

# THE SARATOGIAN

## NEWS

### From the Preakness to the pasture: Retired thoroughbred finds new home in Greenfield

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When Dawn Robyn Petrlik, owner of Rosemary Farm Sanctuary horse rescue in South Kortright, arrived Sept. 2 at a horse auction with her trailer in tow, she was looking for two particular horses that a friend alerted her may go up on the auction block. What she found was something entirely different.

This is the story of King Congie, an 8-year-old thoroughbred stallion and graded stakes winner, whose journey took him from West Point Thoroughbreds and a disappointing seventh-place finish in the 2011 Preakness Stakes to retirement on a farm in Saratoga and ultimately to an unnamed auction house in Delaware County where, if things had gone differently, he would have been just another unknown and uncared for animal being loaded onto a trailer crammed with other terrified horses and driven to an untimely end.

Every year in this country, tens of thousands of horses of all breeds are sold at auction, all too often to “kill dealers,” people who buy horses to sell in Canada and Mexico for meat. The slaughter process can be brutal, and in the thoroughbred racing industry, there are many instances where horses are discarded after outliving their usefulness.

While the racing industry has started to embrace the thoroughbred aftercare movement, there are many horses – with an average lifespan of 30 years – which are cut down at a young age.

## Meeting the king

Dawn first saw King Congie as he was being led onto the auction floor. From where she stood, she could see what a beautiful horse he was, although he looked a little banged up from his journey to the auction house. He had a cut above his left eye and was bleeding from one of his ankles. He was also giving his handler some difficulty and, as they approached the center of the ring, became even more upset and began kicking furiously at the handler and into the people seated along the front row.

The auction proceeded despite Congie's angry outburst in the ring, and he was sold to a man and woman for \$250, much to Dawn's relief. She had seen the green USDA sticker on his rump, an almost certain death sentence for any horse, and she was happy that the couple had prevented kill dealers from stepping in to purchase the animal.

Congie was led out of the ring, and Dawn continued to watch for the two horses she had come there to purchase and bring back to Rosemary Farm, adding to the 65 other rescued horses who already call the sprawling 114-acre spread home. The auction ended a short while later, with Dawn never seeing the horses she had come there specifically to buy.

It was unusual for her to be leaving an auction with an empty trailer. In fact, it had never happened before.

In the parking area, her attention was distracted by the silhouette of a horse following a man into the twilight evening. She could tell by the way the animal was walking that it was in some discomfort. The man was approaching everyone he saw, asking them if they wanted to buy the horse.

Thinking of her empty trailer, Dawn went over to the man to find out why he was selling the horse. She hadn't yet connected the dots between the kicking stallion from the auction and the animal before her now. As she got closer, she noticed one of the horse's legs looked lumpy and disfigured.

The man explained to Dawn that he'd made a mistake – it was a bad decision for him to buy this particular horse. He and his wife came to the auction looking to buy a horse they could geld and ride. Instead, what he got was a spirited stallion who had some kind of leg deformity.

Except, the horse wasn't looking so spirited now. Dawn noticed that he was bleeding from a wound on his ankle. And then there was that strange-looking leg – she wasn't sure if it was a deformity or an injury.

Dawn had \$100 in cash with her – another unusual thing – and offered to buy the horse. At first, he refused the offer, saying, "No, I need to get all of my money back."

Worried that the man would go over to one of the kill dealers, she tried calming him, saying, “At least wait here a minute while I get some bandages for your horse. His leg is bleeding. Let’s just get that taken care of first.”

Dawn hurried away, grabbed some bandages from her truck and returned to the man. While she was working on wrapping the horse’s wound, she and the man continued to talk about the horse and about his options for selling the animal. Somehow she managed to get him to agree to take the \$100 for the horse.

“This was the closest save we’ve ever made,” said Dawn. “If we had not been there, his next move would have been to offer the horse to the kill dealers who were still in the parking lot.”

As the man handed the reins to Dawn, he told her the horse had Jockey Club papers. She didn’t think a whole lot about it at the time because a lot of horses are registered. Too many of them still end up in auction houses like the one she was standing at.

“I took his halter, walked him over to the trailer and gave him the float [a term used to describe the hanging basket of hay] and he stepped into the trailer like a perfect gentleman.”

### **‘Somebody really loved this horse’**

After getting Congie safely into the trailer, Dawn’s first order of business was to take him to her veterinary surgeon to look him over and figure out what was wrong with his leg.

During the three-hour drive to Rhinebeck Equine Hospital, Dawn started thinking about the horse she had just acquired. She hadn’t set out to buy “the nicest horse at the auction,” and as she put two and two together, she realized she had just bought “the kicker” from the auction ring.

It was midnight by the time Dawn and Congie arrived at the hospital. Because Congie had been at auction, he wasn’t allowed to enter the hospital and possibly contaminate the other horses.

“So, instead, they brought their equipment right out into the parking lot,” said Dawn.

When the vet saw the scar on the “deformed” leg, he became intrigued and had his staff bring the X-ray machine outside. It showed that Congie was the recipient of a very expensive implant. This kind of surgery was not something you typically saw in a horse that, just a few hours earlier, was sold at auction for \$250.

“Somebody really loved this horse,” said the surgeon.

The hospital team worked on Congie “like a pit crew,” said Dawn.

“They went over every inch of him – withers, hips, eye, legs, fetlocks. They didn’t miss a thing.”

When they were done, Congie was standing “straight and tall and shiny,” like the thoroughbred stallion he is.

“We exist to rescue horses, and we try to forgive ourselves every day for the ones we don’t bring home. It isn’t every day that we rescue a horse with Congie’s history,” said Dawn with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction.

While the veterinary crew was working on Congie, Dawn had been Googling his name and doing some research on him. She learned that King Congie was a graded stakes winner who won in two of 11 starts for West Point Thoroughbreds, including the 2011 Tropical Derby, which qualified him to run in the Preakness at Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore, the second race in the Triple Crown for 3-year-olds.

After talking with Erin Birkenhauer, media rep for West Point Thoroughbreds and daughter of its owners, Terry and Debbie Finley, they were able to confirm that Dawn’s kicking horse was indeed the beloved King Congie, whom Terry and Debbie thought was safe and secure in his new home in Saratoga. They placed him there in 2012 and had no way of knowing that the owner of the farm would suffer serious financial reversals, leaving him no choice but to put Congie in the care of “owner number three.”

When Debbie and Terry learned what had befallen Congie, “We all jumped into action,” said Debbie. “This was a well-loved horse, named after a beloved man. Both of them meant so much to our team. We were so shocked when we heard about it, and we knew we had to do something.”

While King Congie’s racing career wasn’t what his owners had hoped for, he was always well loved and cared for at West Point Thoroughbreds. They acquired him as a 2-year old colt with the name “Roll Call Honors,” and they syndicated him. He was renamed after West Point Thoroughbred’s director of media information, Congie DeVito, a severely handicapped young man who suffered from osteogenesis imperfecta, often referred to as brittle bone disease.

Terry recalled that he and DeVito had a “friendly wager” going over an Army-Temple college football game – Finley was an Army grad and DeVito a Temple alum. The winner of the bet got to rename the colt. Temple prevailed over Army, and Roll Call Honors was rechristened as King Congie.

DeVito, whose illness confined him to a wheelchair his entire life, worked for West Point Thoroughbreds until his own untimely death at age 35, just days after the young stallion who shared his name won a place in that year’s Preakness. After finishing seventh, Congie raced once more in 2012, suffering a career-ending leg injury. He underwent the implant surgery that saved his life and, following convalescence and recovery, Terry and Debbie

sent King Congie to the Saratoga farm, where he would act as stud for his new owner's quarterhorses.

## **Forefront of aftercare**

West Point Thoroughbreds is at the forefront of the thoroughbred aftercare movement, and its owners take their responsibility to their horses very seriously. They believe that an integral part of thoroughbred ownership is caring for the horse both during and after its racing career. The Congie Black and Gold Fund, named after Devito, contributes \$1,000 from each new partnership formed, plus \$10 per start per horse, which is matched by West Point, to go toward retraining, rehabilitating and finding new homes for their horses after racing.

After Dawn and the West Point team discussed the available options for King Congie and worked out a plan that was best for the horse, West Point Thoroughbreds officially adopted Congie and committed themselves to supporting his aftercare. At first, the plan was to send Congie to a rehabilitation facility in Maryland. But, knowing what a sweet and social animal he was, Erin suggested they place him with Old Friends at Cabin Creek.

Owners Joann and Mark Pepper began Old Friends in Greenfield Center seven years ago as a retirement farm for thoroughbreds and the only offshoot of the original Old Friends in Kentucky. For Joann, Old Friends is the culmination of a lifelong dream. Having grown up going to Saratoga Race Course and later working there, her love for the sport is surpassed only by her love for the animals.

"I love thoroughbred racing. I just want to see the sport do better by the horses."

Everyone agreed that Old Friends would be the best place for King Congie. There, he would have all the love and attention he could ask for on a daily basis.

## **Meant to be**

One week later, Dawn recounted her remarkable story of salvation and discovery, sitting in the shade of the barn at Old Friends alongside Terry, Debbie and Joann. With King Congie safely ensconced in a stall inside, Dawn said, "I knew there was a reason why I had an empty trailer by the end of that auction. I was supposed to be there, on that day, with an unaccustomed wad of cash in my pocket, and no other horses in my trailer. This was meant to be."

As both Terry and Debbie struggled to hold back tears – tears of relief that they had saved one horse, but also tears of grief over what may have happened to Congie and what does happen all of the time to countless other horses – Terry called the issue of thoroughbred aftercare "as pronounced an ethical dilemma as you can have."

"It's a huge challenge," he said. "You can have all the money in the world, but it's still a structure issue. Where do these horses go?"

The racing world isn't built to accommodate all of them after their racing days are over.

"Three different people owned the same horse," Dawn agreed. "They each thought they did right by it, and still the horse ended up in a parking lot."

When Dawn saves a horse that has papers, she always calls the former owner to find out if there is an interest in adopting the horse, or if they can answer any pertinent medical questions about the animal.

"Most of the time, I never hear back from them, but I still make the calls. I make the calls because of people like Terry and Debbie Finley. They're the reason I keep reaching out, because someone actually does care."

## **Making it home**

Earlier that morning, a small group gathered near the barn at Old Friends to serve as an informal welcoming committee for King Congie. Many of them were volunteers at Old Friends. All of them were horse lovers.

Dawn called from the road to say they were running a little late and, when the trailer finally turned down the driveway toward the barn, everyone rose in joy and expectation. One woman standing nearby, with tears glistening in her eyes, said, "He made it home. Congie made it home where he belongs."

As the trailer drove toward the barn entrance, Joann and the others walked over to greet Congie and get him settled in. No one knew quite what to expect. Was he going to be the furious kicker whom Dawn first encountered, or the subdued animal resignedly following a strange man across a twilit parking lot?

With a calm steadiness borne of years of working with and loving these magnificent-yet-delicate creatures, Joann stepped into the trailer. She worked calmly and steadily, hooking her lead to his halter as she and Congie began the short walk to his new home.

In the nearby paddock area, Commentator, winner of two Whitney stakes races, neighed out a greeting as King Congie walked into the stable with a stately dignity befitting his grace and stature. He responded with a fiercely defiant trumpeting. Perhaps Congie's dignity was borne of breeding, or perhaps it was an understanding that, after going through so much, he was finally in a place he could safely call home.