

The Road Less Traveled

By Tracy Williams

"Show me your horse, and I will tell you who you are." - old english saying

Wiser words were never spoken, for the care we extend to the defenseless reveals the measure of who we are. Out of the fullness of our hearts overflows either the compassion that enriches the lives of others or the selfishness that guards our own interests above all else. A true reflection of the saying is the relationship between Ivory Pal and Rafael Valle. The horse is a golden giant with an ivory mane skimming his shoulders, a carved measure of power and gentleness, blended pride and humility, and an undefeatable spirit. The man is composed of a sensitivity mindful of character and emotion, boundless humility, and strength to stand resolutely with what he holds dear. The two reflect each other.

Dreams of Pegasus

Many people can isolate that specific second when they realized the truth about Santa Claus - that defining moment of childhood when visions of sugarplums fade into reality. With his childhood dreams steeped in horses, Rafael Valle's "Santa Claus story" has a different twist. "My first disappointment in life was when my sister said Pegasus didn't exist," he explains with a laugh. Although born in Nicaragua, Rafael grew up in Miami, Fla., a city life far removed from his musings of winged horses. Nevertheless, every summer he would escape from the city streets to a simpler world - his uncle's ranch back in Nicaragua. Although his cousins questioned his sanity, Rafael was up at dawn on this working farm, bringing in the cattle, checking the rice fields and spending every waking moment in the saddle. "For some reason, horses have always responded to me even when I was a kid," Rafael says. Although given horses no one else would ride, Rafael never failed to rise to the challenge, and his unhurried approach reaped a harvest. The secret was not in the saddle; it was on the ground in hours of grooming, handling and building trust, and the horse would always respond. Unfortunately, political conflict ended his summer riding when he was 15 years old. Fast forward several years and after a 14-year stint in the military, Rafael is now a successful supervisor for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation although he is still tied to the memories of his summers in the saddle. Several years ago, Rafael resolved to return to his roots and find his dream horse even though he hadn't ridden steadily since his Nicaraguan summers.

A Frayed Spirit

Waiting in the wings was the golden Tennessee Walking Horse, Ivory Pal, and he was unraveling. Stall confinement since he was 6 months old had

prevented his muscles and bones from naturally strengthening as he matured, weakening his body and threatening his spirit. He had resisted traditional training methods until his trainers claimed he lacked a gait and tried forcing it with pads. "They padded him so tightly there was a big indentation in his hoof where the metal bands held the pads in place," says Rafael, who spent three years working with a farrier to get Ivory Pal's hooves back to normal. But even these more extreme training efforts fell flat. "Some horses do cooperate out of fear, but Ivory Pal wouldn't have anything to do with it," says Rafael. "He's too proud and too sensitive." Thus, the trainers concluded incorrectly that he couldn't perform.

Meanwhile, Rafael searched for an Andalusian like the ranch horses of his youth. He had no interest in another breed, yet somehow he found himself walking down the aisle of a Tennessee Walking Horse barn. "Off to the right was this horse," remembers Rafael as he struggles with the emotion in his voice. "My wife and I were walking by, and this horse just looked up at us. It was Ivory Pal, and he captured me. After we saw him, we couldn't look at any other horse; there was an instant connection with him."

A New Beginning

Rafael hadn't ridden since his childhood and had no professional training, yet on his own he resolved to peel back the layers of damage to allow Ivory Pal room to emerge. Instead of the traditional methods Ivory Pal loathed, he opted for a different approach - natural horsemanship inspired by his friends, Cliff and Barbara Ray. "Cliff and Barbara were ahead of their time, believing in the natural way of gaited horses," says Rafael. "It's more about developing his mind, and then the body will come." Accordingly, the first step was to lay the foundation - replacing Ivory Pal's mental scars with a covering of trust. To this end, Rafael drew on basic leadership principles he garnered while leading soldiers during his military career and applied them to horses. According to Rafael, the first is leading your horse by example; horses sense emotion, so they must feel your assurance to follow you confidently. The second rule, he explained, is to take care of your horse's needs - both emotional and physical. The physical is simply basic care: food, water, shelter and so forth. To meet the emotional, Rafael had to cultivate a friendship on the ground before he attempted one in the saddle. "Even to this day before I get on his back, I spend time just rubbing on him, leading him in the barn, rubbing his nose, rubbing his eyes," Rafael says. Before he could lead Ivory Pal anywhere, he had to prove he was worthy to be followed.

Stone by stone, the foundation settled, and training could begin. Rafael learned the elements of good riding by taking classical dressage lessons from Laurie Wolf and transferred his knowledge to training Pal. "She really helped me become a better rider, and thus (Ivory Pal) could achieve his

full potential," says Rafael. In addition, he had to strengthen Ivory Pal's poor physical condition before asking him to perform the signature Walking Horse gaits. "He was very weak; he had no muscle tone," Rafael says. With versatility as his creed, he taught Ivory Pal to perform a variety of disciplines. "I figured the more he could do, the more coordination he would have," says Rafael. "It's like an athlete. To run a marathon, you just don't go and run distance. You need to run sprints, do some weight-lifting, some swimming, etc." Thus, Ivory Pal has been trained in English and Western disciplines: halter, trail, dressage, horse dancing, barrel racing, pole bending, tricks and, of course, gaited movements. "He responded to everything and still does; he thinks it's a game," says Rafael, who uses techniques from Pat Parelli, John Lyons and Clinton Anderson in his training. He establishes his main goal and breaks it down into a series of steps that he reinforces through repetition and reward rather than punishment, believing that this allows Ivory Pal to focus on the task at hand rather than where the next whip is coming from. "He's very compulsive about getting stuff done right on his own," says Rafael. "One time my neighbor called me and said, 'Hey, your horse is doing something funny out there in the field.' He was out there practicing his bow."

A Point to Prove

The scope of their relationship broadened after Rafael witnessed a sored stallion at a gaited show. Originally, he'd had no intention to show, but after that horrific sight, he sought to prove winning can be accomplished another way. "Let's hit the show ring and make a point," said Rafael. "We'll start showing, have fun, and show people that you can go in the show ring and have respect for the animal." Initially the pair met shock and criticism over their unorthodox ways, for Ivory Pal wore only a simple snaffle bit and showed barefoot. "You're too gentle with that horse," one trainer cautioned. "When he sees you, he lights up; it's like you are his buddy. He's supposed to fear you." Rafael merely pocketed the intended insult as his dearest compliment. In their two year show career, Ivory Pal gathered an extensive record of awards (see sidebar for details), which Rafael handles with characteristic humility. "It was never about me or him getting blue ribbons. It was all about him making a point," he says. The statement is made: one can use natural methods, value the animal more than the prize and walk away with a title made sweeter by the honorable means of attaining it. Rafael has since retired his horse from the show world. "What else does he have to prove?" he asks. Instead, they will learn new skills for the sheer joy of it and perform them in coordination with music at benefits and exhibitions to the delight of the crowd. . "Ivory Pal understands he is an ambassador for his breed and for horses in general," Rafael says. "I want him to be the people's horse." In addition, Ivory Pal is in the midst of his second breeding season at Ivory Knoll Ranch in Citra,

Fla. Due to his talent and temperament, he is in high demand, but Rafael is breeding selectively to "approved homes and mares" to avoid barns suspected of using questionable training methods.

All the Difference

To this day, Rafael shares his and Ivory Pal's story with a sheen of tears in his eyes. Regardless of the part he played in the success of the tale, Rafael refuses to accept praise. "Ivory Pal is the one that deserves the credit because of what he had to overcome," he says. "The only thing I did was treat him with respect, let him gain back his dignity and provide an environment where he could blossom and reach his full potential." But the truth remains. Like a fairy tale, Ivory Pal waited to be uncovered, a vein of gold encrusted in the dark rock. And when he was, a bridge was forged between a broken horse and a gentle man who promised something more to a tired heart that had lost hope. They have walked a road less traveled, but the destination could not have been reached by a different path. "Once a horse knows that you are never going to let him down, he will give you his heart," says Rafael. "Ivory Pal knows that I'll never let him down." And that has made all the difference.

Pillars of Support

Rafael and Ivory Pal have achieved success both in and out of the show ring. While the essence of it stems from their relationship, it also gains life from their support system. Every step of the journey, Rafael has had Stefanie, his wife of 15 years. From financial support to emotional support, Stefanie has upheld Rafael's dream no matter the circumstances. "I could not have done it without her," he says.

On the business side, he has Gail Shrine, Ivory Pal's manager and most vocal advocate. "It's hard to find in any business someone that has a passion for what they do and is honest at the same time, and Gail is both," Rafael says. Rafael, Ivory Pal, Stefanie and Gail (joined with the two labs, Yogi and Simba) are knit together by the trials they have overcome and the satisfaction they are reaping from Ivory Pal's success.

Swearing by Seminole

Seminole was an instant choice for Rafael and Ivory Pal. "I didn't consider anything else; it was automatic," he says. Ivory Pal thrives on Spillers Safety First Performance Pellets, a low starch feed enriched with beet pulp, a highly digestible source of fiber. To further increase palatability, Rafael waters the pellets to soften them and even warms them into a mash in the winter. Because Ivory Pal is an easy keeper, Rafael prefers

his dietary calories to come from fiber rather than molasses, and he claims it is such a good feed, he doesn't need to change a thing whether at home or traveling. Convinced of its virtues, Rafael eagerly converts people to the feed. "It's good when you can believe in a product; you have great results, and you can share it with people," he says.