

SPANISH HORSE: A LOVE STORY

"He Is the Great Heart of the Spanish Horse"

by Pat Haight, Ph.D
with photos by Pamela Reed

This is a story of the great love of my life, my Peruvian Paso horse, Conquistador (Rayo de Olimpico CDEA), and, more important, of his great triumph.

The first time I laid eyes on him, I thought I had never seen such misery and suffering. He was filthy, standing in a dirt corral in the high desert outside of St. John's, Arizona. His gaze never left two small babies, equally filthy, in a dusty corral across from his.

When I looked more closely at him, I saw that every rib stood out, his hipbones protruded, a bump on his nose signaled a break at some point, and most horrible of all, his left eye had been ravaged and had been knocked deep into the socket. Then there were the hooves that curled up like something from Arabian nights, so curled, that he limped to keep his balance. The remnants of what had been a mane and tail were broken off from trying to secure some measure of comfort for what must have been unbearable itching on his dehydrated, emaciated and filthy skin

As I walked closer, I thought this must be the most pitiful creature I have ever seen. I am not sure I can even stand to look at him. And then I looked into his face and into his soul and I was stunned at the strength that came from him. As a psychologist who had worked with suffering and courage in my life I thought I had seen it all but, I had never seen anywhere, such absolute resolve to survive, such absolute lack of self-pity, and such an absolute understanding of one's innate value.

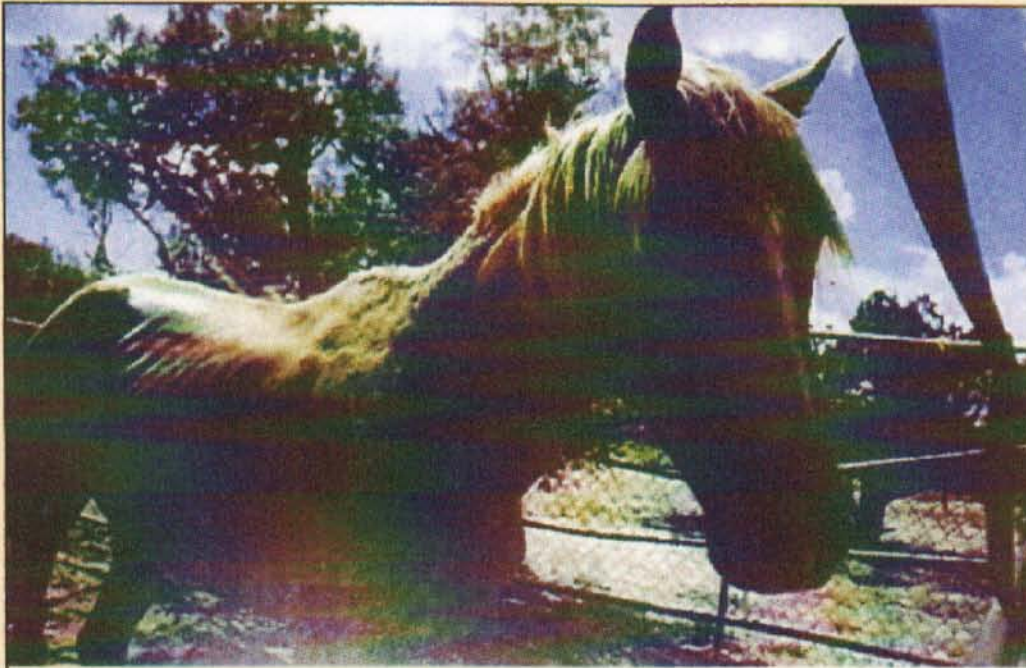
I had never felt such strength. The strength made him magnificent even in that filth and debasement. I knew that this horse was extraordinary, that he had come from nobility, and that he was nobility. I whispered under my breath to him. "Hang on, I am going to get you out of here no matter what it takes—I am going to get you out of here." He looked back at me and,



with his heart, replied, "I trust you. I will stay alive, and I will make sure the babies stay alive too."

Thus began the love story of my life and what I believe is the love story of a lifetime between Conquistador (Rayo de Olimpico CDEA), the most magnificent being I have ever known and my heart.

I came to learn that this horse was a Peruvian Paso, a descendant of horses brought to the Americas



This photo of Conquistador was taken in August, 2001, on the day that Dr. Pat Haight, Bill Haight and Officer Butch Gunnels rescued him from a filthy corral in the desert outside St. Johns, AZ. He was lame from feet that were curled up, blind in one eye, his nose had been broken and he was almost dead from starvation and dehydration. Officer Gunnels kept Conquistador with him at his farm for several weeks before he could be transported because he was too weak to stand in the trailer long enough to make the trip to Phoenix.

breed. Conquistador's father was National Champion Colt, Olimpico de Oro, and his great grandfathers were Sol de Oro (V) and El Cid, both great champions and legendary horses from Peru.

Conquistador was nobility. In fact, his birth was so anticipated that his then family recorded the birth on videotape. For the first two years of his life, Conquistador roamed his Colorado ranch happily with his Peruvian family. I believe his sense of self and fierce independence were created in those idyllic days. To this day, Conquistador has the soul of a wild horse.

centuries ago by the Spanish Conquistadors but it was not his history that captured me, it was his soul, a soul that reflected generations of ancestors with what the Peruvians call "brio" or so great a heart and presence that it is like a light. I said to my husband that day, this is the most extraordinary being I have ever met, he is dignity and strength personified and I did not sleep another night until, two weeks later, he was safe.

Even Conquistador's story rings of stories like those legendary tales of mythological Greek gods. As a colt he was the pampered son of a champion grandfather, Granados de Musante, who had come from the fabled Lima hacienda of Senior Jose Musante, one of Peru's renowned founders of the modern Peruvian



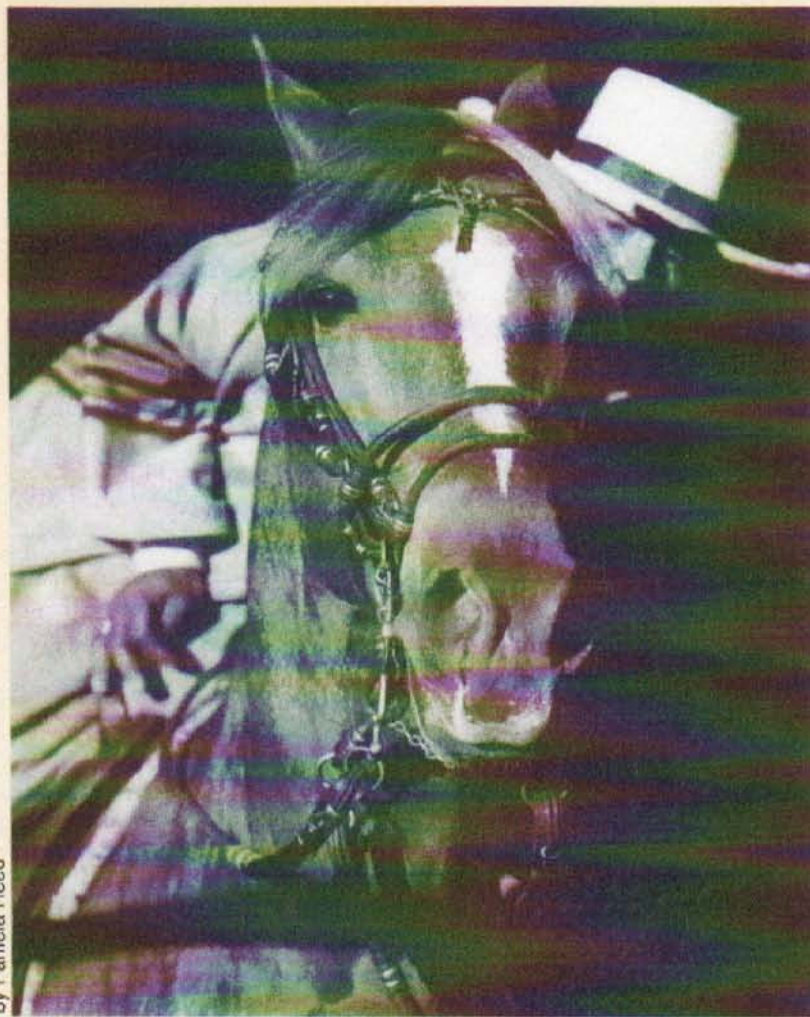
Ten year old Conquistador today with trainer Luis Trujillo

by Pamela Reed

Like all legends, his exploits began early. When a Colorado storm frightened the 18 or so mares on his ranch one evening, they broke down their corrals and, in their terror, bolted across the countryside. The owner of the ranch, too sick to stop them, watched helplessly and incredulously from her porch as the young stallion leaped over his enclosure, chased and caught up with the mares, and successfully herded them back to their corrals making sure that each mare was in her right place. Then the young stallion nudged each gate shut and leaped back into his own home. A scar on Conquistador's leg is testimony to the truth of the story as it was recounted to me by the first person who recognized the great gifts of this horse, the woman who had bred him. The scar was sustained as Conquistador leapt back into his own enclosure.

Life was idyllic in Colorado and it was a perfect place to nurture a soul that had fierce independence, extraordinary courage, intelligence and loyalty and radiating above it all, a joyous heart and love of life. But, at two years old, because of illness in the family, Conquistador was sold from his happy life to a couple in Arizona who just had to have him and who promised that Conquistador would have a wonderful life in his new Arizona home. His former "mom" remembered ruefully the day she put him on the trailer to go to his "wonderful" new life in Arizona.

Nothing was further from the truth in August 2001, when Rayo de Olimpico (Conquistador) came to my attention for the first time. I was working for the international animal organization, In Defense of Animals (IDA). IDA had a reputation for



by Pamela Reed

A complete recovery thanks to many people and the patient, love of trainer Luis Trujillo

being able to get things done and solve unsolvable problems to help animals.

I was contacted by desperate community members in the White Mountains and by horse rescue groups across the country who were looking for a miracle to help a group of horses, severely underweight and neglected, who were being kept in Eastern Arizona. The degree of neglect was so severe that one poor horse already had died. His unattended body lay against a fence. The authorities surmised he had died of starvation and dehydration. The remaining horses were so starved that they fought each other for food and water when the authorities on a

visit made the custodians provide just their most basic needs.

The first time I saw Conquistador he was pictured with the caption, "Hanging on for Life" beneath his photograph. I was a reporter for the newspaper. Baeza, a lifelong horsewoman, had been captured by the desperate situation for these horses and the young chestnut stallion's dignified and tenacious will in the face of starvation and death.

I called my boss at In Defense of Animals, Dr. Elliot Katz, and described the horrible picture and the deplorable conditions. I took his heart and he sent money for

to try and rescue the horses. Others who saw their pictures matched IDA's donation. With cash from IDA and compassionate community members in my purse; armed with nothing but hope; the picture of that remarkable young stallion on the front page of the White Mountain Independent in our memory; with resolve to make this work, my husband Bill and I set out to buy the horses out of hostage and to save them.



Sunrise was only four months old when she was rescued along with Conquistador and a black filley named Midnight. Four years later she is a gorgeous mare. She is shown here with Luis Malca in regional competition.

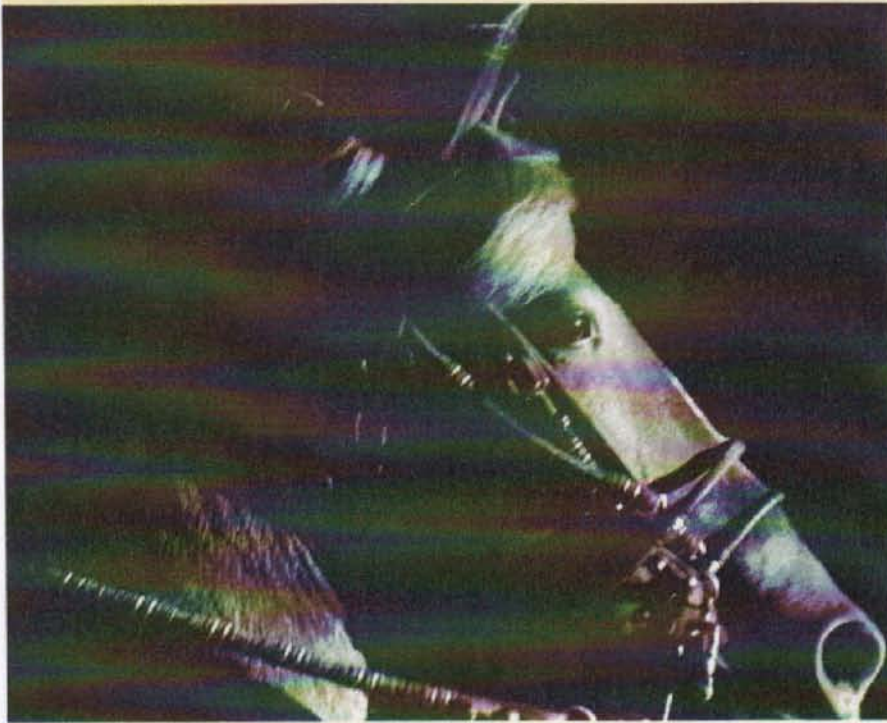
appalling. One small broken down trailer sat on the edge of a property with no water. Several makeshift corrals held horses. Thin dogs ran everywhere. A broken down water truck signaled the critical need to help these animals.

We left our safe truck and Bill walked up to the screen door of the trailer, behind which lived the keeper of the horses. These were people who had escorted sheriff's deputies and humane society members off the property with guns. I stood behind Bill not nearly as brave as my 6 foot 4 inch husband. He looked at me questioningly. "If one of us is shot, someone has to be around to take care of our animals," I said nervously.

Bill shrugged, laughed, and knocked on the door. A small, thin, ill-looking man opened the door and came out. "What do you want?" he asked suspiciously. Armed with my best and sweetest voice and an extra coat of mascara, I said, I am Dr. Pat Haight and I hear you have some Peruvian horses for sale. The man looked even more suspicious and said, "How do you know?" "Think quick," I said to myself, "it is now or never." I innocently replied, "Some friends saw a story in some newspaper."

"Where are you from?" he growled. I batted my mascara-laden eyes, opened my purse, flashed the cash and replied, "I am a psychologist from Phoenix and some of my friends and I want to buy some horses."

The man's demeanor physically relaxed and he said, "Well, I can show you around but any sale has to be approved by my wife. You know the stories about these horses



Conquistador in traditional Peruvian tack.

We arrived in the middle of the high desert between Snowflake and St. Johns, real militia country, late on a July afternoon in 2001. Our guides were arranged by a St. John's police officer, Corporal Butch Gunnells, who had tried to help the horses too. They were a most unusual group, a brave grandmother

and her young grandson and a Snowflake horsewoman, Rose Lang, who had contacted everyone from the Governor on down to help these horses. We set out to find the horses and drove so far into the desert that no one could find the place without a guide.

The first sight of the place was

are really exaggerated and we are doing everything the officials tell us to do. You can see the hay."

I innocently replied, "They all look very good to me."

We began our tour until I found my goal, the filthy starved chestnut stallion with the ravaged eye. In my entire life I have never experienced such relief as I felt at that moment. "Thank you, God, he is alive." My heart pounded as we negotiated for what seemed like an eternity, the horse never leaving my side. Ultimately, the man agreed to ask his wife to sell the extraordinary chestnut stallion with one eye and the two babies he watched over, a four month-old black filly and a four month old palomino filly who was so thin, officials had photographed her along with other horses of particular concern, including, Conquistador.

After a two-week wait we were notified that we could pick up the stallion and the babies. I called Butch Gunnels for help. He had the trailer loaded and the horses ready to leave by the time we arrived. It was Butch who gave the young stallion his new name, Conquistador.

Butch, a quintessential cowboy and horseman, reflected quietly as he watched the starved and emaciated stallion eat his first full meal in months, "I know that this is a great horse, a magnificent Peruvian, and he has to have a name as great as his heart and his courage. Let's call him Conquistador." And so, Conquistador, it was. With time and patience, we rescued seven of the horses; found loving homes for four; found Liz Potof, who had Peruvians to help us care for Conquistador and the babies during their recovery period; and found a

young and compassionate veterinarian, Dr. Gerry Longworth, to help with their recovery and to fearlessly go to officials to advocate for the care of the horses remaining.

And...we learned our precious Conquistador was Rayo De Olimpico, CDEA, everything we knew he would be, the son, grandson, and great grandson of champions who recovered, with the help of an extraordinary trainer and horseman, Luis Trujillo, a graduate of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Spain and the famed Spanish Riding School of Vienna. Luis understood Spanish horses, the effects of the terrible abuse our horse had survived and the issues that came from it. Ultimately, Luis won Conquistador's trust with his patience and quiet manner.

Conquistador recovered fully in body and in spirit and his gift to all of us was to win class after class in Arizona shows, including performance, 100% gaited, luxury gelding, and best gaited of all breeds. In fact, Rayo de Olimpico danced into his first show in December 2003, with his friend Luis riding and was named Reserve Champion in the Peruvian Paso 100% gaited class for the Desert Show Horse Assn.'s December Merry Go Round Horse Show.

People cried, they clapped, they stood and cheered, they hugged each other as the Judge announced, "This horse was rescued from almost certain death and has come back to be our Reserve Champion. He exemplifies in every way the great heart of the Spanish horse." For that wonderful moment, Conquistador brought us all together.

Conquistador continues to bring people together, to garner blue ribbons and the respect and love of

all who meet him as they watch him fearlessly enter the show arena time after time; attend events to advocate for neglected, abused, and homeless horses; appear on television for his fellow equines or advocate for the IDA program founded after his rescue, a program that has taken in and rehabilitated more than 200 horses since August 2001, and a program that rightfully bears his name, The IDA Conquistador Equine Rescue Program.

Patty McGuinn, a wonderful foster parent for the Conquistador Program who herself has many champion hunter/jumpers, after learning of Conquistador's recent winning of four classes in one show, put it best, "What a representative for all the animals out there who are now in the hands of loving families! He deserves all the attention he gets but the attention he gives to the plight of other animals is truly his gift."

It took me decades to find the love of my life, but the wait was worth it. No need for tranquilizers in my hectic life. Joy is resting my head on the back of my love, kissing the perfect white spot on his velvet muzzle, watching him race at full speed around the arena or standing perfectly still, the sun reflecting off his burnished copper coat; blonde mane blowing in the wind and nostrils flaring.

Conquistador? Rayo De Olimpico, CDEA? He is the very essence of love, forgiveness, joy and courage. He is brio. He is the Great Heart of the Spanish Horse.

The black and white photos in this article are the work of equine photographer Pamela Reed. They will appear in her exhibit at the DeGrazia Gallery in Tucson in February. Pamela can be reached at 520-323-0262.