

# WANTED: **One** *Dream* **Horse**

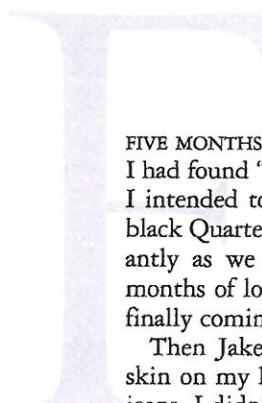


LARRY JOHNSON



**How do you find Mr. Right after a lifetime of wanting a horse? It took a lot of patience and good advice, but the result was well worth it.**

**By Kathy A. Johnson**



FIVE MONTHS INTO THE SEARCH FOR MY DREAM HORSE, I HOPED I had found “the one.” If all went well on this second test ride, I intended to make an offer for “Jake” (not his real name), a black Quarter Horse gelding. Jake’s owner and I chatted pleasantly as we tacked up, and I felt excitement rising. After months of looking, was my lifelong dream of owning a horse finally coming true? I began to think so.

Then Jake bit me. Hard enough to bruise and break the skin on my hip beneath my layers of T-shirt, sweatshirt and jeans. I didn’t make that offer.

My path to horse ownership was a long, winding one. Like many little girls, I grew up dreaming of owning my own horse. I collected Breyer models, read horse stories and doodled horses all over my school notebooks. However, I grew up in Southern California, where horses were an expensive rarity and I had little actual contact with my dream animal. I had to make do with the occasional trail ride on vacation or trips to watch harness racing when I visited my dad.

As I grew up, I reluctantly put my horse dreams away for the more practical pursuits of college, getting a job and getting married. It wasn’t until my husband and I faced a major life decision that my dream reawakened. When we were ready to start a family, we realized our current jobs wouldn’t allow us the flexibility we wanted. We began looking into options for a cheaper place to live. One possibility: moving across the country to Florida to open our own business, with the help of my husband’s parents.

I didn’t want to move. The idea of packing up all our belongings to move cross-country, leaving everything I’d ever known, frightened me. It was at that moment that a fateful promise was made: I told my husband if I moved to Florida, I wanted to be able to have a horse one day. He agreed. At the time, neither one of us truly thought it would be possible, but it helped me make the break with my home state, family and friends.

Once we moved, we were consumed with starting our business, as well as starting our family, and my horse dream was forgotten once more. It wasn’t until our son started elementary school and my best friend reminded me of that long-ago promise that I began to think it was finally possible.

I started reading books like “Horses for Dummies” and taking English riding lessons at a barn near my home. I quickly learned I didn’t know enough about horses to own my own, despite my love for them. I had a lot to learn and would be better off taking lessons on the school horses until I had more knowledge.



The author and her true equine love, Heza Eye Catcher



It wasn't until I was about to turn 40 (midlife crisis, anyone?) that I decided I was ready to stop dating school horses and settle down with my true (horse) love. My trainer and friend, Gayle, advised me to concentrate my search on American Quarter Horses or Quarter Horse crosses. She based this on my personality, the way I rode and my affinity for "Pal," my favorite school horse. I felt comfortable and safe with Pal in ways I didn't with the other school horses I rode, who were mostly Thoroughbreds.

As I did a little breed research, I fell in love with the Quarter Horse's versatility, sound mind and willing attitude. Gayle also encouraged me to try lots of different horses before choosing. Finding a horse can be like falling in love, she said. You just know when it's right.

I let it be known I was looking, and friends tried to fix me up. The first horse I looked at, a lovely bay, was the right age and size for me, but he hadn't been ridden English and, in fact, had been used for barrel racing. Sweet and friendly on the ground, he was too hot under saddle for me, something Gayle confirmed when she came with me to look at him.

That was just the beginning as I moved from fix-ups to personal ads and the Internet. There was the mare so stubborn I couldn't get her to walk in out of the rain. The gorgeous Appendix gelding who reared and bucked while being longed. There was the gelding the owners couldn't catch in the paddock, and the Quarter-Paint cross we wanted to buy simply to remove him from the broken-beer-bottle-festooned field in which he lived.

After five months, I asked myself, "Why are all the good ones taken?"

My luck was about to change. The next horse I saw after Jake was "Tank." He was out of my price range and a bit plain in his Internet photo, but he sounded like a good prospect ("He is quiet but not lazy and is always willing to please," according to the ad). The additional photos his owner emailed me showed him to be prettier than I first thought — living up to his registered name, Heza Eye Catcher (Sig Hansen-Couldnt Be Better by Go Dick Go).

He was located only about 30 minutes from my home. When I arrived, he was waiting quietly in the cross ties, curiosity in his soft brown eyes. I tacked him up and enjoyed a good initial ride, but I tried not to get my hopes up. My second ride was not quite so good, and Gayle was concerned that Tank's sensitivity might be a challenge for me. But it was already too late. Something had happened that hadn't happened before. I had fallen in love.

Despite any misgivings, I wanted him, and I didn't care what difficulties we might face. One rainy afternoon, while I hung out in his stall chatting with his owner, I made my move. Tank would be mine.

After searching for five months, test riding 12 horses and calling on at least 10 more ads, I'd found my Mr. Right.

I joined AQHA when I bought Tank and signed up for the Horseback Riding Program. I've logged more than 795 hours in the saddle and spent countless more grooming, playing natural horsemanship games with him and just hanging out. We've ridden trails, joined in hunter paces, been swimming in a lake and gone riding on the beach. At 22, Tank is still fit and healthy. I'm learning to jump, and my next major goal is to ride him bridleless.

For fun, I used my AQHA free records search to learn more about Tank's lineage. People don't always realize he's a Quarter Horse, and it turned out that he has a lot of

Thoroughbred in his background. (In fact, he has Man o' War way, way back on his sire's side). I also discovered he has American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame racehorse Jet Deck on his sire's side as well. According to his previous owner, Tank was bred to be a racing Quarter Horse, but didn't like it or do well at it, and my records search revealed that he made three starts with no wins, places or shows, and his earnings equaled a whopping \$51.

I've now had Tank for 13 years, and he has proven to be everything I wanted and more. Our relationship is so much deeper than I dreamed possible back when I was cantering model horses through my living room as a child. Yes, we've had a few problems and adjustments, but when does the path of true love ever run entirely smoothly?

Now, when I go to take him out of his paddock to groom, ride or just hang out, he greets me with a whinny and waits for me at the gate. It might have taken me a while, but I couldn't be happier with my American Quarter Horse, and I'll never regret the decision to become a horse owner. 🐾

*Freelance writer Kathy A. Johnson and her true love, Tank, live in Central Florida.*

**"Tank" and I enjoy playing natural horsemanship games, learning to jump and taking the occasional trail ride.**

