

THE LITTLE MARE THAT COULD: DOC'S PLAYMATE

Last month I shared a story about Jimmy Bush and myself in Yakima, Washington, when I chose the wrong horse to turn back on, and almost got into serious trouble. This is a different kind of story and there will be a point to all this later.

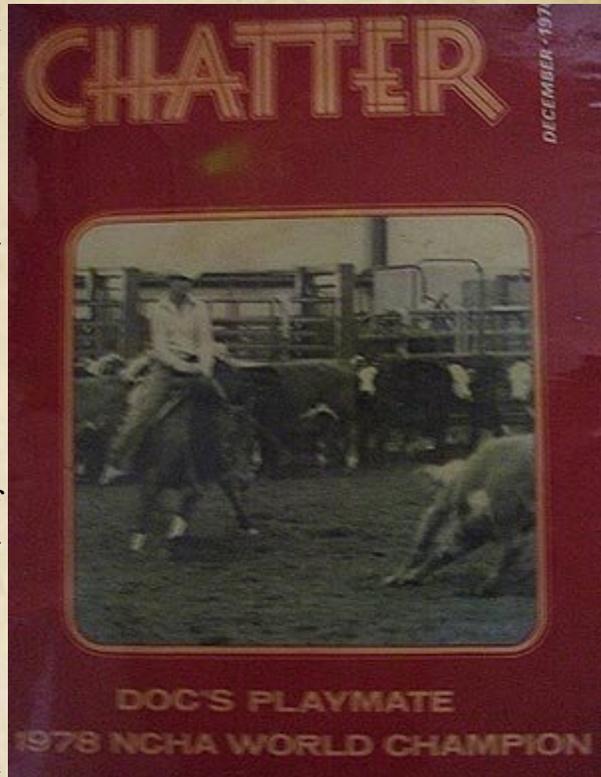


1972 in Oakdale, California I was sitting in my living room when the phone rang. It was Smokey Pritchard, a man I had known since my 1960 rodeo days. Smokey is one of the premier horsemen in the world. He knew I had been training a lot of Doc Bar futurity horses and he had one for sale he thought I'd be interested in. Smokey told me that he had a really nice filly that just turned three and she looked like a Fort Worth prospect. He wanted \$10K for her. I got pretty excited and asked what her dam was. Smokey replied, "a mare called Nancy Jo Hellno". I repeated her name and said, "what in the hell is that?" About that time, I noticed a woman who worked for me waving her arms wildly. I took the phone away from my mouth and asked what was the matter. Her name was Joan Ott, a wonderful lady. She asked if I remembered going to her place in Oakdale and helping her husband Dean with a real cowy bay mare. I did, and she said, "that was Nancy Jo Hellno!" I told Smokey I would drive up to Cottonwood, California the next day.

The following day I drove three and a half hours to Smokey's training ranch. What I found when I arrived was a bay mare that was 3 years old and had never been ridden. I was madder than a wet hen. Smokey chased her around the little round pen, making her run, stop, turn and do all those silly things, like I was supposed to be able to pick a futurity champion that way! I just wanted to leave, but something kept calling me back. I finally told Smokey to offer \$5K to her owner, and he took it.

I was now the proud owner of an unbroken 3 year old Doc Bar mare with no breeding on the bottom side, and 11 months to get her ready for the NCHA Fort Worth Futurity.

The next morning looking at my new unbroke mount, and \$5K lighter in my hip pocket, I began to question my judgment and intentions a lot. However, I couldn't have been any more mistaken. This was the smartest horse I had ever had the privilege of developing. Twelve rides later, I took her into the arena to drive cattle back into the feedlot. She was a little hesitant about going up to the cattle, as I approached them. One of the steers threw his head back to lick a fly off his back and that mare dropped to her knees and just froze there looking at him. I knew right then and there this mare was going to be something really special if I could develop her natural potential. She had a lot of stiff competition to look forward to with twelve other Doc Bar



brothers and sisters, and a relatively short period of time to get there, but she passed all of them by October. Dr. Thursten Dean had purchased her from me in July, and at that time, only one rider per horse was allowed. He bought her on the condition that he wanted to ride her himself in the non pro division. When I called Dr. Dean and told him that I wanted to show her myself in the NCHA futurity, he laughed and said, "No, a deal is a deal."

The rest is history. The name of that very special filly was Doc's Playmate . She and I went on to win and place in several aged events after the futurity, and then on to win the NCHA Open World Championship in 1978. She was inducted into the NCHA Hall of Fame in 1979. Playmate was the best and smartest horse I have ever had the privilege of owning or training.

The point of this story is, always get as much information and input as possible, use all the professional assistance and advice you can get when making decisions that directly affect your choices with horses, but in the end, don't forget to listen to your heart and follow your instincts. Often times, it's God talking to you.

Until next time, cut clean, quit clean and have fun in the middle!