

Trying To Save Endangered Nokota Horses



There are approximately 600 Nokota horses registered worldwide.

Photo provided by Christine McGowan

Christine McGowan was struggling to train a stubborn Thoroughbred when a cinematic image arrived at her farm. She remembers it clearly. It was life changing.

On a cold and windy day, a neighbor and her young daughter suddenly appeared on horseback. The girl was wearing a Superman costume with her cape flowing in the wind. They were having no difficulty dealing with the challenging conditions.

McGowan, facing mounting frustration with her horse, was intrigued. The

new one in front of her looked so easy to ride. It was no trouble at all.

That horse was a Nokota.

“That night I said to my husband, ‘The next horse I get is going to be a Nokota,” McGowan said. “I don’t know what it is. I’ve never heard of Nokotas. But I’m going to find them.”

McGowan soon learned the history. Nokotas are feral and endangered. There are only about 600 registered across the globe. They are indigenous to North America and were confiscated from the Lakota tribe. There are dedicated people trying to save the breed.

None of that was on McGowan’s mind that blustery day. All she saw was one horse and she was enamored. A Nokota could take away some of the headaches she was experiencing with her Thoroughbred. She could ride with peace of mind.

“That started the whole story,” McGowan said. “It was for very practical reasons that I thought this was a great idea. It wasn’t a particular color or size. It was truly because I felt that I wanted to be safe. I didn’t want to get hurt. It seemed like a much sounder horse and they are.”



Christine McGowan has developed a passion for the Nokota breed.

Photo provided by Christine McGowan

McGowan owns a 14-acre property in Chester Springs, Pennsylvania. There are 11 Nokota horses, and one Shetland pony, living there currently.

That chance encounter eventually led to McGowan forming a nonprofit called The Nokota Preserve, Chester Springs. McGowan has helped train and place 56 horses over the past 12 years. Her initial reaction to the Nokota has never faded. She still believes they’re special.

“Why did this happen?” McGowan said. “Why was this so exciting? Because they are unique and they do have a different temperament. They are more interested in people. They have a connection that if you tap into it is quite astounding.”

McGowan has long been interested in horses. She referred to herself as a “backyard enthusiast” when she was younger. She would arrive at a barn at 7 a.m. and it was suddenly 7 p.m. She couldn’t fathom that an entire day slipped away.

Once she discovered Nokotas and dug deeper into their history, McGowan connected with the late Leo Kuntz, who founded the Nokota Horse Conservancy in North Dakota. The conservancy breeds and protects the genetics of Nokotas and engages in community outreach to help sustain their existence for future generations.

McGowan has become a spokesperson and advocate. She helps raise funds for a genetic project at Cornell University that’s designed to place Nokotas on the endangered list and prove they are a unique breed.

“You can get the idea being around them that they have a certain sensibility that didn’t just show up,” McGowan said. “This is something that has gotten them through centuries of survival. Those characteristics are something we should look at as people. That’s what this whole thing has turned into for me.”

McGowan doesn’t know how her horse life might have unfolded if she never discovered Nokotas. She joked that she would have given up training and maybe started a nursery.

Instead she has created one of the few safe havens in the world for her favorite breed. People travel to McGowan’s farm just to meet Nokotas in person. The plan is to continue to train and place them for years to come.

"A lot of very happy memories were created here," McGowan said. "It has become a complete passion."

McGowan's education has never ended. One of the exciting parts of the breed is there's always something new to learn.

Her dream is for the horses to live as naturally as possible and someday have land to call their own. McGowan's wish is for some to find their way back to the Lakota people.

"I hope that whatever I did moved the story along a notch," she said. "These horses have been around for centuries. I hope I allowed them to stay around a little longer. Hopefully more people will become aware of their incredible attributes."

A bond between McGowan and Nokotas was formed instantly. It continues to this day.

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