

The little black horse who changed his spots: a Christmas story



By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Forget about sugar plums and sleigh bells, the story I'm about to tell takes the yuletide cake in my book. Peek-A-Boo is indeed a strange name for a horse, but he comes by it honestly. When Chris brought the two-year-old wild mustang home, his very young daughter, Raven, remarked that the horse was always hiding — be it behind other horses, the barn, a tree, or a fencepost. Anything to put something between him and people. She started calling him Peek-A-Boo, and as Chris had visions of this little horse being his daughter's horse one day, the name aptly stuck.

Peek came into Chris's life when he was living in Nevada developing a reputation for getting through to wild mustangs and turning them into champions. When the owner of this beautiful jet black Spanish Barb of a Mustang brought the horse to one of Chris's clinics, he saw right away she was in way over her head. She couldn't catch him, couldn't touch him. He was always just out of reach. When Chris explained to her that comparing a mustang to a domestic horse was akin to comparing a wolf to a dog, he saw her go deer-in-the-headlights and knew it was not going to work. She agreed. So he took the little horse off her hands.

Chris certainly has a way with horses, in particular the wild ones (I tell him he shares their DNA). He and Peek hit it off just fine, but after putting a dozen or so rides on him, Chris decided it best to let the horse be a horse until both he and Raven had grown up. Peek immediately struck up a permanent friendship with one of Chris's other young horses, a PMU colt named Thunder, and they have been best friends ever since.

Fast forward 14 years. Peek makes it very clear that he is a loner. As long as Thunder is with him, he has what he needs. He takes care of himself, has no desire to lead and is perfectly content to play low man on the

totem pole. Acutely aware of every pin drop in his environment, Peek has Invisible Man down to a science. If you show up, he disappears — hiding behind a horse or a shelter. It's just his way. He is mild-mannered and well behaved, if a bit standoffish, is a perfect gentleman for the farrier and to be groomed, doesn't show any disrespect or cause any trouble whatsoever, but his philosophy is "I won't bother you so please don't bother me." Since his two-year-old start, you can count on one hand the number of times he has been ridden. He's been a wild horse living in a domestic herd, and he has made that adjustment to his satisfaction.

Chris's daughter, Raven, is now almost 16. She has never ridden Peek-A-Boo. She hardly rides, and Peek has hardly been ridden — rarely a winning combination. So in planning the schedule for his group of European working students this past summer — all of them competent certified trainers from Chris's programs in Holland and Ireland — Peek-A-Boo was included in the roster of horses to be worked with and ridden. The goal was to have Peek-A-Boo to a place where both he and Raven would enjoy each other's company under saddle when she visited Riversong over Thanksgiving.

No sooner had Chris set this idea in motion than an incident between Peek-A-Boo and my Thoroughbred, Razzy, made it clear this was an excellent and timely plan. One day in early in spring, Razzy was moved into a paddock with Thunder and Peek-A-Boo. They had been in the same herd before, but with a larger number of horses, never just the three of them. When Razzy was let loose he made a beeline for Peek-A-Boo and relentlessly bullied him to the point where the poor little horse actually peed himself in terror. They were promptly separated and Chris made sure both Razzy and Peek-A-Boo started getting worked straight away. Peek needed to rise up a few notches and Razzy needed some serious toning down. Obviously their winter herd dynamics hadn't done these two horses any favours.

As training got underway, Razzy responded as expected: the more he is worked with and ridden well, the kinder and mellower he becomes. He can be a royal pain, horse to horse, but he is always a sweetheart with people who "get" him. And as everyone here does and did (the more the merrier in Razzy's eyes being the social butterfly that he is) he was a happier and happier camper as the days progressed.

Peek-A-Boo, on the other hand, was a wild card. Like Jack coming out of the box, we didn't know what was in there until we got him going. And when we did, he soon acquired a new nickname, Houdini, as he gave his riders a whole new concept of what it is to be connected to your horse. Without full contact (heaven forbid you rode with a loose rein!), or being truly plugged in to his core, he'd exploit the gap, no matter how minuscule, in a very amusing way. Quick as lightning, he'd snatch the rein and drag you over to an open window in the arena wall and stick his head through it and just stand there, effectively saying "Gotcha!" Without fuss he'd go right back to work, but being a master manipulator, he would effectively humble you in a heartbeat. I know this first hand as when the Europeans went home, I, being the only one small enough to ride Peek comfortably, took over his training. Chris suggested a very sound approach — ride him bareback to fully mold to his movement. Glove my body to his and keep my contact softly consistent to transform squirrelly, squiggly ball of energy who zigged and zagged all over the arena into a horse who would softly stay forward and maintain both a line and a bend. Thankfully, it worked, and saved me the face-losing chuckles of his head-over-the-wall antics.

Thanksgiving arrived and Chris's kids came to Riversong and Peek was ready. For the very first time, Raven rode her horse. And he was good as gold. And she was beaming. It was a magical moment that had her giddy for days. But it doesn't stop there. When they left, we had another miracle moment.

We shifted the horses into winter herds, and decided to put all five geldings together in one big paddock to see if they could sort out their pecking order amicably. We watched carefully, ready for fireworks, and were stunned. While Razzy was unquestionably still the King of the little gang of gelding thieves, we saw none of his macho bullying, and even more amazing, found that not only did Razzy and Peek not have any "words" about the arrangement, but that by day two, Razzy and Peek-A-Boo were buddied up, eating out of the same flake of hay! Nose to nose, like the best of friends. I thought it was a fluke, but it's not. Razzy has clearly mellowed — playing king of the hill with gentlemanly aplomb. And Peek-A-Boo plays his faithful manservant. When the hay comes out, the geldings scatter while

Razzy selects the choicest flake and settles in to munch. Peek then does the ear-pinning dirty work to keep the boys the proper distance from their fearless leader, and when they are all minding their manners, with a self-satisfied look he too saunters over to that very same choice flake and tucks in with his boss. And Razzy lets him — doesn't pin an ear or show any displeasure whatsoever. And it doesn't end with feeding. The other day I watched all the geldings move to the sunniest spot on a warm day, lie down and flake out, Peek-A-Boo almost under Razzy's feet. All but Razzy, who stood sentry, calm and proud as could be while they all took a peaceful afternoon nap.

Liz Rudolph, one of Chris's certified trainers in B.C. said it best: "Hot snow falls up." If we open our minds to the inexplicable, the inexplicable will blow our minds. When we throw away conventional wisdom and believe in magic, anything's possible. There was no magic formula, no purple pill. All we did was ride these two horses — well. Groom them, tack them up, lead them, lunge them — well. And by doing so we gave them a solid dose of a new reality. They took it from there and did the rest. Razzy found what he needed to calm his high-strung, piss-and-vinegar nature, un-bracing his big picture approach to the world at large and his herd mates in particular. And Peek-A-Boo has a whole new lease on life. He has come out of his shell like a butterfly out of a cocoon and has no problem holding his own. Not only is he not hiding behind the other horses, he stays front and centre, as noble a little horse as you've ever seen, and lets us know people are not really so bad — that some of us are maybe even kind of cool — for human beings, that is.

If Peek-A-Boo and Razzy can change their spots to this degree, no doubt old dogs can indeed learn new tricks. And there is light at the end of the tunnel. And Santa Claus may be real after all. 🐾

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train The Trainer programs throughout North America and Europe. They are currently building their own Alberta-based equestrian centre at Riversong Ranch, west of Edmonton near Whitecourt, which will open for events in August of 2008. If you have a question you would like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at alphamare@xplornet.com

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