

POLO

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Polo fun-d

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Mutt's Big Race

Whether you call him Mutt, Dandy or Prince Hellstrom, he is 'muy fuerte'



This is the story of Mutt's Big Race. Well, actually, his name isn't Mutt. We started calling him Mutt because he looked like a Mutt, although he was also well-named as Dandy, as he had been very much the Dandy of a high-goal polo string. His real name is Prince Hellstrom, per his Jockey Club papers. His breeders had high hopes for him, as well they might, with many of the world's greatest racehorses in his pedigree. Also, it wasn't actually his big race. Those came nine years ago, when he raced eight times as a 3-year-old, with one third-place finish. In all his races, he contended, then faded at the end, the ideal prescription for a polo horse—quick starts, repeatedly, over seven minutes. And he definitely had that.

Podger el Effendi, who brought him into polo, had intended to put a handle on him and sell him, but he was so quick that he could often score a goal or two right away and so establish the tone of the game. So Podger kept him, and then later he came to us, for his polo days were more or less over. He was through the bridle, or fried, or however else you describe a horse for whom the rigor of rapid, full acceleration becomes a habit, and thus a liability. So Mutt became one of our family hay-burners. The only problem: Despite his reputation and his dashing good looks, he was all but unrideable. How could we get any benefit from all this expense?

Not that Mutt isn't fun—far from it. He has an ability to untie any lead rope he's tied with. Maybe not funny for a human, but for a horse, he's a laugh-riot. And, hanging out with such a distinguished animal is a privilege. It's the nature of the human-horse relationship to want to mount up and ride. But could we do this with Mutt without taking our lives into our hands? The only time we've seen him being ridden, he was sprinting a prospective buyer off the field. Were we next? Which leads to the site of Mutt's Big Race.

I'm speaking of Rancho Polo, an equestrian facility in the desert at Indio, California, and especially of its racetrack, with its white rails, expansive infield and hedge boundaries, which require only a slight effort of the imagination to turn into the backstretch of Belmont Park on Triple Crown Saturday. In addition to its racetrack, the polo field, the jumps and the outside trail, there's also the round-pen, which makes it possible to test the join-up/horse whisperer theories so much in favor today, and at least put Mutt through his paces without actually having to be on his back.

So it was on a bright summer afternoon in the desert that Mutt's Big Race was run. As with so many miracles, there was no way of planning for it, or even expecting it. Mutt was in good form, to be sure, but probably intended only to go over to the round-pen with his stablemate, a tall, gray mare, for a bracing jog before going back to a quick shower and graze.

And it's here that I have to insert myself into the story, as a horse tyro of the first water. For without the absurd blunder which I'm about to confess, Mutt's Big Race would never have been run, racing history would

not have been made, and we'd be without a story. But, alas, when we got to the round pen, located just exactly where the starting gate would be for a six-furlong race, it occurred to me to start with the mare and not, as I usually do, have both horses with me, one running and one held by halter in the center, in the round pen. In order to do this, I had to tie the gelding to something.

But before finding some fatal object to tie him to, we must have the equally fatal means with which to tie him, which without, like the track and also the round pen, making Mutt's Big Race possible, at least kept it from being a tragedy. Here we note the heretofore unknown intervention of Bear, an Australian shepherd who sometime earlier had half-chewed through a green nylon lunge-line I use for a lead rope. For when it occurred to me to tie the gelding via this half-chewed-through lunge line to a white cavaletti, the horses were all in the gate, so to speak, and the race was about to begin.

No sooner had I tied Mutt and stepped into the round pen, leading the mare, than I heard the clank of the long pole on the ground. I stepped back out of the round pen with the mare just in time to see the start of the race that will live in storied legend as long as horses race and people remember. For Mutt was in full stride, streaking down the backstretch, towing the white pole which must have reminded him of his ancient enemies, the cougar, the panther, the jaguar. This misapprehension on Mutt's part was entirely understandable under the circumstances because the half-chewed-through lunge line connected him to his pursuer. Now Mutt, the jokester, the nonchalant, was faced with the core-question of his being, not to be solved with his easy charm, namely: Am I really fast, can I really run, am I, in short, a pulse-racing, heart-pounding racehorse, or am I just an over-



bred candidate for free meals and, when that runs out, the big pasture in the sky?

After a lifetime of these nagging doubts, Mutt took this occasion of the mysterious pursuer to prove them all wrong, and there in that surreal, almost comical heat, rising in waves and ever-so-slightly distorting the sky, the trees, the white boundary of the track, and the little bay gelding putting in the race of his life, was the mirage of racing itself, of absolutely unrestrained, all-out effort and success. No horse ever ran so fast, and no horse was ever luckier, nor was I, for right at the head of the clubhouse turn, at the culmination of an effort brought forth only by Mutt's ancient enemy, and available from no Eddie Arcaro, nor Earl Sande, nor even the great Isaac Murphy, the half-chewed-through lunge line tore all the way through, dropping the long white pole in the track and releasing Mutt from his greatest test. He was still mighty keyed up when he arrived back at his pen, as befits such an accomplishment, and it took some doing to catch him, even in his paddock, and remove any further hazard from his half of the lunge line.

Like Tiger Woods' caddie, who's seen more great shots than anyone who's ever lived, I've seen the greatest race in the history of horses. There was at least one other witness to racing legend. A groom from another barn, schooling a horse on another lunge line, turned to me as I led the mare past to, I was sure, pick up the pieces from my incredible blunder, and said, deadpan, "Es muy fuerte, no?" I could only answer, "Si."

Van Smith has been playing green horse chukkers in Indio, California, for 10 years.




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