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 **Foundations for the Future**

 **Who will be the stewards of the horse?**

Horses. Why are they so important to us? “If not for the horse, my way would be lost.” How many of us can relate to this phrase as an experience within one’s self or someone close to us? In the literal sense, I have been taken home in the dark along a mountain trail by a night blind horse. But, in contrast to the literal meaning, this phase reflects an age old connection between humanity and our equine partners. What is it about the horse that is so fascinating? Transitioning from the necessary beast of burden in the early 1920’s and 30’s, to the sporting fields of the wealthy spanning several decades, evolving to present day as spectacular athletes in many disciplines; as therapists to assist those with both physical and emotional challenges; as working partners on farms or ranches; as companions for solace or pleasure; and as wonders to all who wish to experience the magnificence of the horse.

Whether seen in the face of a child who lights up at the touch of a horse or witnessing the creative skills of young riders who execute free style performances, the next generation of equestrians are on their way. As a 4-H Horse Project volunteer for 16 years it has been my pleasure to participate in supporting, encouraging and guiding some very talented young people in their endeavors with horses. Although I am comfortable with all types of horses, the Fjord has a special meaning in my life along with others close to me.

Due to a fortunate set of circumstance in 1997, I acquired my first Fjord as a weanling colt. The project of naming the young fellow became the mission of my 4 year old grandson. With little hesitation “Rocco” came to be the colt’s title. Rocco grew into a gentle giant. Not so much a giant in size, but giant in heart. He enjoyed the grandkids sitting on him (several at a time) or standing on his broad back. Sylvester the cat often sat in the warmth of his heavy coat on cold winter days. After several years as a pasture pet, is was time to find Rocco a suitable mate.

The proper pedigree to complement Rocco’s own parental history was the most important requirement for considering a perfect Fjord mare. Next in importance were age, color, conformation and training. The search for a registered Fjord brood mare took me to Creston BC where I found BO Fjords Silver Beauty, a 3yr old, grey dun, with very good confirmation, green started and a true “beauty”. In the spring of 2007, Beauty came home to Paradise and Rocco. Little did I know at the time what an impact Beauty would have on a little girl named Morgan.

I do not advocate beginner riders learning to ride on a green horse but Morgan and Beauty were a match from the beginning. At seven years old Morgan had some experience with horses, but now the stage was set for a new level of experience in horsemanship. Beauty is the most kind hearted, docile, and willing to please horse a person could hope for in a 3 year old mare. Morgan and I spent a considerable amount of time working Beauty from the ground in the round pen, grooming and primping (as little girls love to do). Beauty thoroughly enjoyed every moment of attention; brushing, combing, braiding, scratching. One especially fun exercise was for Morgan to sit on Beauty (no horse gear) as Beauty followed me around the pen (walk then trot) turning or changing direction. It’s a great learning game for horse and rider. The horse almost anticipates the leader and enjoys the game as much as the rider. Giggles from the rider are a bonus but the leader may get tired and need a rest.

This type of interaction progressed for a couple of years including riding in parades where Beauty became aware of other horses and new surroundings. As with many long term endeavors the beginning foundations take as long as it takes. The following three years were an explosion of progress for both horse and rider. The 4-H horse program was a huge benefit, forcing the pair to get off the farm and ride in a group environment. The first outing in a big arena was a little intimidating, but with help from a professional instructor, Morgan and Beauty soon fit into the group. The pair went on for the next couple years to win many ribbons in County 4-H horse competitions. Adding activities such as summer horse camps along with lessons from various trainers helped Morgan and Beauty gain trust and confidence in each other.

As far as a breeding pair, Rocco and Beauty produced their first foal in May 2012. An exciting event for Morgan, who kept vigil over Beauty anticipating the birth of a foal. Evan though we kept close watch, Beauty gave birth to a healthy little filly when no one was looking. The first few weeks of that little filly’s life were filled with Morgan. As with most Fjords, Beauty is a trusting mother, allowing us to handle and fuss over her baby.

At age 14, Morgan has become an experienced horseman having ridden close to 40 horses in three states. Beauty, the 3 year Fjord mare from Canada, was the beginning. For the future of the horse world, Morgan is on the way.

When Beauty is not caring for her foals (two now) she helps with beginner riders. Beauty is a wonder to many during the 4 days of the county fair. With supervision, she is touched, petted, sat upon and sometimes ridden by children who have little chance for experiences with horses. She is a true ambassador for the Fjord horse.

For all those young riders and horse lovers in the world, the beginning steps to handling and getting to know your equine partners will be the foundation you build on for the future. Safely handling these large animals with the help of trained professionals is the first step to understanding the commitment it takes to become a true horseman. Horses will teach you humility and horses will give you confidence. But, you must first be willing to learn.

The circumstances allowing horses into a young person’s life through family connections or mentoring is a fortunate beginning for any young horseman. But, as time passes and young adults leave home or circumstances change, arranging and maintaining care for your horse can be a harsh reality. No doubt one of the biggest challenges involving horse ownership is being able to care and provide for the needs of that animal. Anyone who owns or wants to own a horse must be ready to take on this type of commitment. Do not take lightly the responsibility of caring for such a large animal. Horse professionals or mentors exhibiting proper animal husbandry can go a long way in helping young riders understand what it takes to keep horses healthy. Fortunately there are horse clubs or organizations such as 4-H and FFA who also provide excellent programs in large animal education and health care.

For my part, I want to sincerely thank Morgan and all those young riders who take seriously the time and dedication required to become a true equestrian and steward of equine care. You are the future foundation of the horse world. I can give no finer gift than to offer the touch of the horse.