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I was invited by SNGA President Jacque Parker to pay a special visit to one of their gymkhana participants during their last competition. “George and Shorty have proven to be an unbelievable pair”, she insisted. True to the claim, I watched from the rail as a striking man with a pony tail to his waist used his voice, strength, and excellent seat to keep a high-spirited chestnut horse from charging the barrels too soon. Shorty jigged anxiously behind the timer before George let him take off. With quarterhorse speed the horse rocketed toward the first turn. An excess of enthusiasm caused them to overshoot the barrels a bit and George to lose a stirrup on the third, but considering where they’ve come in the last two years, it’s simply a miracle they are here at all.

A local landscaper by trade, 40-yr old George Vazquez was raised around horses as a child near Puebla, Mexico, but they were used for work and transportation, not for pleasure riding or competition. He never owned a horse of his own, until now. His girlfriend Traci Green purchased her first horse in April of 2009, and George would visit them at the barn. It was there that he met Shorty. The horse was given to the barn trainer for nothing because he was problematic. With a history of multiple owners, all of whom Shorty had bucked off, his options were growing thin. He had issues from severe abuse, including fresh cuts on his face and chest, his hooves were a mess and he was underweight. Yet something drew George to his stall when Staci was busy with her horse “Rodeo”. Over time, he would take him out for groundwork and the two bonded, which would alter Shorty’s ultimate fate.

Assessed by a vet as only 8-10 years old and figured to be a mustang by resident experts, his new owner tried to work him into a worthwhile horse, but eventually he too was bucked off, resulting in broken ribs. He decided Shorty was untrainable, and called out the vet to put him down. The vet refused to euthanize a healthy non-aggressive horse. So he planned to sell him for $200 to a party whose intentions were thought to lean toward foreign table meat. When George and Traci heard the trailer was coming for him one afternoon, they approached the man that morning about taking him themselves. “He was not a mean horse”, said George. “He was skittish and afraid, but would not bite, kick, or charge.” Aware of the fondness that George had for Shorty, he was given the horse. For Shorty, it was nothing short of winning the cosmic

lottery.

It was a long road ahead for George, but at least Shorty was out of danger. However, the horse had heavy baggage, and it would be the following year before George would even be able to get in the saddle. Old scars on Shorty's face and body bear remembrance of a horrible past, one that would not leave the memory of any horse quickly, if ever. "I can tell he still has flashbacks", George said quietly. "I will come to his stall sometimes, and he has his head down, and there is worry in his face. I understand him though, and his suffering. " Traci adds that George has amazing patience and a natural horsemanship that has helped renew Shorty's trust in people. "I'm a technical rider – I use training methods and steps", she commented. "George just works with his horse on their own terms and it's beautiful; it kinda makes me jealous!" Indeed, they have come far. In their second year of gymkhana, George and Shorty are climbing the ranks to some top finishes.

So what is this former throw-away horse like? With his perfect star and glistening copper coat, he's certainly beautiful to look at. Then there's his personality - fun and happy, say Traci and George…and he's smart. While Traci's horse Rodeo will bob unsuccessfully to try to retrieve a floating apple in the water bucket, Shorty will just drink the water down and take the prize. He picks the lock on his round pen so he can cruise the ranch. Once he opened a sealed pressure-release bin to steal an enormous mouthful of grain and then return to his stall and drop it in his feed bucket to eat. Shorty is one crafty horse. He doesn't whinny – instead he makes a mumbling noise – and does so when he sees George's truck coming or knows it's time for his daily carrot. With other horses, he's sweet and submissive. "My six month old filly suckles on him, and he lets her", laughs Traci. He's also great on the trail and brave about most everything – except people. Approach too quickly or reach for his head, and you can see him startle as the ghosts of his past continue to haunt.

But Shorty's future is filled with love and hope, thanks to George and Traci. They all love to compete, and George is excited by their progress at the gymkhana, where they just earned their first blue ribbon last weekend. "I want to see how far we can get in competition", says George. Next year, he has his eye on bigger events at the South Point. Their speed is undeniable, and if they can smooth out the rest, they should be impressive. "When he's running full out, it's amazing. I can feel him click over into that next gear. We connect – and it feels like we are flying!" And when his life in competition is over? "We'll always keep him", states Traci adamantly, "even if he's just a pet". "He's the only horse I want", agreed George – "I don't want any other. " With so many recent stories of horses abandoned, starved, or sent to slaughter, it's wonderful to find this one of courage, patience and the ultimate happy ending.