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A Match Made in Ojai

A one-of-a-kind horse inspires an Ojai woman and Robert Redford.



By Alisan Peters

If ever there was a creature that embodied the Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you — it is the horse. Horse-riding enthusiast Maraya Droney knows this deep in her bones. Her experience with her horse Montana, a 25-year-old Palomino, is one she credits with taking her from deep physical despair to absolute joy in the movement of horse and rider. Droney has lived and worked in the Ojai Valley for nearly a dozen years, running Maraya Interior Design out of late architect David Bury's offices until she moved into her own site on East Ojai Avenue. Back pain has been a constant, if unwanted companion. Until she met Montana.

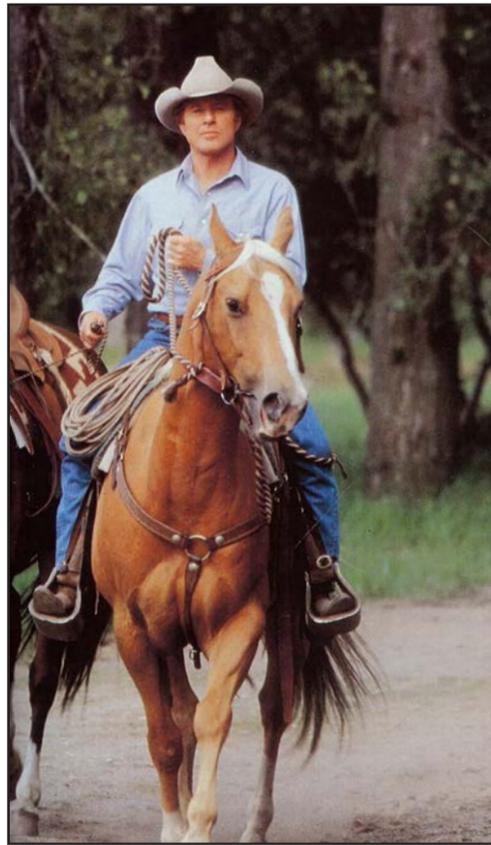
In talking about her horse, Droney points out what many a horse trainer knows: It's not about fancy boots, tooled saddles or the wind in your hair, and it's not about apples, carrots or thumbs in belt loops. Riding a horse is not about the rider at all; it's about the horse.

There's even a movie on this topic: Robert Redford's "The Horse Whisperer." In it, a tragedy unfolds when

a young girl and her horse are hit by an out-of-control logging truck. The physical recovery proves painful enough, but the emotional recovery that follows, for both girl and horse, is every bit as exacting.

Montana is a spectacular animal, named for the state in which he was born. A mere youngster when Redford came calling in 1996 (the horse then known as Nugget), Montana was the scion of two horses owned by cattle rancher Ken Monson. Kind enough to take on an interview during this year's calving season, Monson told about how Montana became a member of the "The Horse Whisperer" cast. Redford had been looking for horses at various ranches, and arriving in Absarokee, just west of Billings, he found seven possible candidates. "Redford rode each of them out about a half mile, maybe a mile," says Monson, "then he'd ride back and take out the next one. He saved Montana for last, and when he got back, he said, 'This one's the one.'" Monson sold the horse to Redford, and Montana was on his way to being in the movies.

Monson praises the horse he trained, saying that he knew even when Montana was barely two years old that he'd be a great ranch horse. That training may have



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helped him land the part, since, as Monson says, “Most horses are careful about where they put their feet. Montana would go across those camera cables, no problem. That just didn’t bother him.”

What did bother him was a period of uncertainty that entered his life once the movie hit theaters. In any movie role, there’s not just one horse — or one dog or one cat, for that matter — there are actually multiples who play the same role. Once the movie wrapped, a number of the film’s now-unemployed equine “stars” were trucked to Simi Valley to sell off to area ranchers.

Local ranch hand Jim Vize happened to

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be in the market for a good roping horse, one he could pair up with for team roping competitions as well as use for managing cattle. He heard about a certain Palomino, and seeing Montana, knew that he’d

found a horse he could work with. “Montana is a good working horse,” says Vize. “He’s intelligent and patient. I watched him work a herd in which this crippled calf kept wandering away, and Montana just knew. He literally walked that cow in, step by step, working him down to the rest of the herd.”

But during this period, a couple Vize knew saw him at a roping competition and shared that they’d love to have his horse as their own. Was it the beauty of the palomino? His star quality? No one knows for sure, but they wanted to move Montana to their Mojave Desert ranch. Since Montana had been used quite a bit

as a ranching horse, Vize saw no reason it shouldn’t work.

But it didn’t.

Vize happened across the couple some time later and asked how Montana was

doing. The couple admitted that it hadn’t gone well. What seemed to be anger about the horse dissolved into fear; they admitted they were actually afraid of the animal. They asked Vize to take Montana back. While it didn’t sound right to Vize, he drove out, and entering the stable, found Montana with his nose in the corner, his back end facing whomever had come to call. This was not the Montana Vize had come to know. “That horse,” says Vize, “had lost his trust of people. He wanted nothing to do with anyone.” Vize coaxed him into a bridle, no easy feat by then, and led him to the trailer to bring him back to the Ojai Valley.

Maraya Droney didn’t know Jim Vize, but she knew horses, having ridden as a child. Those childhood memories darkened when she hurt her back as a sixteen-year-old. “I remember when I was around 30 years old, I actually began to think I wouldn’t be able to walk soon,” Droney admits. “I had tried everything — yoga, acupuncture and even fused disks — and I knew I was looking at going back for more and more surgery.” But she loved horses and began volunteering at a

friend’s home, simply because she could walk there, to take care of their horses and keep her mind off her pain. Then her friend developed cancer, and after his death the horses went the way of the

As she learned his backstory, Droney marveled at what she saw before her, a seemingly quite happy horse. “I asked Jim: what did you do to make him so happy? He told me, ‘Maraya, it’s you! He trusts

He seemed **hot and bothered**. I like to say he has two speeds, **fast or stop**. But I thought if I could ride him, then **I could take care of him**.

china and the garden tools. Maraya was left with sadness for the loss of her friend, the loss of the animals and the constant nag of her own back.

An avid photographer, Droney took to the country, stopping to photograph her favorite members of the animal kingdom. Jim Vize came across her one day, and they struck up a friendship. She returned again and again to photograph his horses — one in particular, named Montana — who now officially owned his name as per the decision by Vize’s daughter Julia.

you, and he misses you when you’re gone. He’s happy because you’re here.”

“I talked her into coming to exercise him,” Vize says. “By then we weren’t competing anymore, and Montana was just hanging out in the pasture. Horses are very social, but the situation in the Mojave had made him spooky. He just wanted to be left alone.”

“He hadn’t been out with a rider in a while,” Maraya continues. “He seemed hot and bothered. I like to say he has two speeds, fast or stop. But I thought if

I could ride him, then I could take care of him. Three weeks in, I realized I knew nothing about horses.”

But she talked about horses. One horse in particular: Montana. In fact, she talked about him so much, her husband, Tim Droney, finally put his foot down. “Buy the darned horse, Maraya; it’s all you talk about.”

So she did.

The ensuing years of horse and rider were somewhat up and down. “He was moody,” Droney says. “He wouldn’t put his head down the way he should. If a horse wants to work, he’ll do anything for you. But Montana was standoffish and nervous. I started calling him Mr. Shenanigans.” Droney decided to board Montana at Rancho Royale with Patrice Vernand, and she hired Ojai’s local horse whisperer, Deidre Garrison, to work with the pair of them.

Vernand admits she had doubts. “You could see the tension and concern in that horse. He carried a lot of baggage with him; he was skittish and scared and wary of taking on a rider.” Vernand was aware of Maraya’s physical limitations and

worried for her, but she acknowledges that potential injury is part of the deal with horses. “Many of my clients have physical ailments, whether it’s a neck or a knee or what have you, but riding seems to be therapeutic. It’s non-concussive and requires you to focus on what you’re doing, rather than how

That horse has a big heart. They just had to take their time to figure each other out.

your body feels.” Vernand credits Maraya for her patience and willingness to wait out Montana’s healing process. “That horse has a big heart. They just had to take their time to figure each other out.”

“It took about four years,” Maraya says, “before he’d trust me. I knew he wasn’t a bad horse; he was just scared.”

“He was not a happy horse,” Garrison says. “He seemed kind of turned in on himself. But he found a partner in Maraya. She had a sense about him, and she would ask all sorts of questions. You know, there are all kinds of owners. Some want to show their horses; some want to just ride them and put them away. But Maraya is sweet and gentle and a perfectionist. She wants that relationship to work.”

Garrison, who has had horses for 45 years, set about developing the duo’s relationship, teaching Maraya how to assert herself and teaching Montana to relax with his rider. “If a human is not assertive, a horse will compensate, thinking, well, someone had better run this show,” Garrison says. “It’s a relief

to them when they don’t have to react to all that external input going on around them. You want a horse to be thinking and reacting to you. When you constantly give them something to think about, they can perform at their best. Maraya really gets that part of the relationship.”

And Maraya got something else out of it. Call it kismet or call it therapy, but riding Montana not only cured him, it cured her. “I don’t know if it’s the exercise or that Montana’s gait is so smooth and comforting or what. But I haven’t been back to see a doctor in five or six years. I have zero pain now.”

Maraya Droney has learned enough to take ownership of another horse, Choak’n Throttle, bequeathed to her by a friend who died from Lou Gehrig’s disease. At ten years of age, he’s an active Anglo-Arab, the Futurity National Champion Reiner in 2007. But Choak’s presence put Montana in a funk. “He started in with his moody behaviors again,” Maraya explained, “nose in the corner, refusing to come to me and running all over the ranch. But I said, ‘No sir. We’re not gonna do that.’” They started again with Garrison’s teachings, and Montana came around. “He’s pretty happy now, at least most of the time.” Montana is a good student, too. In addition to his talents with team roping and cows, he’s learned western pleasure riding and trail course riding, which entails obstacles. “And we ride trails every weekend,” Droney adds, “often with Jim, up Sisar Canyon or Gridley Trail or in the Rose Valley.”

“Montana was raised a cattle horse,” says Vize. “Now I’ll stand around with Tim and we watch Maraya work those cattle with Montana. I tell Tim all the time, I’m so glad your wife bought that horse.” 🐾

