

# KONA

BY SHERRY PINSON

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*To understand this story, you will have to set aside logic and practicality and prudence. You will have to forget what you know about balanced books, bottom lines, and common sense.*

*Instead you will have to believe in extravagance, long odds, serendipity, and maybe even a little magic.*

**I**n a trader's lot in the state of Washington in June 2005, a cattle truck stood with its metal door rolled up and its ramp down. The truck had been hired by a Canadian slaughterhouse and it periodically made the rounds of lots like this one, gathering up horses — not cattle — that were used up, unwanted, or simply too numerous for the local market to absorb. The deal was struck, an ordinary business deal trading money for goods, and the horses were herded toward the ramp.

A big, dark bay mare with two hind socks stood among the others, waiting her turn to load, one of many whose names no longer mattered.

Now in her mid-fifties, Paula Drake is a reasonable woman, well

educated. When decisions must be made, she is practical and thorough, careful to consider requirements and consequences. Her current job as a researcher with the Cincinnati office of the county auditor suits her well. At one time she bred and sold Akita puppies, and her sensible approach proved a boon to clients who otherwise would succumb to puppy charm first and only later realize the practicalities. She advised them to research various breeds carefully and consider how each would fit their lifestyles. She recommended they visit the breeder and meet their prospective puppy's parents before making a decision. Such a careful, considered approach to animal ownership offered the best promise of a good match, she advised.

Then, in 1980, Paula decided to buy her first horse. "I had always loved horses," she said. "I had ridden off and on for years and always wanted one of my own."

Her knowledge of horses provided a foundation for the decision, but when she met the Appaloosa named Comanche, her reasoned approach wrestled with that inexplicable pull horses have on the heart. Research? It was hard to come by; Comanche had been left behind by a boarder who skipped town, and Paula was his fifth owner in six years. A good match? She wanted a riding horse; Comanche hated a saddle.

Her heart won out. "I found myself in a place where there was no one to tell me I couldn't do it," she recalled. "So I bought Comanche for \$500."

"I rode him bareback until he learned to trust me," Paula said. "There were lots of past training issues to overcome. By trial and error I discovered he loved the trails, and he adored my four-year-

old daughter. So I put her up behind me and we raced around the cornfields of our farm for the first few months.”

Paula owned Comanche until 2002, when she sold her small farm east of Cincinnati. By then Comanche was nearly blind, and no public boarding barn would take him. Finally, she placed him with a friend of a friend who had an equally aged blind mare. Comanche died in his sleep about six months later.

Adjusting to life without her companion of twenty-two years, Paula eventually heeded friends who urged her to keep riding. She took lessons in dressage for the next two years, riding her instructor’s retired show horse. But Comanche’s death had left a hole in her life, and her heart ached for another horse of her own.

By the time she began her search in 2004, horse sellers and horse buyers had begun to connect via the Internet. Seeking another Appaloosa, Paula checked Web sites offering horses for sale. She stumbled onto *The Chronicle of the Horse*, and from threads on its bulletin board discovered the other side of buying and selling horses: trader lots and slaughterhouses. One particular incident, an accident involving a double-decker rig that overturned on an Indiana highway, ate at her tender heart. Of the fifty horses on board that September afternoon in 2004, at least twenty-one had died as a result of the accident. Where had they come from? Some had braided manes and painted hooves; who had so recently loved them and dressed them up? What became of those that survived? What was this business of selling horses to slaughterhouses?

As Paula learned more about this darker side of horse-trading, she also learned about rescue operations. And eventually she discovered the trader lot in the state of Washington, more than 2,000

miles away, where the big, dark bay mare with the two hind socks would one day line up for the cattle truck bound for Canada.

Formed in August 2004, a small group calling itself Columbia Basin Equine Rescue (CBER) had established a relationship with the owner of the lot in Washington. The owner had a contract with a Canadian slaughterhouse, but he didn't care where his profits came from. If the rescue group got money together, he would separate out the horses they bought until they could transport them to a local foster facility. He would even hold horses they were still working to redeem, to a point; if a contract truck from Canada happened to come along, only horses fully paid for by the rescue group were safe. Once boarded on a truck bound for the slaughterhouse's holding facility in Stanwood, Washington, a horse was out of reach.

CBER sought funds by posting online photos of horses they were trying to save, and a group of people connected through forums on *The Chronicle of the Horse* Web site began to pool their money. In addition to Paula, the group included several women from the Pacific Northwest area, a woman from Palo Alto, California, another from Toronto, one from Charleston, South Carolina; and a woman from Tennessee. None had met face to face.

"You would see the typical comments about the postings," said Paula. "'Oh, isn't she beautiful?' 'Does anybody know anyone who would want her?' 'His price is only \$200.' 'Oh, let's not forget about this one.' So our group started making a list of CBER horses we wanted our money to rescue."

The big, dark bay mare with the two hind socks had come in to the Washington lot with several other horses, including two older mares. The rescue group described the bay as a Thoroughbred,

fifteen to twenty years old, “gorgeous, with lovely conformation.” The report noted recent injuries, a gash from a kick and an abrasion, both suffered at the trader lot. She was nervous at being in the lot, the posting said, and she was wary of men. Because of her size, she was listed at \$800.

Her name was Kona, and she became Paula’s cause. “We’ve got to get this one out,” she told the group.

“Kona wasn’t very high on the list,” Paula recalled. “The two other mares who came in with her were about the same age, but they were higher up — I don’t know why.”

One by one, as money came in, horses higher on the list moved to the safe holding pen. Kona did not.

Finally enough money came in to rescue Kona, and the rescue worker headed to the lot. But the truck from Canada had shown up earlier than usual, on a Sunday, and the deal with the slaughterhouse buyer had already been made. Kona was already in line, ready to load.

The worker pleaded with the lot owner; she had cash in hand for this exact mare, this very one, she told him. Because of her size, he countered that she was worth more than the others. Finally, the owner agreed to let Kona leave the line, but as the rescuer led the big mare away, she watched in horror as two other horses were loaded in Kona’s place.

Shortly thereafter, in late June 2005, Kona and several others were moved to a foster home in Elma, Washington, one of several facilities that had opened to help with the growing number of rescues bought off the trader’s lot. One by one, the horses rescued with Kona were adopted. Once again, Kona was left behind.

“I had no intention of adopting Kona,” Paula said, a wry smile lighting her face as she recalled her own advice to puppy buyers. “I’d never touched her. I’d never ridden her. I’d never even seen her move. I didn’t know anything about her — no one did. But there she was, waiting and waiting. My friends said, ‘Paula! Kona’s sitting out there for a reason.’”

“There were closer lots, other horses I could buy, but by that point I was asking myself, ‘How am I going to do this? What about the logistics?’ A young girl had visited Kona and was sort of interested in her, so I decided that if she took Kona, that was it — that would be as it should be.

“But the girl walked away. I knew then that Kona was meant to be mine.”

Friends of the rescue operation found a driver who would, for a reasonable fee, add two rescues to a scheduled haul, and in September 2005, after a meandering, ten-day, cross-country trip, Kona arrived at a boarding farm east of Cincinnati and not far from Paula’s home.

Kona was already thin when she left the trader lot, and a drought that summer in the Elma area further compromised her weight. By the time she got to Paula, every rib was visible. She had traveled cross-country in a slant-load trailer that was too small for her, and over the long journey she developed two football-sized hematomas on her rump, one on each side of her tail. But as she finally stepped off the trailer, her eyes were bright with curiosity and a sense of adventure. She whirled and kicked and bucked at the end of her long line, seeming to celebrate that she’d seen the last of the slant-load. Lingering stiffness from her confinement worked itself out over the



**Kona's ribs showed when she arrived at Paula's place.**

following few days, and she rebounded quickly under Paula's care. "She was perfectly happy in her new environment from the start," Paula said.

When Kona left Washington, she had been brand-inspected as required by law. An earlier attempt to read her tattoo had produced only a guess. The markings were faded and uneven, some mere dots after so many years. Maybe the tattoo began with an "O"; that would make her twenty, born in 1986. At the brand inspection, more practiced eyes discovered an "R" before the "O." She was eighteen, foaled in 1988.

As Kona recovered, Paula doggedly worked to decipher the tattoo. "I looked at it from all angles, with a flashlight, without a flashlight, with blacklights, on digital photos. One by one most of the

numbers became clearer. What we thought was an 'O' was a zero, the first of her numbers. Eventually, I had enough to contact The Jockey Club, and after a couple of tries and with the help of a sympathetic researcher, we got a match."

Kona was Cassal Pond. She had a name, a history, and a trail.

By Cassalieria out of Treasure Pond, Cassal Pond was a homebred owned by Guy and Barbara Roberts and foaled March 30, 1988, on their Guy Bar Farm in Washington. She raced sixteen times, nine at Longacres and seven at Playfair, both Washington tracks long since closed. In her third start, a mile at Longacres on September 13, 1990, she broke her maiden by a six-length margin. At Playfair later that fall she won the Juvenile Mile-Hers Stakes and was second in the Spokane Futurity. She finished her racing career with three wins, one second, and earnings of \$33,388. Retired from racing in 1991, Cassal Pond produced six foals for Guy Roberts and Guy Bar Farm, all of them winners.

Cassal Pond also aborted a foal in 1996, and from 2001 through 2005 her breeding record shows either no report or failure to conceive.

Now eighty years old, Guy Roberts has spent his entire career breeding and racing Thoroughbreds. He is well regarded for his horsemanship and commitment to Washington racing and in 1998 was appointed to the Washington State Racing Commission, serving two years. At its peak in the 1990s, Guy Bar Farm owned more than thirty-five broodmares and stood five stallions, including Petersburg, a son of Danzig.

A father of five, many times a grandfather and great-grandfather, Guy Roberts is a family man and Guy Bar Farm is a family business. But business had to be the operative word, and culling un-

productive horses was part of it. Guy kept Cassal Pond through five barren seasons, trying repeatedly to get her in foal even though he knew that her previous failures to conceive meant she likely would never conceive again. Eventually, though, he conceded to reality and arranged to send her to the trader.

“I try really hard not to be judgmental and point fingers,” said Paula. “The bottom line is that this is Kona’s story, not the story of the trader who made two others go in her place, and not the story of a business decision to sell her to the trader.”

In fact, Paula said, she “put aside any prejudice” and wrote Guy “a letter from the heart.” The two struck up a friendly correspondence.

“I grew to understand that he held onto Kona as long as he did because she was special to him,” said Paula. “He told me he had no idea anyone would want an old broodmare.” To this day, Paula and Guy keep in touch.

Through the fall of 2005, Kona continued to recover, and Paula began riding her. “She was perfect,” Paula said. “Except for the girl who first considered adopting her, she hadn’t been ridden in fifteen years, but she was eager, willing, and thrilling to ride. I finally found a horse that fit my long legs! We had the best of times through Christmas that year and I began to make plans to show her in 2006.”

Kona was not an easy keeper. She was fit, muscling up, but still lean despite three full plates a day. In January, Paula noticed the mare had gained some weight, but it seemed to be settling across her belly. Later that belly began filling out to the sides, and the once agile mare began, as Paula describes it, “galumping around the arena like a walrus.”

Kona, the eighteen-year-old mare who couldn't conceive, was pregnant.

Sent from the only home she had ever known, stressed by the chaos of the trader lot, shuttled from pen to pen to foster care, exposed to who knows what, debilitated by drought and her long journey, with no supplemental nutrition, and older besides, still she held onto the foal.

A miracle, Paula's vet pronounced.

A victory against long odds, a bit of serendipity, maybe even magic.

With an ultrasound confirming that Kona had to have conceived before she was shipped to the trader lot, Paula called Guy Roberts.

"It was quite an interesting phone call," Paula said. "He said, 'Well, I'll be ... oh, my, oh, my.' He felt some regret, he said, but he was happy for Kona and for me. 'I'll make good,' he said, 'no problem. That's a Petersburg baby. Yep, here's her cover date. Yep, you're going to have yourself a fine baby.'"

Earlier matings of Kona and Petersburg had produced Peter's Pond, an eighteen-time winner with earnings of more than a quarter-million dollars, and Capable of Gold, a four-time winner. Counting this miracle pregnancy, Roberts had tried three other times to get another Petersburg foal from Kona. After her last cover, he'd left the job of ultrasounds to a new barn manager. Was Kona missed? Was the reading incorrect? No one knows.

Given her broodmare's belly, she had been palpated on arrival at the rescue facility. The pregnancy was missed there, too.

On April 21, 2006, Kona delivered a dark bay filly. Although registered as Dancing on Dreams, the filly is called Lucy, meaning "of first light."



**Paula proudly shows off Kona and her foal, Lucy.**

Five weeks after foaling, Kona colicked, always a risk with an older mare and especially when the foal is large, as Lucy was. At Hagyard Equine Medical Center in Lexington, Kentucky, Kona improved when her displaced colon righted itself. She was even allowed outside to hand-graze with Lucy beside her, and Paula snapped photo after photo of the two of them together.

But the colon slipped again, hepatitis set in, and Kona was lost.

Paula was devastated, and Lucy was adrift. Dr. Nathan Slovis, an internist at Hagyard, insisted that Lucy should see and smell that her mother was dead; otherwise, she would have a harder time accepting the absence of her mother and might not thrive. Even now, tears pour down Paula's face when she recalls the little filly snuffling and nosing at the mother who could not respond.

Back at the boarding stable, despite all efforts, Lucy slid into

depression. She would not drink milk from a bucket. She played with water in a bucket and knew how to drink, but she would not drink the milk she needed.

Desperate to save her miracle baby, Paula called on a friend from Last Chance Corral near Athens, Ohio, a facility that rescues nurse mare foals. Ten days later a sorrel colt about Lucy's age arrived, a "maybe Saddlebred-something cross," all legs and mischief.

"We had a 'Lucy,'" Paula said. "What else could we call him but 'Desi'?"

Desi had been handled very little and had no use for a halter. He was rowdy and rambunctious; had he been human, he'd have had a cowlick and a gap-toothed grin. At first sight of him, Lucy did the only sensible thing; she hid. But within forty-eight hours they were fast friends, and Lucy followed Desi's lead right into the milk bucket.



**Desi and Lucy are best friends.**

Today, at two, Lucy and Desi are still best friends. They face each other across the aisle at the boarding barn, and in the field they move as one. He's still a handful, "a punk," Paula said; you can almost hear him say, "Hey, Luce, c'mon! C'mon, let's play. *Luuuce ... come on!*" Lucy indulges and mothers him. Except that she has a star and no hind socks, she is her mother all over again, big of body but elegant, dark, and lean. Her trot is liquid, her movements well balanced. She stands with an innate sense of self, her intelligence obvious.

Paula's impractical, illogical, long-distance adoption of one aging mare laid the foundation for a legacy. Because she adopted Kona, Paula also rescued Lucy. Discarded as worthless, Desi proved invaluable to Lucy's survival and found a home where he is treasured. Because she still needed a riding horse and had come to appreciate older horses, Paula also adopted Bernard's Choice, a nineteen-year-old former racehorse renamed Elliott By God. At every step, new human friendships blossomed.

Kona's legacy now writes a larger story. Grieving over Kona's death and well versed in the plight of unwanted horses, Paula joined a like-minded friend, Shelly Price, to establish Speak Up for Horses in 2006. A registered nonprofit based in Kentucky, Speak Up for Horses focuses on education. The group teaches law enforcement agencies and county elected officials to recognize equine abuse and neglect, works to ensure enforcement of laws already on the books, and champions stronger animal protection legislation where needed. Speak Up for Horses also offers seminars on horse ownership, so horses get a head start with owners who know what to expect and how to choose wisely. The dream down the road includes a facility for more hands-on instruction.

“We’ve been involved in several rescues, but we’re not a rescue *per se* because we don’t have a farm,” said Paula. “The fact is, you can rescue ’til the cows come home, but simply rescuing horses in need is not enough. We must root out the *need* for rescue through education and good example.

“We are responsible to leave a legacy of compassion and respect. The lessons learned in owning and caring for horses translate to how we care for our environment and how we treat our fellow human beings.

“For whatever fateful reason, Kona chose me to care for her final foal. The hard realities will probably always be there to fight, but Lucy and I will dance on dreams together, with Kona’s sweet spirit ever lighting the way.”

<b>Race and (Stakes) Record</b>						
<b>YEAR</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>STS</b>	<b>1ST</b>	<b>2ND</b>	<b>3RD</b>	<b>EARNED</b>
1990	at 2	8	2 (0)	1 (0)	0 (0)	\$31,913
1991	at 3	8	1 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	\$1,475
<b>Lifetime</b>		<b>16</b>	<b>3 (0)</b>	<b>1 (0)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	<b>\$33,388</b>