



# Great Rides

*Today, Stacy Westfall's freestyle reining performances have had more than a million views on YouTube. Her great ride at the 2006 All American Quarter Horse Congress started it all.*

**By Honi Roberts**

THE ALL AMERICAN QUARTER HORSE CONGRESS IS THE WORLD'S largest single-breed horse show, and every year the freestyle reining championship is a sold-out favorite. The fans in the stands are savvy and appreciative, and their expectations are usually rewarded. On rare occasion, their highest expectations are exceeded. Such was the case in 2006. Between the emotional introduction and the thunderous applause as they took their final bows, Stacy Westfall and her American Quarter Horse mare turned in a reining performance that no one would ever forget.

"It's neat when something becomes bigger than just you," said Stacy modestly.

Today, three years after her most famous ride, she still receives e-mails from fans around the world.

"The ride means different things to different people, but mostly it's about possibility. It's about what is possible with a horse and, in a larger sense, what is possible in life."

For many, Stacy's freestyle reining performance – without bridle or saddle – erased the usual boundaries that exist between horse and rider, and epitomized the human-horse bond that so many aspire to. From little girls in Australia to comedienne Ellen DeGeneres, people told Stacy they'd been moved to tears by the ride. Although in hindsight, her performance was marketing brilliance for the talented trainer. At the time, her goal was just about achieving a personal best.

Stacy grew up in Maine and was 6 years old when her parents brought home a spunky pony named "Misty." At 13, Stacy's dad rewarded her good grades with her first horse, "Bay." The youngster and her mother, Sherri, rode daily, and whenever Bay didn't respond the way Stacy wanted, Sherri always asked, "Why did your horse do that?"

"Instead of giving me the answers, she made me think and get into my horse's head," Stacy recalled. "Later, in college I learned how to make things happen, but with Mom, I learned to treat every horse as an individual, and ask why things happened. She made me a thinking rider."

Stacy's close ties to the Quarter Horse Congress are many. It was there, in 1994, that she met a gifted young reining trainer named Jesse Westfall. Three years later, they married and opened their Mount Gilead, Ohio, training facility. Today, the couple's three young sons, ages 7, 9 and 11, are growing up with, as Stacy said, "their lives saturated with horses." After his birth, the youngest went from the hospital to the Quarter Horse Congress before he went home.

"Jesse won a class, and we all wanted to be in the win shot," Stacy said with a little chuckle.

In 2003, Stacy climbed aboard the Paddys Irish Whiskey daughter Can Can Lena and wowed audiences at the NRHA Futurity freestyle competition with a bridleless performance to Johnny Cash's rendition of "Ghost Riders in the Sky," and took home the champion's trophy. How could she possibly top that? The answer was already in her barn.

While in college, Stacy trained a dun Mr Gun Smoke-bred mare, Boot Scootin Dolly. In 2003, clients sent a black Boot Scootin Dolly daughter to Stacy to start. Sired by the NRHA Futurity champion Whizard Jac, the pretty 2-year-old was named Whizards Baby Doll, but everyone at the barn called her "Roxy."

In 2004, Jesse took Roxy's reins to win the Congress Reining Open Futurity limited reserve championship for her new owner, Greg Gessner. Then Stacy was ready to try freestyle with the mare.



TONYA RAUTLIF-GARRISON

“When I started her, Roxy was very ‘feely,’ which made her more challenging at the beginning,” she said. “But later, it was an asset. Over time, we’ve developed a relationship where she has tremendous trust in me; we’re in tune, and she’s always there for me when I need her.

“Mentally, she could take the training,” Stacy added. “We have a language between us, where communication is easy with – or without – a bridle or saddle. Physically, Roxy is an elegant, smooth-moving horse, which makes it easier for me to stay on!”

In 2005, Stacy climbed into the saddle and rode Roxy bridleless to the Congress freestyle championship. They entered seven competitions that year and won them all. But as good as they were, they were just getting warmed up.

In 2006, Stacy decided to expand her goals with Roxy and started to experiment, riding sans bridle or saddle.

“Growing up, I rode bareback lots,” she said. “So initially I rode Roxy bareback with a bridle, to help figure out my balance. Oddly enough, in practice I never came off of her – not to say that I didn’t end up on her neck a few times!

“It took lots of practice,” she admitted. “From the time I started her to when I could ride bridleless, there were probably 800 hours of training, then another year before I was confident without a saddle. It wasn’t just a happy accident!”

Her greatest aid was her husband.

“He’s my eyes on the ground,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “He’d watch me practice, and when he said our stop would score a 0, but we could do a plus-1 if we were faster, he was right – he’s an NRHA judge! But I admit, the first time I practiced without a saddle and bridle in a show warm-up pen, people joked that he must’ve taken out a big life insurance policy on me.”

Stacy chose her music, Tim McGraw’s version of “Live Like You Were Dying,” because riding bareback and bridleless seemed to describe the sentiments of the song. Stacy and Roxy debuted their performance at the Tulsa Reining Classic and won. Everyone in the family was on Cloud Nine, looking forward to Congress. Then, with 24 days to go, Stacy’s father suffered a sudden, massive stroke and died.

With that shock, McGraw’s song took on special meaning, and Stacy’s reining performance became a heartfelt tribute to her dad.

“I dedicated our ride to him,” she remembered. “It was a little risky, because Roxy could always stumble, or I could lose my balance and fall. But mostly, I wanted to nail it. I handed my introduction to the announcer right before the class and made a point of ignoring him as he read it, because it was all so emotional. I learned later that he choked up and hardly got through it.”



Stacy Westfall and Whizards Baby Doll

Then it was show time.

Spins, fast circles and slow, lead changes, rollbacks, sliding stops. The young woman with a ponytail and her beautiful black mare didn’t miss a beat in four minutes of sheer talent and barely concealed emotion. As Roxy bowed for the audience, Stacy, who goes into “a zone” for a ride, slowly realized that many in the audience had tears streaming down their faces.

Stacy and Roxy’s score – 239 – was the highest ever awarded in freestyle reining at the Congress.

Life for the Westfalls has never been quite the same. Three years later, Stacy still hears from young girls who look to her as a role model and from women facing challenges who say that her example gives them strength and hope. Stacy and Roxy have made TV appearances, and starred at events from Nova Scotia to California. In response to her most frequently asked question (“How did you do that?”), Stacy now sells a video, “Bridleless Reining: How Does She Do That?”

Roxy, 8, came out of semiretirement last summer for a trip to Kentucky and her debut as a limited edition Breyer Horse model. The black beauty also has three foals out of recipient mares.

“It has been an amazing experience,” Stacy confessed. “What I always hope to convey is that developing a relationship with your horse is what’s important. Roxy and I have the same connection with – or without – a saddle and bridle. Your goal doesn’t have to include riding bridleless to attain that special relationship.”

Everyone who saw her 2006 Congress ride would agree that it was pretty darn special. 🐾

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