



Icing on the *Cake*



White Thoroughbred is the only one registered in Texas

By Bana Varnon

If only every subject were as fun as math in Ms. Lawhorn's second grade class.

For each lesson, the small group of students intently tunes in to their teacher's questions: "If Duchess ate five carrots on Monday and 10 carrots on Tuesday, how many carrots did she eat altogether?"

A contagious string of giggles scurries across the class, and the little faces start to smile after mention of the Thoroughbred's name.

As mascot of Ed Cody Elementary, 'Duchess' is a celebrity throughout the halls of the San Antonio campus. The mare even has her picture featured in the glass display case in the school's foyer. The kids all recognize the name and love hearing about their teacher's Texas-bred mare.

But elementary school fame isn't the only thing that makes this homebred special.

Like an arctic dream, the 4-year-old is unmistakably pure white. And in a state where snow is an anomaly, the white Thoroughbred stands out among her kindred like a snowy import from a winter wonderland.

As the first white registered Thoroughbred in Texas and the 31st in North America, Duchess is among special company, because when it comes to white Thoroughbreds, they're as rare as a blue moon.

Of The Jockey Club's registered 2007 foal crop, just 19 of the approximately 37,000 registered Thoroughbreds were white. White Thoroughbreds are even scarcer than black ones, who average about 60 per year. Colors more often seen on the track include bay (34 percent), dark bay or brown (33 percent), chestnut (25 percent) and gray or roan (8 percent), according to John Cooney of The Jockey Club.

With such a slim percentage of white Thoroughbreds spread across North America, these frosted creatures are few and far between—a product of expert breeding combined with a hint of miraculous luck. In Thoroughbreds, darker colors are the majority, so when a breeder gets a white baby, they know they've struck something rare.

And on April 13, 2004, Dawn Lawhorn struck gold—white gold. Standing beside her chestnut mare Mystic Mint (nicknamed 'Misty') at 2:30 a.m., Lawhorn watched as the new creature made an early morning, feet-first appearance to the world.

"I was sleeping out in the barn on my parents' property in Boerne, with Misty moaning in the background," Lawhorn said. "I turned on the lights and there lay Misty with two white legs sticking out of her. It was not an easy delivery, but with the help of both my parents, we helped pull Duchess out."

Born on Texas soil on a chilly spring morning, the newborn foal was a true white Thoroughbred and "cute as can be," Lawhorn said.

A *Gamble* with Genetics

While luck had a great deal to do with it, Duchess' color was more than just a product of simple happenstance. In 2003, Lawhorn was out of college and back in the classroom as a teacher. As a rider most of her life, she bought Misty as weanling, but only as a pleasure horse.

"I had just started teaching and Misty was just kind of sitting there," Lawhorn said. "I thought I would breed her on the side to pay for my hobby."

Later that year, Lawhorn made her first venture as a small-time breeder. Gambling with genetics, Lawhorn took Mystic Mint to the white stallion Arctic White, a freshman sire who stood at



The colorful mother-daughter pair mixing pure white with palomino might show up on the show circuit in the future.

Painted Desert Farm in Oregon. By the late Texas stallion Naevus, who was a chestnut with a distinctive white spot on his side, and out of the white mare Not Quite White, Arctic White was the only registered white stallion in North America at the time.

“I wasn’t expecting a white Thoroughbred when I bred her to Arctic White,” Lawhorn said. “I thought I would get a chestnut with white sprinkles on the body or large white socks or something.”

Lawhorn could only wait to see the color of her new prospect, but the period leading up to the new

baby’s birth was anything but easy. Two days after confirmation that Mystic Mint was pregnant, the mare colicked and underwent surgery at Bend Equine Vet Clinic, where she was diagnosed with duodenitis-proximal jejunitis (inflammation of the small intestine).

“They told me not to bother to fly out; she wasn’t doing well and probably wouldn’t make it through the night,” Lawhorn said. “So I asked my friends and family to do a lot of praying that both Misty and her unborn foal would survive.”

The mare and foal lived, and so did the namesake. Lawhorn registered A Lot of Praying with The Jockey Club, and the filly became the first Thoroughbred of her color registered in Texas.

Once the frosted baby had arrived, Lawhorn made sure her new filly would truly have the best. So she threw a foal shower, complete with presents, friends and food.

“I know it’s silly but that was kind of fun,” she said. “I invited my friends and some faculty from Ed Cody. We had carrot cake and apple slices, and a lot of people showed up with things like fly spray or baby halters.”

Duchess enjoyed the attention, presents and, most of all, food. After all, Lawhorn said, “Duchess is my spoiled baby.”

As a new breeder trying to break into the industry, Lawhorn had initially planned to sell Duchess, but with one look at her white coat, that plan was soon out of the question.

Double Duty *Thoroughbred*

After her arrival, Lawhorn asked the principal if Duchess could be mascot for the school, known as the Cody Colts. The principal readily agreed, and the white Thoroughbred soon became a local icon.

The school’s technology teacher and her “Ed Cody TV” crew (a group of fourth and fifth grade young journalists) came out to the Boerne property shortly after Duchess’ birth. The elementary news crew took pictures and filmed Duchess for their morning announcements program.

“It was quite the experience for most of the students as they had never been out to the country and around horses,” said Amber Samaniego, Ed Cody’s technology teacher.

The young anchors then interviewed Duchess’ farrier and vet, and the crew used the footage to compile a short video on Thoroughbred upkeep, racing and health, which they shared with the entire school.

“The kids enjoyed learning about how the farrier trimmed the horses’ hooves and put new shoes on them, and how the vet helped keep the horses healthy,” Samaniego said. “The students on campus were quite envious of the ECTV crew because they got to visit with Duchess in person.”



Dawn Lawhorn is believed to be the only owner of a registered white Thoroughbred in Texas.

In the *Classroom*

Since that day, the Ed Cody kids all know Duchess. And they know Ms. Lawhorn takes care of her. But it’s not her rare color that makes her so

intriguing to the students.

“I don’t know if they even know how rare a white Thoroughbred is,” Lawhorn said. “They just like hearing about Duchess and all of her little things that she does day to day.”

Teaching a group of wandering 7- and 8-year-old minds can be hard, but Lawhorn said it’s easier when she brings Duchess into the equation.

“Any time I can relate Duchess to a lesson, I do,” Lawhorn said. “We sometimes compare weight when they’re learning about pounds; how much they weigh compared to how much Duchess weighs. And they’re always amazed how Duchess can be 1,100 pounds.”

As a celebrated mascot, Duchess’ name and picture appear throughout the school. The school even incorporates their mascot into special art contests and competitions. For her birthday in April, the students all received bookmarks, which showed pictures of Duchess and included fun facts about her and Thoroughbreds in general.

Trying out the *Track*

In 2006, Lawhorn sent Duchess to trainer Teddi Meek in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, in preparation for her 2-year-old year. Though Arctic White’s racing record was non-descript and Misty never raced, Duchess carried bloodlines from Misty’s dam Tap the Mint, a Grey Dawn II mare who hit the board in 15 of her 49 lifetime starts.

A little nervous about entering the filly into the racing scene, Lawhorn waited until late summer to send her first runner to the track.

“With dressage and jumping, I don’t ride until they’re two or two and a half at the earliest so it was a big transition for me to start them as a yearling,” Lawhorn said. “So I told the trainer that I’d send her, but not until she was a full 2-year-old.”

After four months of training, Duchess was ready to start, but never made it into a race.

“She did everything right,” Meek said. “She had showed lots of talent, lots of speed, lots of potential on the racetrack, and we entered her a few times, but she never ran. Two of the races that I entered in did not go and

Like Father, Like *Daughter*

As one of two white foals that Arctic White sired in 2004 (the other a white colt born in Oregon), Duchess is a spitting image of her white sire, whose color derives from his maxed-out sabino gene.

The stallion has moved from his original home in Oregon to Kentucky and then to Oklahoma, and now stands as property of Duchess’ former trainer Teddi Meek at Sunlight Farm in Sallisaw, where he serves his fifth year of active stud duty.

“I have Arctic in the barn with my racehorses and you would never know that I have a stud at the farm,” Meek said. “He goes on the walker with them. He just has a really good mind and he’s never a problem.”

At the time of Duchess’ foaling, Arctic White was the only white Thoroughbred in North America standing at stud. Now, Arctic White is one of eight white stallions, according to John Cooney of the Jockey Club.

the others she did not draw in because she missed the deadline for her papers at the racing office.”

Duchess went back home to South Texas, where she retired her racing shoes and registered name.

In *Queue* for Another Hue

Though racing wasn’t in her cards, another career loomed on the horizon for Duchess—motherhood. Because she was such a rare color, Lawhorn thought maybe some experimental color breeding might produce some vibrant results. After all, it did with Misty.

And when the cremello Thoroughbred stallion RFF El Dorado at Red Fox Farms in Bryan, Texas, finally became available to the public before the ranch’s relocation to Canada, Lawhorn played the genetics game all over again.

“After Duchess came home, a friend of mine called and said she would breed El Dorado only to a few select customers,” she said. “Cremello is a very rare Thoroughbred color, so I wondered, what color can she possibly throw?”

Duchess foaled her first baby in March 2008, and just like her mom, the newborn turned heads as a palomino filly.

Like her mom, A Hint of Magic (aka Blossom) is double registered as a Thoroughbred and Paint, with white markings reminiscent of Duchess splashed across her palomino base color.

“Plus, she’s cute as a doll,” Lawhorn said. “Blossom has her mom’s personality—she’s very confident. Some horses just have more heart than others; a more outgoing personality. It’s just something about them, and Blossom’s got it.”

Looking *Ahead*

For now, Duchess remains in the foaling pasture with her new little one. But once Blossom gets older, Lawhorn hopes to enter the attractive mother-daughter pair into some shows.

“I would like to start them in Paint shows, just to get the baby out there a little bit so she can start getting used to being around a lot of people,” Lawhorn said.

After that, Lawhorn hopes to sell the palomino Thoroughbred,



Duchess became the subject of a “news” report that was shown to the entire school.

provided that she doesn't get too attached like she did with Duchess.

As for Duchess, Lawhorn expects to put her 16-hand white mare into dressage or jumper training, but the mare might produce a grandbaby of Secretariat in the coming years.

"I'm not looking to breed her right away, but if I did breed her, I might go next year to Tinnors Way because I really like him," she said. "I went up and visited him and he's beautiful."

Small Operation, *Vibrant* Results

Lawhorn, whose two-mare operation consists of 4-year-old Duchess and 12-year-old Misty, only breeds her mares once every two years. As a breeder whose trademark has become colorful horses, she says she just does it for a little extra money, and a little extra fun along the way. Since Duchess is a rare gem herself who will always throw white to her offspring, the color combinations are endless.

"I go for conformation first; I always go out and check the stallions, and look at them before I decide," she said. "But there are a lot of nice colors out there, and you never know what you're going to get."

But she does, and not only does Duchess have the look, she's got the personality to boot, according to Lawhorn.

"Duchess, even from the moment she was born, is just a people person," she said. "She's just one of those friendly sweet horses—fun and easy going. She's wonderful."

Modesty, however, is not in the mare's repertoire. "She loves attention and loves cameras," Lawhorn said.

Of course, the mare is not without her quirks. As the self-appointed lead mare around the ranch, Duchess takes her time when eating, sticks out her tongue when she's happy, and according to her owner,



Although Duchess did not make an impact on the racetrack, her striking white color makes quite an impression in her paddock.

is a big fan of naps.

"She loves to sleep," Lawhorn said. "She's one of those horses that you can go out and pet her and she'll just stay down and sleep."

Besides napping, Duchess just enjoys passing the breezy Texas days at the ranch with her pasture friends Blossom, Misty, Willow, Whisper, Chocolate Chip, Honey and Cloud. Most days they graze, but sometimes their owner will come home with a special treat for everyone.

"When we have early release days, the kids get sack lunches with apples and carrots," Lawhorn said. "I bring them home and there's enough to share for a few days. Duchess and her family don't mind."

Plus, it gives the teacher lecture material for the next day, when a little hand rises with eager anticipation in the back of her class.

"She ate 15 carrots!"

"Yes," the teacher says, "and then she took a nap." ★



The students at Ed Cody Elementary in San Antonio have learned quite a bit from this Texas-bred, both in and out of the classroom.

And like a box of chocolates, that's what genetic coloration is all about—random surprise.

"I would have never thought that I would have been able to own a white Thoroughbred," Lawhorn said. "I read about them, and I had seen pictures of them, but I never thought I would have one."