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# The One and Only

By Gigha Steinman

## LEGENDARY

# NICO

*When Sherry Koella decided to accompany her husband on an emergency vet call more than a decade ago, she never would have guessed the path her life would soon take...*



IT WAS THEN that she was first introduced to the grace and beauty of the Friesian. She began an unusual journey which led her to own one of the most famous Friesian crossbred stallions in the world. Little did she know she would become a pioneer in pinto Friesian Sporthorse breeding, and her unique stallion would become a legend. She also never could have predicted how tragically their journey together would end.

### FROM ARABS TO FRIESIANS

Sherry Koella remembers loving horses her entire life. When she first moved from Las Vegas to Tennessee in 1997, she had three Arabians. She mostly rode the trails and some endurance and even dabbled in team penning and working cows with one of them.

She met and eventually married veterinarian Jon Koella. One day she happened to join him on an emergency veterinary call. This particular patient was a Friesian, a breed Sherry was not familiar with. Jon had always wanted to stand a Warmblood stallion, but Sherry was immediately enamored with the Friesian.

As fate would have it, the Friesian had come from importer Harry Witteveen in Ontario, Canada, not far from where Sherry's own parents lived. On her next trip to visit her parents, she decided to also visit Witteveen Friesians. She wasn't ready or able yet to purchase one, but she continued to stop by to see Harry and the horses whenever she saw her parents in Canada and took advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as she could about the breed.

Meanwhile, Sherry had a friend in Tennessee with a Warmblood who wanted to buy another horse. Sherry's recommendation was "Let's go to Canada!" because she wanted her friend to see Harry's Friesians before she bought anything. So in early 2000 they made the trip to Canada together.

That trip was when Sherry first noticed Nico. Friesians are bred to be solid black horses with no white markings. Sherry remembers, "Harry had a long row of them lined up in standing stalls, and there among all the black faces, I saw this face with white and more refined." Unlike the others, Nico was not a purebred—he was a Friesian/Dutch Warmblood cross, by Tamme out of Cindy by Samber. He was also a black and white pinto and only three years old and still a stallion. He was immediately her favorite, but when she asked Harry about him



his response was, "He is not for sale!"

Her friend ended up buying a Friesian from Harry, but since they had no trailer with them, they had to return to Tennessee and then make another trip to Canada. Arriving with truck and trailer to pick up her friend's new Friesian, Sherry again inquired about Nico, but Harry still would not sell him. A subsequent inquiry yielded the same result. "Sorry, but Nico is not for sale."

A few months later, Sherry was surprised to get a call from Harry. Nico was turning four and was beginning to act like a stallion. Harry felt he was too nice to castrate, but he didn't want to deal with standing him as a stallion himself. So Sherry and Jon returned to Canada, pulling their horse trailer. Seeing Nico again, Sherry remembers thinking he was "the most incredible thing I'd laid eyes on." Jon saw him for the first time and said, "Put him on the trailer!" Her husband was concerned that Harry might change his mind. He could see that Nico was something special. "I remember I didn't have a big Warmblood trailer back then since I'd only ever had Arabians. Nico lowered his head and went on anyhow, and with excitement we took him back with us to Tennessee," recalls Sherry.

### NICO'S NEW LIFE

When they first purchased Nico in 2000, the Koellas weren't planning to stand and promote him as a stallion. Word traveled that Sherry had a unique Friesian cross. She remarks, "I took some flack for it because Nico was technically half Friesian, and FHANA especially was very opposed to crossbreeding." She can even recall one person telling her he should be castrated, but Sherry knew that that would be a bad decision.

Still fairly new to dressage, she took Nico to a clinic with FEI trainer Jim Koford to get a professional's opinion. At that point, Sherry says, "I was just having fun—I didn't realize what I really had, or what he really was." Nico was just five years old then and still fairly green, but after riding him for only about twenty minutes, Jim was already impressed with his talent and his trainability. He felt that Nico had FEI potential.

Afterwards, Sherry and Jon decided to send Nico to Jim for training. After approximately a month with Jim, he recommended that he show Nico at Dressage at Devon, and she and Jon agreed. The trip did not go smoothly. Their truck broke down, and Sherry remembers questioning the whole trip and wondering how people

would react to him.

Standing 17 hands at age five, and with his pinto coloring and the long mane and feather of the Friesian, Nico was clearly impressive and unforgettable. At that time, Friesians weren't nearly as common as they are now. People weren't really familiar with Friesians, much less a flashy pinto Friesian crossbred. Some people were appalled, as crossbreeding of Friesians was strictly forbidden, but Sherry remembers most people seemed genuinely interested in him. "Nico received so much attention," she remembers. "We didn't expect that, and I can remember Jim joking 'I can't even adjust my underwear because everyone is watching us!'"

### BREEDING CAREER

Soon Sherry began getting calls from people wanting a "horse like Nico" and inquiring about breeding to him.

Meanwhile Nico was seven hours away at Jim's farm in training. She missed him and was having trouble sorting out how to juggle breeding and training with him so far from home. Ultimately she took Nico out of training and brought him back to their farm, Hidden Promise Sporthorses, in Tennessee. "One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't leave him with Jim and focus more on his training," admits Sherry, "but the phone was ringing off the hook with people interested in him, and Jim's farm was seven hours away. Yet he was so talented. It's a shame we never got to prove how far he could go." Another



big regret was that she didn't take more time to ride him herself. "So many years were 'busy-ness' and were lost. I'll never get that time back," she adds. Nico was also taught to drive, and did a couple of combined driving shows too, but the main focus became breeding.

Nico's first foal was born in 2001, a filly out of a Thoroughbred mare. "That foal was so nice, people started wanting one," recalls Sherry. At first Nico was bred primarily to Arabs and some Thoroughbreds and even a couple of Quarter Horses. The Koellas were thrilled with all of his foals and his prepotency, but began to move more towards an emphasis on sport within their own breeding program. Dressage was becoming Sherry's passion, and she began to learn more about biomechanics, the value of a good mind and developing her eye. Their breeding goals became fine-tuned. She and Jon agreed they wanted to breed horses with talent for the upper levels but "with a



brain amateurs could enjoy." This also meant they would focus on quality and performance even if that meant selling fewer breedings. "We didn't want to overbreed Nico; we wanted to create a legacy," she remarks.

Sherry began collecting what she jokingly referred to as a "small but hand-selected harem" for Nico. This harem included imported and domestically bred Hanoverian, Dutch Warmblood, Trakehner and Ster Friesian mares.

Nico went on to become the first pinto Friesian Sporthorse to be fully approved for breeding by the Friesian Sporthorse Association in 2008. (To date he is still the only pinto Friesian Sporthorse to have been approved for breeding.) He was one of the most highly recognized Friesian Sporthorses in the world. The Koellas became pioneers in pinto Friesian Sporthorse breeding, and Nico became a prime ambassador for the breed. Sherry admits, "Nico spurred on the popularity of Friesian crossbreeding and really brought attention to it. I felt so privileged to own him."

### CRISIS AT CHRISTMAS

And then, in the early hours of Christmas morning 2010, a tragic barn fire turned their world upside down. One of Sherry's last memories before the fire was of her and her husband leading two of the mares in for the night. "The snow was beginning to fall, and it was so peaceful that Christmas Eve," she says.

That peacefulness was shattered hours later, when they awoke to a neighbor (who was also a volunteer fireman) honking his horn and flashing his lights wildly in the yard. A neighbor had called 911 to report a fire—it was one of the Koella's barns.

"My husband has always been my hero. He is the strongest person I know. He can fix anything, but I heard something in his voice as he looked out and yelled 'no!' I knew it was terrible, and it was too late."

One of their barns was engulfed in flames and the fire was spreading quickly. Sherry and Jon frantically rushed to the barns, but, she says, "The fire was horrible, the flames were everywhere, 100 feet in the air. I'll never forget the popping sounds—the fire was so huge and horrible. I knew my animals were dying, and I couldn't do anything."

There was tragically no way to get to Nico. Sherry was able to save one of the mares and her foal, but two other mares and their foals were also lost. The fire had also spread to the second barn which housed Adonai, one of the only stallion sons of Nico. They could only see flames where Adonai's stall was, and the halter hanging outside the stall was too burning hot to touch. Her husband ran in with literally a piece of string and was miraculously able to lead him out to safety. The fire quickly engulfed the second barn as well, destroying all of their tack and nearly

all of their farm equipment. In the end five horses died in the blaze which included their beloved Nico.

Their area is serviced by a volunteer fire department which had only a small crew that night, most likely due to the holiday. They fought the fire through the night with the help of neighbors and friends while the Koellas prayed it wouldn't spread to the house. By 6:00 a.m. the firefighters began to leave. For the next four days, the Koellas, along with friends, family, and neighbors, stayed up in rotating shifts 24 hours a day watching as the fire smoldered, hoping it wouldn't re-ignite.

### PAINFUL RECOVERY

Sherry says the fire was a nightmare they can't ever wake up from, but says her faith in God has helped her to find peace. Although her heart still aches, she has to trust God. "I am so blessed to have had Nico. He had a wonderful life, and he knew he was special. My heart is broken to realize what we lost. I don't know what God has in store for us or the farm, and for now I just stay busy and have faith. We are so grateful for the people who are praying for us and the huge outpouring of support."

Recovery has been a slow process, and the flooding in late February and early March of 2011 in that area of Tennessee has only added to the difficult clean up.

The future of Hidden Promise Sporthorses remains unclear. Luckily the Koellas have some frozen semen from Nico. They also still have Adonai, their stallion by Nico. Adonai has sired two foals so far, which Sherry says were both breathtaking. "We were so excited to see they were so similar to Nico. Nico was such a prepotent sire, we are thrilled and thankful for Adonai." Sherry admits that they are still not sure what they will do about breeding and the future. They also have two other young stallions: Malachi, a purebred Friesian, and King, a third generation Friesian Sporthorse who is 7/8 Friesian by Adonai and a Nico grandson. Another Nico son, a gelding named Elijah, is currently in training with Jochen Hippenstiel and was expected to make his FEI Prix St. Georges debut this year, although all plans are up in the air at the moment.

They are also expecting four Nico foals this year. Two are out of Friesian Ster mares, one is out of a Hanoverian mare, and one is out of a pinto Warmblood mare by the German Warmblood stallion Rainbow. Even after his tragic death at the age of 14, seeing Nico's progeny on a daily basis is a gentle reminder of Nico's majesty and presence that still reigns at Hidden Promise Sporthorses. **WT**

