

The Win

by Lisa Wysocky

The phone call came to Terra's hotel room at precisely two minutes after three in the morning.

"I'm here at the airport, but don't bother picking me up. I'll get a cab," said the voice.

"Huh?" Terra mumbled groggily. "Who's getting an airport?"

"A cab. A cab. I'm here. I'm in Louisville. I came to see my horse win tomorrow."

"Oh."

Terra's heart sank with thudding reality. An owner—but not just any owner. This was the most demanding owner on Earth. No, in this galaxy. Right here. In Louisville. At the show. Came to see his horse win. Terra hated to disappoint him, but the truth was, if there was any winning to do at this show, it would have already been done.

The owner in question, Paul Brack, was a very busy man. He was head of one of Nashville's largest record labels and got into the horse business as a means of enjoyment and relaxation. Unfortunately, between hob-nobbing with the stars and showing off all his platinum records, Paul had little time to either enjoy or relax. When he did find time, it was usually last minute and he wanted to milk the moment, so to speak. In other words, Paul not only wanted to see his horses win. Paul expected it.

That said, Terra knew that when Paul wasn't there, all he wanted was a good progress report—to know his horses has put on a good performance and that they had done well. When Paul was in attendance, however, he wanted to bask in the glory that came with a class winner at a National or World championship show.

Terra had been at the Nationals in Louisville for more than a week, starting with the youth classes, taking a few days off while the cattle classes were running, then moving into full swing with the halter and performance horses.

And they'd all done well. Relatively. One of

the youth had placed in the top ten in every class he'd entered. Never higher than fourth, you understand, but in there all the same. Another had been in a three-way tie for second in trail and placed third in her equitation class. In the halter division, her broodmare had stood fifth, the yearling gelding, third. Terra had two senior performance horses, one competing in English events, one in western. The mare she rode in the English events had been a world champion the year before and took home a third this trip. The western pleasure mare had not traveled well, was cranky the entire trip, and got the gate. So while they weren't burning them up, they were competing competitively.

Paul Brack could not have chosen a worse time to arrive. Terra looked at the clock. Three-sixteen. In a few hours, dawn would break on the last day of the show and the only class she had left was a junior hunt class scheduled for the afternoon. Not that either junior hunt classes or afternoons were bad. Just that Water Sprite, the little chestnut mare of Paul's that she was riding in the class, was dog tired after a hard week. And, even worse, junior hunt was not her best class.

They'd entered Sprite because she did well in this class on a regional level. But in national competition she just wasn't tall enough to match the stride and movement of top-notch junior hunt horses. Terra was hoping to make the cut into the finals, but that was as far as she realistically expected to go.

It didn't help, either, that Terra was five-foot-six. If she was, say, five-foot-two, it would help make Sprite look bigger. Not much bigger Terra admitted, but some.

"Oh, well," Terra sighed. There wasn't anything she could do about it except do her best. And with that thought she rolled over and went back to sleep.

Water Sprite was just drying off after her bath

when Paul abruptly turned the corner to the shed row.

"My goodness," he panted as he wiped his dripping brow. "I thought I'd never find you."

In addition to temperatures in the mid-nineties, they'd been dealing with the layout of the fairgrounds. In short, the place was huge. There was a nice indoor coliseum for the competition, but most of the barns were a fifteen-minute walk away with a colorful sea of vans and horse trailers between. Having been there before, Terra knew enough to bring bicycles for quicker movement between barn and arena. Many stables used golf carts, mopeds or ATVs, however, this trip they were fully loaded with horses, and had room only for the non-motorized two-wheelers.

"It's easy to get lost," Terra agreed after offering Paul a chair.

"Boy, I can tell you I am looking forward to today," Paul smiled. "How I love to see my horses win."

"Ah . . . Hmmm," Terra thought as she directed her attention to Sprite's grooming. Sprite had four splashy white stockings so her legs would have to be kept wrapped until shortly before she went into the arena. Terra selected a dark brown yarn that tastefully matched the mare's coloring and started to braid Sprite's short mane. Terra didn't want her boss to be disappointed and had spent much of the morning deciding the best way to tell him his horse wasn't going to win.

"Well, sir," she sighed from the other side of Sprite's mane, "we'll do the best we can."

It was a bit lame, but it was the best she could do. Several hours later, the final preparations made, Paul wished Terra and Sprite a cheery farewell in the warm-up arena.

"Win one for the Gipper," he whispered gaily into Sprite's ear.

This particular class was going to be divided into three heats on the flat, due to the large number of horses entered. One hundred and twenty one, to be exact. Terra and Sprite had drawn the second heat, and six finalists from the forty odd horses in each heat would come back to compete for the national championship. Terra knew they

had some hard work cut out for them if they were to be included in the final competition.

She tightened the reins and squeezed her calves lightly into Sprite's sides as they entered the coliseum. Sprite was an exceptionally steady ride for a four-year-old mare. She could compete well in many different classes and had placed in several earlier in the week. But she was also a hard horse to ride in that the rider had to use steady hands and firm legs to balance her just so, or she tended to pull with her front legs rather than push from behind. But Sprite was a willing mare and for the most part they did very well.

They were one of the last in their heat to enter the arena. But as soon as Terra got her bearings and looked up, her heart sank. Most of the other horses in the class topped Sprite by a good four to six inches. She felt as if she were riding a Shetland pony rather than a 15.1 hand horse.

"Sprite," she said, gripping even tighter, "we'll just have to be that much better than they are."

But that was easier said than done. They had entered at a working trot, but Sprite's working trot, just because she was smaller, was much slower than the rest of the horses, her step much quicker. So, glancing over her shoulder, Terra pulled about ten feet off the rail to make their circuits around the arena a shorter distance. It was a maneuver many judges frowned on, but with so many horses in the heat, she hoped it would be overlooked.

At the walk, Terra had a chance to scope out the positions of the three judges in the ring. Her objective was to stay in their sight and not get crowded from view by the larger horses. Terra stared hard at the nearest judge, and by instinct, he turned and looked at her. She smiled as they went past, Sprite striding out nicely on a loose rein.

The thing at the canter was to avoid wrecks, Terra thought, and she kept her eyes peeled. For some reason, many riders let their horses get 'bunched' in a class. The close quarters of being bunched close to other horses often rattled them, causing the horses to break their concentration

and lose their willingness to perform. But through good use of the ring and a circle or two at the far end Terra was able to keep clear of most of the groups.

On the reverse she was able to settle down and push Sprite a bit more, but Terra could tell that the weeks of traveling and heat were taking their toll. Sprite was tired.

The judges retired the class and they pulled, finally, into the line up, panting and sweating. Terra searched the faces in the crowd for Paul and found him sitting almost directly in front of her, eight or ten rows back, with a celebrity-type owner he knew from New York.

"Did you have a good ride?" whispered a trainer friend from Illinois who was positioned next to Terra.

She nodded, thinking that in spite of it all, Sprite had done very well. It would still, however, be a miracle if they made the cut. After an interminable wait, the loudspeaker finally clicked on.

"Will the following six numbers please step forward and return for final judging after the third heat," crackled the announcer. "1046 . . . 293 . . . 1265 . . . 987 . . ."

"987," Terra thought. "Why, that's us!"

"That's us, Sprite!" Terra whispered, secretly thrilled. "We did it, girl. We did it!"

Back in the warm up ring, Paul greeted them with a rousing mixture of enthusiasm and doom.

"You were great out there!" he effused. "But we couldn't see you. Those other horses are all so much taller. We kept losing you in the ring. And then when we thought we found you it was another horse of the same color."

"I know," Terra said morosely. "I tried to keep where the judges could see us. But I don't know. I felt like a midget out there. I wish there was something we could do, other than put Sprite on stilts."

"We could spray paint her," he joked. "Or tie a flag on to her tail."

Terra was silent for a minute, thinking, wondering.

"Well . . ." Terra said slowly. "There is one possibility . . ."

"What! What is it?"

"It might mean stretching the rules of the class. I don't know."

"What!" he repeated. "What?"

"I think that in the tack box there is a length of heavy fluorescent green yarn. We got it for one of those silly groom's classes once and I think some if it is still there. Maybe," Terra said, "we could take the brown yarn out of her main and tail and braid it with the fluorescent green."

"But," said Paul, "wouldn't it look . . . well . . . awful?"

"Yes. Probably. And it's definitely not a recommended color for hunt. But everyone would see her. It's your decision."

There was only the slightest hesitation before he said, "Let's do it."

Terra sent one of her youth kids by bicycle back to the tack room with a nervous look at her watch. She figured the third heat would take about forty-five minutes. Ten of those had already gone by. It would take at least another fifteen for Kelle to get to the stable area, get the yarn (providing that she could even find it) and get it back up to them. That left twenty minutes to re-braid Sprite's main and tail. Tight timing, but it could be done.

"Where is she? Oh, where is she," Paul moaned ten minutes later. He'd been pacing the same four square feet for the last five minutes and was driving Terra nuts.

Terra said she didn't expect Kelle back for another few minutes, but secretly hoped she'd be back sooner. But five minutes passed, then six, then seven and there was still no sign of Kelle.

"Oh, my goodness, we'll never get this done now," moaned Paul, still pacing and rubbing his face in his hands. "Oh dear. We're out of it now."

By this time his pacing and moaning was starting to attract some attention. Wanda Ziegler, the trainer who had been lined up next to Terra came up on foot and asked if there was anything wrong.

After Paul despairingly explained the situa-

tion and what they were trying to do, she gave a short laugh and said, "Well, of all things. But I am out of it. I didn't make the cut. I'll help you get this mare re-braided and look," she pointed to the entrance, "isn't that your girl coming now?"

We all looked and sure enough, it was Kelle, red of face, huffing and puffing, but with lovely lengths of garish fluorescent green yarn in her hands.

"Couldn't find it at first," she gasped as she handed me the horrible looking stuff. "Sorry. Fast as I could."

"It's all right," Terra said, sliding from Sprite's saddle. "Wanda is going to help us and with two on the mane and one on the tail, we should be able to get this done."

So with Paul holding Sprite they went to work, pulling out the nice, neat, tasteful row of dark brown braids, and doing the mare up again in garish green.

"So," Terra said stepping back to view their handiwork when they had finished. "How does she look?"

"Truthfully?" asked Wanda with a chuckle. "Like a circus horse. But I guarantee you she'll be seen. And you don't have a smidgen of a chance without that."

All the attention had revived Sprite, and she perked right up when Terra slid back in to the saddle for a final warm up.

"Finalists, you are now entering the arena," shouted the gate man. "Everyone in. Let's go now, the judges are waiting."

Terra again positioned Sprite toward the end of the group, set her head, and pushed her into a perky working trot.

"Remember the Gipper," called Paul after them.

Terra nodded and waved. Just how could she forget?

There were only eighteen horses in the finals, making the traffic much more reasonable. Terra positioned herself in an open spot slightly off the rail and with grim determination willed each judge to look as she went by. Terra sat down and back in the saddle as the call to walk was

announced, letting the reins slide through her fingers ever so slightly. Several 17-hand monsters walked by, blocking them on the rail just as they were approaching the second judge. Terra secretly hoped they'd disappear into thin air. But Terra was encouraged thirty feet ahead when Wanda whispered over the rail that the judge had gone out of his way to catch her number anyway.

They cantered ably and were able to stay out of most of the traffic on the reverse. Sprite was doing very well, Terra thought. She often felt that geldings, on a whole, were steady and dependable. Mares on the other hand, although sometimes skittish and other times cranky, had the ability to be brilliant. And today, Sprite was shining. Her ears had been perked the entire class. She was responsive. Her stride was a hair longer than usual. She was balanced.

"Well," Terra told her as they trotted into the lineup, "if nothing else, you've just performed the best you ever have and no matter what the old Gipper says, that counts for a lot in my book."

They went through the usual long wait as the judges handed in their final tallies and the even longer wait while the show staff tabulated the three scores and determined the winners.

After almost fifteen nerve-racking minutes, the announcer informed everyone that the first group of numbers he read off would be excused.

"Thank you very much for competing," he said. "If your number is not called, please stay in the arena for the announcement of the placings."

With resignation, Terra waited for her number, 987, to be called. And waited. And waited.

"Thank you, and now for the placings."

"Wait," thought Terra. Did I miss something? They didn't call our number."

Terra looked around wildly, thoroughly expecting that she was somewhere she was not supposed to be. She glanced up into the stands and Paul was shaking his hands wildly over his head in elation, a huge smile on his face. Then it dawned on her. They had placed. One hundred twenty Amazon horses in the class competing against one midget entry and they had made the top ten at the Nationals.

The placings, starting with tenth, were being read and Terra forced herself to concentrate on the numbers. With each new place she prayed it would not be them. Not 987. Terra suddenly wanted, very badly, to win this one for the Gipper.

"In sixth place is 370, Surprise-Surprise . . ." The applause droned out the listing of owner, rider and hometown, and Terra looked at the other four horses remaining in the ring. They all closed ranks, shook hands around and waited. Again.

"In fifth, number 1066, Black Velvet . . ." Terra again glanced at Paul. By this time he was praying, hands folded to his chest, eyes skyward, lips silently moving.

"And in fourth, number 987, Water Sprite . . ."

Terra was tremendously elated and depressingly saddened at the same time. Fourth was so very good, considering Sprite's size and abilities. But it still would have been nice to win and Terra hoped Paul wouldn't be too disappointed.

She picked up the big white rosette ribbon and rode slowly back to the warm up arena, trying to think of some consoling words for Paul. But he reached her before they got there.

"Fourth, we got fourth!" he laughed. He laughed!

"You mean, you're not upset we didn't win?"

"Upset? Why that was the best performance I've ever seen!" he expounded. "You and Sprite just zipped in and out between those sluggish giants. And the green yarn, why that was an inspiration! We could see you all over the ring. I'm going to take this fourth place ribbon and put it above my desk at the office. I'm going to hang it above all those platinum records because this, this, is worth much, much more."

As we walked back to the stable Paul explained to Terra that he had suddenly had realized that winning wasn't everything. Sure you needed to win sometimes. If you didn't you were doing something wrong. But you also had to take the circumstances of the class and the abilities of the horse into account, too.

"You know," he said clapping Terra on the back, "this is the best time I've ever had. Thank you. This is truly a win for the Gipper."

Author's Note: The Win is based on a real event. Paul Brack retired Water Sprite from competition later that year, and actually, finally, found the time to ride and relax Please check back at www.powerofhorses.com for new stories periodically throughout the year.

About the Author: Born and raised in Minnesota, Lisa Wysocky had early success on the national and world championship horse show circuit. She soon was asked to begin speaking and writing about horses. A knee injury cut short Lisa's career as a trainer, but she quickly ventured into music. Six years with Nashville's afternoon paper, the *Nashville Banner*, and her reputation in the music industry as a writer of quality biographical and promotional material, piloted Lisa to a career in public relations.

Recently, Lisa served as general manager of the independent record label, Scarlet Moon Records, and authored the *only* book about country music stars and their horses, *The Power of Horses: True Stories from Country Music Stars*, which features true horse stories and original photos from 18 of country music's top artists. A mystery, *The Opium Equation*, is due out in 2003. Lisa is also active in assisting clients with their public image and with their interview skills, writes a weekly syndicated celebrity lifestyles column for Ag Features called *Down Home*, and is a regular featured guest on Jones Radio Networks syndicated overnight show, *Danny Wright All Night*.

A witty, down-to-earth speaker, Lisa gives her audiences 'news they can use', along with step-by-step advice on how they can create their own success stories.

Also by Lisa Wysocky
The Power of Horses:
True Stories from Country Music Stars

(Fura Books, 2002, ISBN: 1-890224-10-3)

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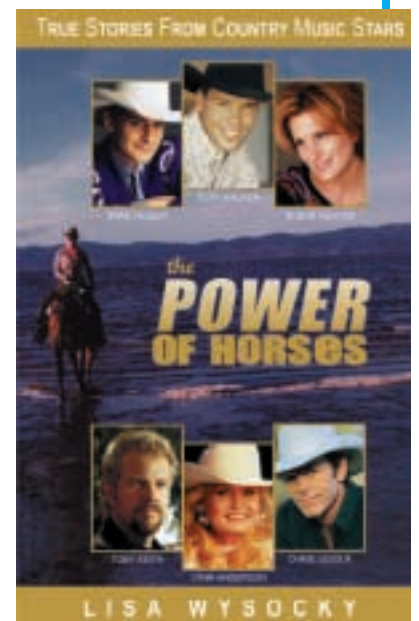
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