

Equestrian - Unbridled love

YAKIMA -- Tucker is a Thoroughbred horse, a portrait of breathtaking, yet restrained power. **Mary Burke** is 5-foot-4 and 110 pounds, the personification of petite. But they are connected.

The minute Mary walks into the barn at Burkeridge Farms, the equestrian training center she and her husband own in Ellensburg, all she has to do is speak and Tucker will know it.

The 12-year-old gelding's ears will perk up. His eyes will brighten. He'll emit a little knicker - not a whinny, more like a low rumble. He'll look around to see where she is and whether she's on her way to acknowledge him, to say hi. God forbid she pays attention to one of the other horses first. Oh, Tucker won't like that. He'll get his nose out of joint, stomp his foot. Tucker fully expects to come first.

And perhaps he has earned that right.

Tucker and Mary are a team in eventing, an equestrian competition requiring grace, athleticism, discipline and, yes, that undeniable connection - that trust - between horse and rider. Last month they won the preliminary horse class at the American Eventing Championships in Wayne, Ill.

To understand just how unusual and remarkable that is, though, one must look back at their journey - one that's a little about love at first sight and a lot about second chances.

The troubled athlete

The horse Mary now calls Tucker - known in eventing circles by the more stately moniker of Esprit de Corps - was bred by Max and Judy Golladay to be a racehorse, fast and strong.

But fate intervened. When Judy Golladay, one of Ellensburg's famed "Rodeo Grandmas," suffered a cancer relapse 10 years ago - she died later that same year - this unriden, unsaddled 2-year-old named Hallow's Dee Light was sold to another Ellensburg horsewoman, Barb McBride.

It would be two or three years before McBride attempted to saddle the rambunctious young Thoroughbred she called Hal. When she did, he bucked so hard he ripped the saddle's girth - the cinch that goes around the horse to secure the saddle - clean in half.

McBride, who had back-injury issues and two small children to care for, decided not to push her luck. She turned Hal's tutelage over to Cle Elum horse trainer Jim Briggs, highly regarded in the equestrian community for his skill with "problem horses."

Briggs was able to saddle Hal and work him, riderless, in the round pen. But when one of Hal's stirrups got snagged on a panel gate, the horse panicked and fought to pull free - "Like any horse would," McBride says. Frantic and forceful, Hal folded the metal panel in half and ripped the tree - the guts of the saddle, metal bars and fork that distribute the rider's weight - right out of the saddle.

Boy, Briggs remembers thinking, this guy is an athlete. A real athlete.

Still, Briggs was able to saddle and ride Hal several times. The last time, though, Hal spooked and bucked him off, dislocating Briggs' shoulder - one that already had pins in it from two surgeries.

Briggs handed Hal's reins to one of his top students, Steve Houston, a New Zealander and now a world-renowned trainer, for a couple weeks of work. When Houston returned home, though, Barb McBride basically put Hal out to pasture - and out of any future plans.

"He was a risk, I felt," she says. "He was not a horse I could sell to any little 4-H kid, because these things had happened and he naturally was afraid. Some horses don't recover from that. I could not advertise him to just anybody."

"I didn't want to have anybody hurt."

The comeback kid

Mary Burke understood early on - "ever since I was teeny," she says - her gift and passion for riding horses.

She was born in Idaho but grew up in Bellevue, which in the 1960s was a rural place of two-lane roads, fields and farms, full of people who loved horses. Riding before her third birthday, she took quickly to hunters and jumpers at Evergreen Equestrian Center in Kirkland and established herself as one of the state's top junior riders.

But Burke had greater goals in mind.

"If you want to make it onto the Olympic team or want to ride with Olympic-caliber riders," she says, "the East Coast is the place to go."

So after high school, she did just that. She moved to Maryland and trained with equestrian luminaries like Linda Zang and Elizabeth Madlener, from whom she developed a love for dressage and quickly became one of that discipline's top competitors.

Dressage, Burke says, is "kind of like ballet on horses, where you perform a prescribed series of movements that kind of flow into each other, somewhat similar to figure skating. (It's) mainly designed to demonstrate the level of communication between the horse and the rider."

That innate ability to connect with a horse would pay dividends years later. Many years, as it turned out.

Mary returned to Washington and became a trainer at Cedar Downs in Auburn, where she met and married Richard Burke, whose parents had built and owned the facility. They had a son. And Mary made a decision: She chose to discontinue all riding and raise her son.

She also got her college degree and became a physical therapist. The family moved to Ellensburg, where Mary serves as the lead physical therapist at Kittitas Valley Community Hospital.

Seventeen years passed. For an athlete, a veritable eternity.

With her son grown, Mary decided it was time to get another horse, maybe do a little trail riding. She asked around and was introduced to Barb McBride, whose Valley View Stables was the only English-riding barn in Ellensburg.

That's how she met Tucker.

Going full circle

Not at first, though.

McBride pointed Burke toward some other possibilities. She mentioned Tucker - who was still Hal at the time - only as a pasture horse that was a bit of a safety risk and wasn't on the market.

Mary saw the others. Not interested. So, she asked, could I see that other horse?

McBride began to understand **Mary Burke** wasn't some tenderfoot off the street. The two had ridden with some of the same instructors; they were hitting it off. So McBride relented and brought Hal in from the paddock.

"I knew in an instant he was exactly what I was looking for," Burke says. "He had the correct conformation, the right kind of personality and attitude." As the two women stood in the indoor arena and watched the horse play, run and buck all around them, Burke noted how respectful he was of their space, never closing

that distance.

But McBride wouldn't easily sell Hal. She made Burke work with him at the arena for weeks. She had Burke call Briggs, who - not knowing Burke's experience level - tried subtly to dissuade her from buying the horse.

Mary was undeterred and bought Hal - who she renamed Tucker and, for the competition record, Esprit de Corps. Noting early on the horse's aptitude for jumping, she began jumping him in the back yard over buckets with boards laid across them. He enjoyed it, and also took quickly to the challenges of dressage.

Here, their story took an ironic twist.

As a young trainer in Auburn, Mary had taught a 10-year-old who, two decades later, was now well on her way to becoming a two-time Olympian in eventing, a discipline combining dressage, cross-country and stadium jumping. Mary knew almost nothing about eventing - often referred to as the triathlon of riding - but that former student, Amy Tryon, became her teacher.

Mary, two decades past her days as a young prodigy, still had it. So, remarkably, did the horse once considered too sensitive and jumpy to sell. Says Briggs, "She's done a fantastic job with this horse, no doubt about it."

For six years, Mary and Tucker moved steadily up through the eventing ranks.

Last month at the American Eventing Championships, in abysmal conditions - "absolutely sheeting rain," Burke says - the horsewoman and her equine partner outcompeted a field full with top eventers, including a former Olympic gold medalist.

At 47, a quarter-century after giving up riding to be a mom, **Mary Burke** had become a national champion.

And today, when she steps into the barn, she'll be sure to greet Tucker first thing.

Not because he's a troubled beast.

Because he's a champion, too.