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Trainer puts former racehorses on a new course
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Cyndy Day-Wilson hates to think of where her horse, Max, would have ended up if it wasn't for trainer Emily Ruocco.

"Probably on someone's dinner table in Europe," the Bonita resident said of the 7-year-old former racehorse she bought from Ruocco in April 2007.

Max is one of at least 20 off-the-racetrack Thoroughbreds that Ruocco, 21, has helped rescue and retrain, and then sold since starting Ruocco Equestrian Training in 2006. Some, like Max, are schooled in dressage; others have been taught to be hunters and jumpers. One is now a polo pony.

"There's nothing wrong with these horses," said Day-Wilson, who also bought her daughter's hunter-jumper, Memo, from Ruocco. "They're just on their second career."

Around 3,000 Thoroughbreds are retired from racing each year, according to the Thoroughbred Charities of America's Web site. Many of Ruocco's horses are between the ages of 5 and 8. Horses can live to be 35 years old.

"I don't think many people understand what happens to a horse when they can no longer race or breed," said Dawn Mellen, president of San Diego-based After the Finish Line, which funds nonprofit Thoroughbred rescue groups.

Ruocco, who came to the United States from Italy when she was 12, worked summers at the Del Mar Race Track while attending Point Loma High School. After a few seasons as a groomer, exercise rider and hot walker - someone who walks the horses to cool them down after a race - the Linda Vista resident noticed some of her favorite horses were missing.

"It's a very hush-hush subject on the racetrack," Ruocco said.

She discovered that the retired horses were being sent to auctions in Pomona and Chino Hills, where some would find new homes and others would not be so lucky.

"Unfortunately, for those who didn't make it, they are either let go (euthanized) or sent to the slaughterhouse," Ruocco said.

Lack of land on the coasts for pasturing, too many horses being bred and the presence of mid- and lower-range owners who lack funds to care for a horse post-career has led to skiller buyers% being able to pick up former racing horses on the cheap, said Liz Harris, executive director of Thoroughbred Charities of America. The downturn in the economy is also a factor.

"There is not enough land to rest all these horses and there aren't enough people who want these horses as pets," Harris said. "The demand does not meet the supply."

New federal regulations helped close down the last slaughterhouse in the United States in September, but that doesn't stop the export of horses to Mexico and Canada. Both countries export horse meat to various European countries and Japan, where it's a delicacy.

Determined to make a difference, Ruocco used her savings to buy her first horses at auction. Where others saw racehorses past their prime, she saw potential for horses who could be retrained to compete in other fields.

"So many people don't know what to do with them because all they are trained for is to run," Ruocco said.

Max, found at a Chino Hills auction, was among the first horses Ruocco bought. A former champion nominated for the Breeder's Cup, Max had 12 starts and eight wins before slowing down too much for his former owners to keep him on the track.

After a few months of training Max in dressage, a sport in which horses are guided by their riders through a complex series of movements, Ruocco matched him up with Day-Wilson, who was also learning the sport.



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At first, Day-Wilson said she was wary of the match.

"I thought, 'Oh, hot,'" she said. Thoroughbreds are known as a hot-blooded breed and have a reputation for being spirited and hard to handle.

But Day-Wilson, an attorney who practices environmental and equine law, soon fell in love with the 17-hand horse. "My husband calls him the other man in my life."

As for temperament, "My Paints are much hotter horses than the Thoroughbreds," said Day-Wilson, who plans to show with Max later this year. "But these guys can run."

Ruocco said the concept of Thoroughbreds as high strung and energetic is far from her experience.

"I've found the opposite," she said. "They're quite lazy when they get off the racetrack."

Retraining the horses takes between six months and a year. First, the horses are given a two-week break and put on a special diet to sleek out their coats and add on weight.

Then, for the first 60 days of training, horses are worked with a surcingle, a strap that fastens around a horse's girth, to strengthen their back end. Ruocco also does ground training using a round pen and a longe line, a long leash that allows the horse to learn commands while going in circles.

Many off-the-racetrack horses don't know how to work to the right, Ruocco said, because races are run counterclockwise.

Once the horse has learned some of the basics, Ruocco works on bending, a type of stretching, and leg yield, a classical riding move that involves stepping forward and to the side. The complexity of the training goes on from there.

Sometimes she takes the animals up and down the trails in Bonita to work their hindquarters and their chests.

"It's like going to the gym," she said.

Ruocco works hard to match her horses with a new owner. After retraining them, she sells them for \$5,000 to \$25,000.

"Emily won't sell you the horse unless she really likes you," Day-Wilson said. "She wants to find them a home for life."

At the moment, Ruocco has three horses in training at the Mt. Miguel Equestrian Center in Bonita, one stabled at friend Candice Mancino's ranch in Valley Center and two more at another stable. Not all of them came from auction, some were passed on by racing trainers.

"Horses are versatile," Mellen said, noting that most humans have five careers in their lifetimes. "If we just give them the opportunity, they can thrive. It's like giving them a second chance to show what they can do off the racetrack."

Ruocco, Day-Wilson and Mellen all said that they are not against the art of racing. In fact, Day-Wilson plans to attend the Kentucky Derby this year.

"The only negative thing about the racetrack is that the owners who own horses don't take responsibility after they're done racing," said Ruocco, who has also worked at Santa Anita.

Ruocco has encountered some prejudice against her former racetrack Thoroughbreds in the hunter-jumper and dressage worlds. She tells of one trainer who said she couldn't possibly sell a retrained Thoroughbred to her upscale clients, likening it to trying to sell a department store brand to someone who only buys designer labels.

"A horse is a horse," said Ruocco, who also gives riding lessons and trains horses other than the ones she rescues. "If they do the job, then why does the breed matter."

Harris has also noted a prejudice against the breed in some worlds.

"It's a matter of education," she said, "educating the public as to what they're good for. They're not just good for running."

Ruocco would love to someday have her own facility and perhaps go nonprofit. But for now, helping the horses is its own reward.

"I love what I do and I don't plan on stopping anytime soon," Ruocco said.

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