

Filling Midnight's Shoes



After a routine veterinarian exam of Midnight Matador showing that there was an unexpected injury to his leg, Sam Jackson, associate professor at Texas Tech University knew that Midnight Matador's time was limited as the Masked Rider's horse. For the health and safety of the horse, they decided to retire him and began the search for the new horse. Midnight Matador's career of being the Masked Rider's horse ended. He was the longest-serving horse in the program's history after 10 seasons with 11 different riders so Jackson knew finding a horse to fill his shoes would be a difficult one.

The search started after Jackson let people know by word-of-mouth, they needed to find a replacement. Many local farmers, ranchers and alumni contacted him by phone or email offering up horses that they owned or were familiar with and thought would be a good fit for the program. They all wanted the pride of knowing the horse on the field used to be theirs; however, the majority of the horses that Jackson received information and videos about, did not fit the criteria for such a unique and recognized position.

"I received dozens of emails or phone calls about horses that people thought were good for the program, but most weren't even considered," said Jackson. "Some horses I got information about were yearlings or recently off-the-track-Thoroughbreds.

"He does really well and the public likes him, he just has to learn not to lick everyone."

The horses like that didn't work because of reasons like age or training."

To fill the large shoes of Midnight Matador a horse must be calm, well trained, and adaptable to many situations. Jackson rode about a dozen potential horses, while Ashey Wenzel, the 51st Masked Rider,

rode only a handful of those. They narrowed it down to three. Those three horses were put through a series of tests including large, loud and screaming crowds, band practices, meeting Raider

Red, observing fireworks, and watching and hearing a cannon and pistols being fired.

The final three horses also were on the field during a Texas Tech football game. The first horse did not deal well with the situation and had to leave the game. The second and third horses did well and actually ran, but there was something about the third horse that ran at the Meineke Car Care Bowl of Texas that stood out in attitude, behavior and personality. That horse's



name is Hollywood at Dusk, or Woody as he is nicknamed.

Woody spent his days before Texas Tech as a ranch horse. Coming to Texas Tech has been a transition for him because he has been faced with so many new and unique situations he had not experienced before. He was found on a ranch in Tulia, Texas, so he has not had to adjust to the West Texas wind or weather.

“He is a good horse with a great personality,” said Wenzel. “Part of me wanted him to run bad at the Meineke Bowl game so I could get him, but with how well he ran I knew I couldn’t and that he would be a great fit for the program.”

With all the unique and new situations Woody encountered, Jackson said that he maintained the same calm attitude and willing demeanor that continued to remind Jackson of why he and Wenzel thought he would be a good candidate in the first place. Jackson first rode him in an outdoor arena used for roping with no one around but other horses and some cattle.

Some of Woody’s personality traits and quirks reminded Jackson and Wenzel of Midnight Matador and what made him a great horse. His physical appearance also made him a perfect fit. He is an 8-year-old Quarter Horse gelding who is solid black. He has a calm attitude and is willing to do what is asked of him; however Woody does have some learning to do, even though he is very adaptable.

“Midnight knew the fight song and knew it meant it was time to run and would get all excited,” Wenzel said. “He [Woody] just stands there waiting to be told what to do.”

The new Masked Rider team of Wenzel and Woody made their first big public appearance on Texas Tech’s campus March 8 at a baseball game. Woody loves the public and enjoys the attention.

“He does really well and the public likes him, he just has to learn not to lick everyone,” said Wenzel.

Jackson and Wenzel have high hopes for the new horse. He is young enough that he has many seasons ahead of him at Texas Tech and is willing enough to be put into many new situations without much thought. Woody is expected to be a great fit in the shoes of the former Masked Rider horse, Midnight Matador.

Wenzel said she was sad to not have a full season with Woody because he is such a great horse, and she is going to miss him terribly. Even though her time with him was short, she is excited to see him on the field in the future with his new rider. She expects his career to be long and successful and that he will continue to be a great fit for the Masked Rider program.

Wenzel and Woody made it to a few more public appearances together and one more baseball game before Woody gained a new rider to carry on the field for his first full season of Texas Tech traditions. **T**

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As the story was going to press, the results of the horse mascot naming contest was reviled. Out of more than 2,500 names submitted, Fearless Champion was chosen as the spirit name for the new Masked Rider horse.