

Hoofprints from the Heart: Returning to Roland

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Partners on the field and friends for life, a gift of love was the reckoning force that parted comrades Paul Spiers and Roland. An ironic twist of fate brought them back together in a way neither could have foreseen—testing their strength, trying their patience, and ultimately, adding a new dimension to a seasoned friendship.



Paul Spiers gets a lift onto Roland following his accident. (From bottom left, clockwise: Marj Kittredge, Priscilla Donham, Paul Spiers on Roland, and Mandy Hogan) Photo Credit: Windrush Farm

Paul says Roland had a reputation for sizing up his rider's strengths and personality traits the moment they hit the saddle. More importantly, he made it his mission to keep those riders safe—one of the very reasons he became the mount of choice for visiting friends and celebrities. "I've had some fantastic horses, but none of them had a grasp on that the way Roland did," he adds.

Even off the field, Roland was one-of-a-kind, determined to show off his humanity to all who cared to take notice. "He had a unique talent for letting himself out of his stall," remembers Paul. "He'd pull the latch up and slide it over with his mouth. But for a horse like Roland, even that wasn't enough. He was an equal opportunity escape artist. One Sunday morning, he let the whole polo string out. All five of them, with Roland in the lead. They traipsed through the neighbor's yard, then went galloping into the center of town. The police followed him and thought they had him cornered in the school parking lot, but he took off again and led them towards the highway."

While the "standoff" of sorts did end peacefully (without a scratch on any of the horses), Paul quickly realized he'd have to up the ante to keep Roland in the barn. "Believe me," says Paul, "it took more than one renovation to keep him contained."

After a few years of fun on the polo field, Roland needed a rest and Paul turned his focus to fox hunting. "I played polo until my banker told me I couldn't refinance the house again," Paul says quickly, his disarming humor at the ready. "Truthfully, Roland wasn't up to playing whole games

Playing polo was not one of those lifelong goals Paul Spiers set out to conquer. Rather, it conquered him. In generous terms, he didn't know much about the game. Working in a Boston hospital through graduate school, Paul admits he wasn't the typical equestrian found in the inner circles of Boston's elite. He was a hit-the-books type who would soon become one of the world's more promising forensic neuropsychologists, conducting studies on a controversial sugar substitute, and guiding students at Harvard and MIT. But after a few English riding lessons at a barn on Cape Cod, this scientist was hooked, and already, polo lay in careful wait, determined to make him a part of the game.

"It's like having an addiction," Paul laughs with recollection. "I was drawn in very quickly."

Under the careful watch of a partner and tutor by the name of Roland, polo became Paul's passion. It was Roland, a sharp polo horse who had graced the pages of *Polo* magazine, Paul says, who transformed him from an awkward beginner into something of a respectable amateur with a one-goal rating. To be fair, sometimes Roland kicked that one goal in himself. But best of all, the Quarter Horse-Thoroughbred cross who taught him the game would prove to be one of life's most promising companions. Standing at 15.2 hands, the bay gelding had a sense of charm. Wit. And according to Paul, a real knack for polo.

"Roland had been playing the game for at least 10 years—I was the new guy on the field," Paul says. "I'd think a play was going one way and he'd pull me in another way. I'd try to go down one sideline, and he'd lean in towards the middle. He knew where the ball was going and as long as I didn't interfere, he'd take me to it."

any more. It's a good thing I'd taken up fox hunting in the interim, so I had something to fall back on."

Left to retire and enjoy the view, Roland grew restless—and a little resentful when all the other horses would pack up for a polo match. Paul felt it was evident he wanted to work—he just needed a different kind of job. So after some serious thought, Roland auditioned at Windrush Farm, a therapeutic riding center Paul had lectured at professionally.

"I knew they treated their horses well and I could sense he'd be happy there," Paul says. No sooner than he had auditioned, Roland was welcomed with open arms. He took to his stall, his caretakers and his pupils, like a Broadway star to a new dressing room, even forcing a handyman with the same namesake to go by "Sparky."

"He fit right in," says Paul. "And into all the different aspects of the program. Summer camp for kids, disabled riding, everything. Not long after, he was chosen as therapeutic horse of the year for this entire area."

With Roland in a good home, Paul turned to fox hunting as his hobby of choice—a hobby that would soon change the course of his life. A couple of years after saying good-bye to Roland, Paul embarked on a hunt that would turn out to be his last.

"I was riding a 17.3 hand horse who was being lazy," Paul says. "He thought he could trot over a fence and he obviously couldn't. He caught his front legs and began to fall forward on his nose, then picked himself up and threw me."

Paul admits the telling of the tale doesn't come from his



Paul Spiers and Roland: the perfect polo pair. Photo Courtesy Scott Goodwin

Normalcy that did not include fox hunting, a sport he still loves. “I want to make it clear that I don’t fault fox hunting for what happened,” says Paul. “It’s a great sport. I’d do it again if I could. We all fall and we all get funny horses sometimes. I’d fallen my fair share of times—it was just that one extra fall that did it.” Though he couldn’t return to hunting, Paul could sense he needed the steady constant only horses—and riding—could provide. The legwork of how to make that happen became the tricky part.

“I have no control of my trunk,” Paul explains frankly. “Keeping my balance is about where I position my head and shoulders.”

But as he returned home from the hospital and returned to work, Paul found his strongest desire once again centered around Roland. “It had to be Roland,” smiles Paul. “It had to be my horse. When I saw him for the first time after the accident, I was in a wheelchair. I wasn’t exactly the same in appearance, but he knew it was me. He recognized my voice—he knew exactly who I was. It was a little ironic—two years after donating Roland to Windrush, they gave me a scholarship so I could learn to ride him again.”

After a few months of training on other horses, Paul and Roland were once again partners, putting on demonstration rides for others to watch over the course of the next few years. But almost as soon as Roland finished teaching Paul the second time around—giving him the mental leg up he needed to survive after the accident—the horse who refused to rest decided he was ready to retire after all.

“After eight years of excellent service at Windrush, he was ready for a break, so I gladly brought him home,” says Paul slowly. It was reflecting on this lifetime of selfless service to

Paul Spiers is the First Vice-President of the Board of Trustees for the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) and sits on the Board of Directors at Windrush Farm Therapeutic Equitation, Inc. He continues to work as a visiting scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and as an Assistant Professor at the Boston University School of Medicine.

Paul Spiers and Roland are February’s “Hoofprints from the Heart” honorees. Media may request additional photos or interviews for coverage. The above article may also be published in its entirety, provided the source is cited. Contact Sarah Lane by phone, (859) 225-6974, or via e-mail at sarah.lane@usef.org for more information. To review guidelines for Hoofprints from the Heart, log on to www.usef.org, and click on the Hoofprints logo on the right side of the homepage.

own memory—it’s one of several snippets from his life he’s never been able to place in his mental scrapbook. What he does remember: waking up in a hospital over two months later in a complete fog and being told he’d been in a coma and had suffered traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries. Several months later, Paul started to pull out of his mental fog much more quickly than the specialists anticipated. Even so, the earliest memory he could recall occurred two years prior to his accident, something the doctors call severe retrograde amnesia. Usually, that kind of amnesia prevents a person from learning anything new until the gap is bridged.

“I was lucky though,” Paul says. “Because I’m a scientist, I had access to a treatment I’d been researching at MIT. I started learning new things almost immediately—long before I could remember the past.”

Paralyzed from the chest down, it took Paul a solid year before he finally got his life to follow some course of normalcy.

mankind that inspired Paul to nominate Roland for the Cosequin Equine Exemplary Service Award, an honor given to horses who have excelled in multiple disciplines. Roland was the hands-down winner, rising above hundreds of entries sent in. Unfortunately, when the time came to accept the award, Roland wasn’t there to see the honors that would again lead to a well-deserved tribute in the pages of *Polo*.

Because soon after returning to Paul and his pasture at home, Roland slowed down. “I felt I needed to be brave and roll across the lawn to bring him some carrots,” Paul shares. “He nickered, as always, and then rested his head in my lap, in a way he had never done before, and sighed as if to bid me farewell.” A pause fills the air as Paul takes a deep breath before continuing. “I miss him. I don’t talk about him without getting tears in my eyes.”

Paul still rides on occasion, though it doesn’t seem the same without Roland under saddle. “He was a person,” says Paul. “Some animals are just like that. Shining stars. We’re lucky to share the planet with them. I am convinced that Roland bears the name of the famous, medieval knight immortalized in the epic tale of Charlemagne, *La Chanson de Roland*. Just as that knight sacrificed himself and returned to defend his fallen comrades, my Roland always gave his riders the best he had. Until the end.”

In memorial, Paul would later write: “Roland was buried overlooking the countryside he loved and knew so well, on a hill where he had many times watched the riders and hounds race past. And his spirit now runs with them. One day, if I am fortunate, I will find his kind and giving soul one last time and we may ride together again, for always.”

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