

Champion Thoroughbred Fosters Orphaned Foal

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Maybe it was an overwhelming maternal instinct. Or maybe it was that headstrong, competitive spirit. Brown Bess wanted another baby. Retired from life as a broodmare, the 22-year-old champion had the roam of a grassy pasture with other pensioned mares and some cattle at John Harris' River Ranch near Fresno, Calif. When a heifer unexpectedly gave birth, Brown Bess stole the newborn calf.

"She must have witnessed the birth and it set something off," said Dr. Jeanne Bowers-Lepore, Harris Farms' resident veterinarian. "It triggered some maternal response in Brown Bess. I don't know if it was pheromones in the air or what. But it was very difficult to get her separated from the calf."

But that incident led to a new career for Brown Bess as a foster mom.

One of Northern California's all-time greatest mares and the 1989 Eclipse Award winner as champion grass female, Brown Bess now cares for an orphaned filly at Harris Farms' main breeding facility in Coalinga. The foal is out of the stakes-winning mare Peaceful Road, whom Harris Farms purchased while in foal to Yonaguska at the 2003 Keeneland November breeding stock sale.



COURTESY OF HARRIS FARMS

Champion Brown Bess with Peaceful Road's foal.

Shortly after Peaceful Road gave birth May 1, the 15-year-old mare became sick. She died of colic on her way to surgery at the University of California, Davis. The little bay filly, nicknamed Kyla, refused to nurse from a bottle or drink from a bucket. No nurse mares were available. Bowers-Lepore tried everything else with no success.

"She was literally wasting away," horse division manager David McGlothlin said. "We were really worried about her."

Then, Bowers-Lepore thought of Brown Bess. "If she'd take a calf, maybe she'd take a foal," the doctor said.

Thoroughbred mares rarely are used with orphan foals unless they've recently lost their own baby, Bowers-Lepore said. With a quick kick, the high-strung mare could accidentally kill or injure the baby.

Suzanne Pashayan, who owns Brown Bess, gave her blessing to the experiment. After more than 40 years of involvement with the mare's family, the breeder understood Brown Bess' strong maternal drive.

"It runs in the family, this taking-away business," Pashayan said.

Two members of Brown Bess' female line had been involved in a similar incident. Nathleen, a half-sister to Brown Bess' granddam, Moog, gave birth in a paddock she shared with her daughter, Del Mar Oaks and Ramona Handicap winner Greta.

"Greta took the foal away from her mom," Pashayan said. "It's like she said, 'It's not yours; it's mine!' They're very strong that way. They're a very tough family to deal with. They have minds of their own."

Brown Bess also won the Ramona (gr. IT) as well as the Yellow Ribbon Stakes (gr. IT) and Santa Barbara Handicap (gr. IT). A California-bred daughter of Petrone out of the Windy Sands mare Chickadee, Brown Bess earned more than \$1.3 million during her racing days, with 16 victories from 36 starts. She had eight foals of her own with two--Pax Americana and Uncle Whiskers--still in training.

Through hormonal therapy, Brown Bess quickly started producing her own milk. But she wasn't so sure about this foal. "The baby would try to nurse, but Bess kept walking away," Bowers-Lepore said. "It got very frustrating."

Hiding the filly from the mare's sight, the vet tried giving Brown Bess more hormones. And then she witnessed what she called "a miracle."

"It was unbelievable," Bowers-Lepore said. "Her whole body contorted--just like she was giving birth. But that's when the light went on. She started nickering for 'her baby.' When we brought the foal back in, she started cleaning it like a newborn.

"Since that moment, Brown Bess has believed that this is her baby. She won't let the foal out of her sight. She's so bonded. She just fell in love with it."

McGlothlin said Brown Bess and her adoptive foal Kyla would be kept together until November "to make up for lost time."

Readers are cautioned to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.



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