new Kentucky Breeders Incentive Fund.

This culminated a shift in focus for us from Appaloosas to Quarter Horses. Consistent with that shift, we sold our Appaloosa breeding stallion, the 19-year-old Zippo Pine Bar son Zip N To Paradise, that spring, before two of our remaining Appaloosa broodmares had foaled. Because all our Appaloosas were for sale, and because an

open broodmare is not a hot commodity, we decided to look into the show backgrounds of those two open mares before putting them on the market.

One of them was Annie. By Zippin Bonanza Flash and out of Tex Ann Wrangler (by Sir Wrangler), she’d produced four nice foals for us since joining our broodmare band in 2003. (In fact, her daughter Applause N Paradise was the June ’09 *H&R* “We’d Love to Own” horse.)

Before we acquired her, Annie had been a reserve world champion in yearling longe line (I remember because I placed right behind her in 2000 with a yearling by Zip N To Paradise). She’d also been shown under saddle through her 3-year-old year.

She was in foal when we bought her, however, so I’d never experienced her under saddle. And in mid-September of last year, when we were preparing to market her, she hadn’t been ridden in a good six years. Still, she was attractive and in reasonably good shape for a broodmare, with a tail down to the ground. Roger and I were curious to see what she could do.

I pulled her out of the pasture, saddled her up, and worked her a bit in the round pen. Then I mounted and rode her in the round pen, just enough to realize, without question, this mare was *nice!* →



ABOVE: Annie had been a broodmare—and unriden for six years—when I began preparing her for the show pen. **OPPOSITE:** Annie and I after our win in ladies’ Western pleasure at this year’s National Appaloosa Show in June.

HOW NICE?

I rode her again the next day, outside the round pen. Afterward, Roger and I looked at each other, eyebrows raised. Annie wasn't just nice, she was *really* nice. Rusty as she was, she was still smooth and responsive under saddle, with the most willing disposition imaginable. Her attitude from the moment I stepped on her was, "What can I do for you?"

Here's how extraordinary she was. I rode her for the first time on a Wednesday, for the second time on Thursday. Then, that very weekend, I took her to a regional Appaloosa show in Frankfurt, Kentucky—about 20 miles from our place—and placed first under three of four judges in senior Western pleasure. It was a well-attended show, so our placings earned us all but one point needed to qualify for the 2009 Appaloosa World Show.

Not too shabby.

She was ready for more, and at that point the deadline for entering the 2008 World Show, which would begin the end of October in Fort Worth, Texas, was upon us. Roger and I thought, why not?

It was too late to qualify for the 2008 event, so we entered her in ladies' Western pleasure, a non-qualifying class. Even with so little preparation, Annie performed beautifully. The placings were close, and we wound up third. Not bad at all, considering I didn't have all the "buttons" on her that I typically put on my show horses. (More on that in a moment.)

I had put together a new outfit for that show, and was crazy about it—a gold saddle pad for Annie, and a black, gold, and white shirt for me. The third-place ribbon we won was a rich yellow that matched the pad almost perfectly. Pointing this out to Roger, I said with a laugh, "I should've worn blue!"

But, as it turned out, that wouldn't be necessary going forward.

BUTTONS 'N' BELLS

We took Annie back home and pretty much put her on the shelf, with the thought that I'd bring her out and show her again sometime in '09. Whenever I did ride her, I worked her with that goal in mind.

I believe a good Western pleasure performance is all about strength and balance, and because of that it's essential for the rider to be able to position the horse properly to perform at its best. At the same time, today's highly competitive pleasure events demand absolute finesse in presentation—you can't be obviously cueing your horse and moving its body around.



Annie was a dream to train. I'd simply show her what I wanted, and she'd say, "Oh! I get it," or "Could you show me that again?" I was careful not to overwork her and make her sore, relying instead on the fine-tuned communication we had together.

My solution is to have a lot of what I call "buttons" on my show horses. Buttons are subtle rein and leg cues that fine-tune my horses' positioning and way of going in the show pen (allowing them to perform at their best), without drawing the judges' attention (thus demonstrating finesse).

An example of a button would be a subtle hand-lift. I show on a draped rein, which means rein cues don't typically make contact with my horse's mouth. I taught Annie, as I do all my horses, that if I lift my hand even a couple of inches, causing the slightest movement of the

reins against her neck, she's to drop her neck slightly.

Other buttons include subtle leg cues to control speed; I taught these to Annie as well. I "explained" to her that if I fanned my legs slightly—pulling them away from her sides and then gently bringing them back in again—that means "go," but if I squeezed and held her with my calves, that means to shift her weight to her hindquarters and slow down. If my leg cue goes all the way to my heels, that means stop, and more squeeze at that point means back up.

Annie was so easy to train! She's the



Husband Roger and I pose at the backdrop with Annie and Miniature Australian Shepherds Cozy (left) and Gabby. It was hard to let Annie go, but we're delighted she's already carried her new owner, 15-year-old Emma Gentile of Illinois, to a win picture of her own.

kind of horse you just show what you want, rather than drill or try to coerce her. She may not get everything on the first try, but it's as if she says, "What was that? Could you show me that again?" Then, after a few times, she'd say, "Oh! I get it." I loved that about her, and I worked hard to preserve that confidence and her corresponding calmness of mind.

With all my buttons in place, Annie was ready to respond to my slightest adjustments, which would enable me to keep her at her best in the show ring.

BOFFO BABYSITTER

But more showing was a ways off at that point. Through the winter and spring, Annie's job was periodically as a confidence builder to less-experienced riders. Whenever I needed a horse to take care of someone in one of my clinics, I'd get Annie out. With her solid-gold attitude, she'd make rookies look like stars, giving them the chance to see what it feels like when you and your horse work as a team.

I knew these riders couldn't mess her up, even though they didn't know any-

thing about my buttons. They could just sit there, smiling from ear to ear, and she'd do her thing. My communication with Annie was at a higher level, and she respected that, but she was honest enough to take good care of a novice rider, too.

The spring of this year was hectic at our new place, and time clicked away until the National Appaloosa Show was right around the corner (scheduled for June 22 to July 4 in Jackson, Mississippi). I hadn't planned on attending because I'd committed to present one of my Yearling Head Start clinics at a Lexington tack store at about the same time.

Then, again almost on a whim, Roger and I decided to somehow get Annie to that show. As much as we loved her, we needed to get her sold.

WALKING THE WALK

Ordinarily when we go to a world or national show, it's a big deal—we arrive many days in advance, then set up a big display area with stall curtains and all the accoutrements. Very high profile.

Not this time! We pulled into Jackson on a Sunday night after a 620-mile haul, and set up our single stall at the end of someone else's row of stalls. Annie barely had time to settle in before her first class, senior Western pleasure on Tuesday afternoon. But that didn't stop her from performing like the standout she is.

We had what felt like a flawless go, except for one little thing: The judges asked for an extended walk and I didn't have a button for that! I'd known in advance we'd probably be asked to extend the jog, and we were ready for *that*. But if I'd fanned my legs to ask Annie to speed up her walk, she would've misinterpreted it as the button for jogging. An extended walk just wasn't in our repertoire.

"Could've had more walk!" Roger teased after the class, in which we still placed fourth overall. I shook my head and laughed, but then got busy plotting my strategy for Annie's other class, open ladies' Western pleasure, just 48 hours away.

Clearly, I needed a button for an extended walk. What I came up with was swinging my legs forward and back one

CONDITIONED TO WIN

Here are the measures I took, apart from training, to transition Annie from her broodmare lifestyle to show-ring ready.

- **Hair coat.** I brought her in from the pasture and kept her stalled to protect her from the sun. Other than that, ordinary grooming with plenty of elbow grease prepared her hair coat for the show pen.
- **Feeding.** Nothing special here—just high quality alfalfa/grass-mix hay and a standard grain mix, fed in amounts to keep her sleek, but not fat.
- **Conditioning.** Obviously, as a broodmare, Annie needed to get in better shape to perform competitively. But I believe with pleasure horses, you need to be careful not to get them too conditioned. If they're too fit, they become hard to get mentally ready for the show pen, as they have so much endurance. So my goal with Annie wasn't to get her as fit as a racehorse or barrel horse, but conditioned enough to handle the stress and training needed to get her ready to show.

I began with short periods—say, 15 to 20 minutes of easy riding a day. At this point, I was mostly working on installing her buttons (I talk more about these in the main text). I increased the length of this work period gradually over time, until I was riding her for up to an hour a day. At her peak, Annie could lope continuously for about 10 to 15 minutes at a time in each direction, with other slower work in between lope sessions.

I took special care not to overwork her at any point and get her sore. My emphasis was on the fine-tuned communication I had with her, so I didn't have to wear her out in order to show her at her best.

at a time, in rhythm with her front legs, as opposed to fanning them outward as I would to ask for a jog. My simulated “walking” with her would mean extend the walk.

Annie was as quick a study as ever, and caught on readily. On Wednesday we worked mostly on her walk, plus I lightly polished her other gaits and transitions. Satisfied, I felt we were ready for the class on Thursday.

AND THE WINNER IS...

It wound up being a tough one. There were over 30 entries, representing talent from all over the country, including several previous world and national champions. Could my 10-year-old broodmare-turned-showgirl measure up?

I'd brought her along gradually, nurtured her self-confidence, and in general treated her like a dance partner rather than “just a horse.”

Would it pay off?

Did it ever! She was practically perfect, smooth and flawless, gearing her gaits up and down in response to my subtle cues. She was calm and willing, and showed beautifully: ears up, a pleasant expression on her face. And...her extended walk was awesome.

She wound up winning the class by over 100 points. (And the only blue I was wearing were my jeans, under my chaps.)

Not surprisingly, Roger and I also achieved our goal of selling her. Trainer Sandy Jirkovsky spotted Annie at the show and knew she'd be perfect for Emma Gentile, eldest daughter of Dave and Wendy Gentile of Carpentersville, Illinois.

The Gentiles have since fallen in love with Annie, and the mare has responded in kind by carrying 15-year-old Emma to a circuit championship in novice Western pleasure, 18 and under. That was at the Reichert Celebration in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in August. Wendy and trainer Sandy reported that Annie did her job amazingly, and it doesn't surprise me a bit.

Selling Annie was difficult, but I'm thrilled she's found such a wonderful home. My consolation prize is having two more of her foals to look forward to—a yearling and a 2-year-old. So far, they seem to have their mom's great mind and attitude.

Which also doesn't surprise me. This mare is a broodmare deluxe, a Western pleasure machine, and now a family horse as well.

Can't ask for much more than that. ■

TEAM Horse & Rider

ROBIN GOLLEHON and her husband Roger operate Gollehon Show Horses in Versailles, Kentucky. They stand Quarter Horse and Paint stallions and raise weanlings destined for yearling longe-line, Western pleasure, and hunt-seat competition. To learn more, go to gollehon.com or YearlingHeadStart.com.