



Mocha Brewing

By Roberta Pattison

Equine Health Research Fund-supported studies at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVN) have made many significant contributions to the cause of improving horse health around the world. But in 1997, a welcome — if unintended — byproduct of a research study was born in the form of a feisty bay filly that was eventually christened ZF Mocha.

Mocha's parents — a Standardbred mare named Java and an Arabian colt — took part in a wound healing study that was conducted at WCVN by PhD student Dr. Christine Theoret and her supervisor, surgical specialist Dr. Spencer Barber.

Horses used in the College's equine health research studies come from various sources, and at the end of each project, researchers go to considerable effort to find good homes for these horses. Mocha's sire and dam were a good example of this practice: once the study was completed, Dr. Don Smythe of Kipling, Sask., then a WCVN student, bought the pair.

Both horses eventually found their way to the Delisle-area acreage of another student, Dr. Lorrie Fraser (now of Wetaskawin, Alta.), where the unlikely match between the mare and young stallion occurred.

Dr. Trisha Dowling, a professor of clinical pharmacology in WCVN's Department of Veterinary Biomedical Sciences, is also an endurance riding competitor. Always on the lookout for a good endurance prospect, Dowling initially went out to Fraser's acreage to take a look at Mocha's sire (who had been gelded) for her husband, Brian Zwaan.

The correctly-built, young gelding was too small for the six-foot-tall Zwaan. But a year later, Dowling remembered the horse's excellent conformation when she heard that he had produced a filly out of the Standardbred mare. In March 1998, Dowling returned to Fraser's acreage with some birthday money in her pocket — intent on seeing the young filly.

"She was a late yearling — small, hairy and a little thin — but there was definitely something about her. Lorri and I made the deal, we loaded her in the trailer, and when I stopped on the way home to check on her, she

was eating," remembers Dowling. "I thought, 'Hmm, eats under stress. Good endurance prospect.'"

Started under saddle at the age of three, Mocha started to compete as a four-year-old in 25-mile endurance rides under the guidance of a various WCVN student-riders.

"New veterinary students arrive every year and many of them are talented riders from all disciplines who have to leave their horses behind while they're at school," explains Dowling, who regularly pairs up students with her young horses. "Mocha's riders included Dr. Crystal Madrigga of Williams Lake, B.C., Dr. Meredith Dunki of Calgary, Alta., and Dr. Sam Crosdale of Sherwood Park, Alta. They all helped to train her and competed with her in the early years. They're also among her biggest fans."

Dowling eventually took over Mocha's reins as the little horse's skill in the sport became noticeable. "Mocha is small, plain, tough, bossy and mean as a snake," sums up her owner with unabashed admiration. "She looks after herself, and this is the attitude you want in an endurance horse. It could have been bad if she had ended up in the wrong hands, but she has channelled her energy into competition. On a ride, she's easy to place — front or back, with other horses or alone — and she has never been tired. I'm still learning what she can do."

Mocha was seven when she completed her first 100-mile endurance race. On June 11, the nine-year-old horse and Dowling finished eighth out of a field of 40 entrants in the Fort Howes CEI*** 100-mile endurance race, held in the Custer National Forest near Ashland, Mont. The annual international competition is sanctioned by Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI).*

Mocha and Dowling's excellent time in the Fort Howes ride earned them a "Certificate of Capability" which qualifies the pair for CEI**** international team events like the World and North American Championships during the next two years (Dowling and Mocha rode for Canada as individual competitors in the Fort Howes ride).

"That was our goal — to get our Certificate of Capability — but the eighth-place finish was nice considering how tough the competition was and that Mocha wasn't fully fit," says Dowling, who was particularly pleased with her horse's excellent condition at the end of the ride. "At the final metabolic check two hours after the finish, she dragged me through the check and knocked the veterinarian off his feet."

Dowling hopes to compete with Mocha in next year's North American Championship that will be held in Montana on September 29, 2007. But the pair's ultimate goal is a few years (and quite a few miles) down the road. If all goes well, Dowling hopes to compete with her little horse at the 2010 FEI World Equestrian Games in Lexington, Ky. By that time, Mocha will be 13 years old — the prime age for a 100-mile endurance horse.

Mocha's story is not over yet. We'll keep you posted. **H**

* CEI*** is a designation given to all endurance rides of 120 kilometres or more in one day or 80 or more over two days or more. CEI**** represents senior championships of a minimum of 160 km in one day, junior championships of 120 km in one day, World Cup finals and finals of series or major rides approved by the FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) endurance committee.

Roberta Pattison is a freelance writer who is a regular contributor to the national publication, Dogs in Canada. Recently retired from grain farming, she still lives on her farm near Delisle, Sask.