

Bay Area trainer transforms an ex-racer into top finisher at Kentucky competition.

by Kim F. Miller

Emily Flaxman hopes to “do well by doing good.” The buzz phrase is borrowed from the social enterprise corner of the corporate world, where charitable endeavors are built into business models.



A transplanted British horsewoman, Emily is doing good by taking on Off The Track Thoroughbreds and training them for second careers. And she’s doing well. At the Retired Racehorse Project’s Thoroughbred Makeover in Kentucky last October her personal “project,” 4 year old Go Wheeler Go, finished fourth in dressage, conducted at Training Level Test 2. He also earned the highest score in the “materiale” class, which is conducted at the walk, trot and canter and judged on overall impression and quality of gaits.

The Thoroughbred Makeover is modeled after the Mustang Makeover, in which trainers take on formerly wild Mustangs, train them for a set period of time, then showcase their skills in competition. After the competition, the horses are auctioned off to the highest bidder.

In the Thoroughbred Makeover, trainers work with local racetracks to take on a retired racer who hasn’t had significant training for anything beyond the track. Trainers get 10 months to prepare the horse for the Makeover. Selling or keeping the horse after the competition is optional.

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Emily has the perfect background for the job. She grew up a horse-crazy girl in horse-crazy England. As a young adult, she took on three Thoroughbreds as sale prospects. Was it profitable? “No,” she laughs. “Horses never are! It was more a labor of love.”

It was also an affordable way to stay in the saddle. “I wanted to improve my skills, but didn’t have the money to buy a fancy horse,” she explains. What she learned came in handy when she and her American husband relocated to the States in 2011. Emily had enjoyed a career in banking in London, but part of the deal in moving to the U.S. was that she could “get out of the rat race and do what I really love to do.”



That’s horses, of course.

She and her husband bought a 2.3-acre fixer-upper farm in the East Bay Area’s Clayton and it’s now home to Emily’s seven horses. “Mostly rejects and misfits,” she says with affection. With an up-by-the-bootstraps approach, Emily dreams of building her business as a coach and mobile trainer. “It may never be profitable, but my hope is it can pay for itself.”

Her equestrian upbringing is rooted in the British Horse Society education that incorporates dressage and jumping riding and training, stable management and horse care skills.

Certification as a sports coach using neuro linguistic programming (think Tony Robbins) is another tool in her kit as a developing professional.

Dressage is the foundation for all the horses she works with, “but I would get bored if I only did that,” she admits. “I’m a big believer in variety for horses.” All of her horses jump at least a little and go on trail and Emily welcomes affordable opportunities to school them cross-country.

She has continued her formal dressage education with some of the Bay Area's best, including Jane Weatherwax, Rachel Saavedra, Chelsea Sibley, Creeky Routson and Christine Rivlin.

Go Wheeler Go

Emily learned about the Thoroughbred Makeover through Facebook. She brought it up with a friend at Concord Feed, who put her in touch with the CANTER (Communication Alliance to Network Thoroughbred Racehorses) rep connected to Golden Gate Fields racetrack. Shortly thereafter, 4-year-old Go Wheeler Go arrived at her ranch. "He was just too slow," she explains, but level headed from the get-go and quick to catch on to dressage training.

In preparation for the Makeover, Emily augmented her training with a few lessons and clinics and took him in one open dressage show. He did what she asked, Emily reports, but the atmosphere got the better of him and he did the test with his head held high and in a hollow frame. Emily saw the silver lining in that "it showed me that his throughness and connection were not really honest, because when I really needed it, it disappeared."

After that, she reinforced the basics and schooled him in a few different arenas and environments. Things went much better in Kentucky, validating Emily's belief that ex-racers can make suitable dressage mounts.

"Most Thoroughbreds come off the racetrack stiffer than plank of wood," she observes. "But once you teach them how to use their bodies and bend you can really open up their gaits and make them competitive against the big moving Warmbloods in the competition ring. "

She would love to see more West Coasters embrace the Thoroughbred Makeover. It's part of the Retired Thoroughbred Projects' mission to "increase demand for Thoroughbred ex-racehorses and build the bridges to second careers." At the Kentucky climax, participants compete in one of 10 events: Barrel racing, competitive trail, dressage, eventing, field hunter, freestyle, polo, show hunter, show jumping and working ranch, along with the materiale class.

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Trainers can be amateurs or professionals and horses must not have had significant training outside the track environment. The Makeover is held in conjunction with educational seminars, a horse sale and various festivities. In 2015, the program drew 350 entrants and approximately 170 who took their steeds to the Makeover showdown in Kentucky.

Wheeler crossed that bridge to a new career in Kentucky, when a family from Michigan purchased him from Emily for \$6,000. She was thrilled that he's going to a knowledgeable owner with 25 acres. And the sale enables her to do it all over again with another horse. At presstime, she was looking for her next candidate.

Look for Emily's reports from her next Thoroughbred Makeover adventure in upcoming issues.

This year's Thoroughbred Makeover is set for Oct. 27-30 at the Kentucky Horse Park and has \$100,000 in prize money on offer. Applications will be available online as of January 4 and the program is open to professionals, amateurs and juniors with demonstrated experience and skill in the discipline in which they plan to train their horse. Horses must be registered with the Jockey Club, have a lip tattoo and meet criteria determining that they haven't had previous non-racing training. For more information, visit: www.retiredracehorseproject.org.