

## Sunspot's Eclipse

### Sunspot's Eclipse: The Spirit of a Leopard Horse



Gala Argent

*My horse fights with me and fasts with me, because if he is to carry me in battle he must know my heart and I must know his or we shall never become brothers. I have been told that the white man, who is almost god, and yet a great fool, does not believe the horse has a spirit. This cannot be true. I have many times seen my horse's soul in his eyes.*

— Apsaalooke Chief Plenty Coups  
(also referred to as Chief Many Coups)

The long-anticipated day had finally arrived, and we waited impatiently for the haulers to bring our new 19-year-old stallion to us. I had done my homework on this horse, Sunspot's Eclipse, and everything I had found out led me to believe that I was one very fortunate breeder to have found and acquired him. I had never met him, but purchased him based on pedigree research and one very short video in which he was led around in his 15-by-15 foot pen, hardly a paddock.

**It has been said that for each person no matter how many horses touch your lives, there is *one* horse: the horse of a lifetime. Not everyone is fortunate enough to find that one horse, but I did.**

I had wanted to find a stallion for our program who had the bloodline of Sunspot Revel—multiple medallion sire, an extremely balanced horse conformation-wise, and noted for his consistent production of premium performance horses. I had investigated a lot of nice stallions who had Sunspot Revel four or more generations back in their pedigrees. Figuring that any horse with close-up Sunspot Revel would be older, I had scoured *Appaloosa Journals* for the 1970s and 1980s, and turned up and 1978 ad for

Sunspot's Eclipse, known as "Clipper." As I did my research, I found that Clipper's pedigree read like a "who's who" of the old-line performance leopards. Clipper is one of two remaining sons of Grand Champion Performance Horse and ApHC Medallion sire, Sunspot Revel F-1604. Sunspot Revel was the outstanding leopard performance horse around which Ralph Cannon built his Sun Appaloosas and the reason he started the Sundance 500 organization. (For background on Sunspot Revel, see Charles O'Bryant's article in *Sundance News* July/August 2001.) On top of that, Clipper is out of Bambi's Jungle Flower, an own daughter of the immortal Bambi E. F-2497, patriarch of Lee Warne's "Sully" line of halter and performance horses. Bambi's Jungle Flower was a striking 16-hand leopard mare who was a race winner, and showed in Dressage and open jumping.

Performance accolades do not diminish in Clipper's second generation. Both grandsires more than proved themselves in performance. Revel Junior F-1728 was two times National Cutting Horse Association champion, and in addition to Sunspot Revel, sire of World Champion Cutting horse, Revel's Decidedly; World Champion Camas Prairie Stump Race horse, Revel's Promise; and National Champion Cutting horse, Revel's Rawhide. Bambi E.'s descendants were as talented as he was, with many halter and performance winners including Sully B., who was National Champion Stock Horse and National Champion Cutting horse. We believe Clipper is the last grandson of Bambi E still producing.



**Bambi's Jungle Flower being courted by Sunspot Revel. The outcome of this mating was the elegant son, Sunspot's Eclipse.**

Going back even further, both Clipper's sire and dam were great-grandget of the ApHC Hall of Fame stallion, Sundance, F-500, through Rocking Chair Porter F-574 on his top side and Woodrow Shiek F-502 on his bottom side. Thus, Clipper carries the *close-up* blood of the legendary Sundance F-500 twice at the fourth generation—as far as we know, the only horse alive who does. He is also one of only three living horses we know of to have three of four F-numbered grandparents.

## Sunspot's Eclipse



**Clipper with Dressage trainer Holly Mathews as few months after he came to us.**

But as the hauling truck came into sight, questions remained unanswered: Who was this horse? What was he like? Would he live up to what the stellar "paper" version of him led us to believe he would? He calmly backed of the trailer and, for a moment as I gave him the quick once-over, I questioned my decision to buy him. He was in poor condition with ribs showing and flank sucked up, lame from a four-inch crack on the front of his near fore hoof, all of his feet had heels as long as the toes, and he had a suspicious nickel-sized lesion on his sheath that we would later determine was sun-induced squamous cell carcinoma. But as he swung around—although lame—with a twinkle in his eye, he proudly arched his neck, puffed up to his full 16 hands and, with that incredible dignity, presence and stoicism I would come to know and admire so very much, tried to prance. We made eye contact, and it was as if he was thinking, "Don't look at this decrepit shell of mine, look who I am; look at me inside." Right then I *knew*. I knew, immediately and intuitively "who" he was. And I knew I had made the right decision.

### Fixing Him Up

Over the next days and months, I would

and I thought I might have to dive for cover! When I told her she wasn't for him and that we had business to attend to, he looked at her, looked at me, looked at his foot in the bucket, let out a big sigh and stood calmly until the commotion was over.

It was months before I could ride him. Once the crack was under control and growing out,

and we had some weight on him, we still had the effects of 15 years of bad farriery to deal with. Not wanting to stress tendons that had shortened due to years of his heels being allowed to grow so long, with each successive trim we lowered his heels a little more. Finally, the day came

to discover what a truly exceptional horse he was. Our first chore was dealing with his feet. I had front shoes put on to hold the crack together, and soaked the foot daily. He soon showed me how sensible and unflappable he was. We were in the process of preparing our new place for the horses, so we were at a boarding facility. Clipper was in a paddock next to an Arabian stallion when his owner brought a mare over to him to tease, not 10 feet away from me underneath Clipper with his foot in a bucket. Clipper started to perk up,

to hop on. I had become interested in Dressage a few years back, and thought that this horse had the build and the mind to do it. But Clipper had been trained and ridden Western for 18 years. When I first put him in a snaffle you could almost see the wheels turning: "What's this? You want me to take contact? Each rein means a different thing? Like this?" You could see his mind working, ears back, listening, trying to figure out what I wanted. Listening, trying, and trying harder. We joked that he was like an old person having to learn German after speaking Spanish his whole life. But he did it! And it was then I learned that he applied himself to any task put before him with 110% of his concentration and ability. Within months, I had him going well in Dressage.

### Black Beauty with Spots

Like the fictional Black Beauty, Clipper's life was filled with ups and downs; good times and bad. Bambi's Jungle Flower was bought bred to Sunspot Revel by Iris Hahn (then Iris Brabrook). Iris had plans to build a Foundation leopard breeding program. "Already the tide was changing to the more Quarter Horse type of Appaloosa," she said in a recent phone call, "but we very much wanted to breed the Foundation-type horses." Iris says that Clipper was always a very mellow youngster, always reasonable and fearless but given to prance and show off—a trait he retains to this day. She had big hopes for the spotted colt in both showing and as an sire around which to build her breeding program.



**Always a show off, Clipper seems to know when the camera is turned on him. Shown here at 22.**

## Sunspot's Eclipse

His first training experience, however, was not wonderful. Iris took him away from the trainer when she found out he had tied him up, teasing him to kick and then whipping him when he kicked out. She realized that this gentle colt needed a lighter touch and sent him down the road as an unstarted long yearling to a woman known for sanely starting youngsters. Iris tells of what happened a few weeks later: "She piled several of her young 4-H charges on him and sent them up to surprise me—several miles away—along the highway and over hill and dale. Although he behaved perfectly, I was more than surprised, I was a little shocked. But she was so sure he would never hurt anyone. She proved to be correct."

His first crop of babies in 1979 were four beautiful leopards and a near-leopard and a blanket—all with his super temperament. But an unforeseen personal emergency forced her to sell not only Clipper but her entire herd.

His next 15 years were not so wonderful. When Iris went to check on him a few years after selling him, she saw that he was kept in an old pig pen with one small window, up to his knees in mud and manure. Sometimes he was let out into the little 15-by-15 foot area in which I had seen him videotaped. Once or twice a year



**Malaga's Sis-E, Clipper's first baby (now deceased), shown here in with her 1998 colt by Shavano's Brent Lea. (Colt bred and photo by Ken Spurlin)**

he was ridden bear hunting in the mountains or in a parade. Some years he bred one or two mares, some years none. But for 15 years, his life was one of a inmate, kept from the normal company of his kind, poorly fed and cared for, and unable even to self exercise. I can only imagine the boredom and frustration this "solitary confinement" must have caused for this personable and athletic horse! It is truly amazing to me that over these years he did not turn sour, aggressive or go absolutely stir crazy. I am sure that I would have.

### Further Training

As time went on, I found out just what that work ethic and ability could do. I knew he had the build and the mind to do Dressage well.

After running up against my own limitations of knowledge, I put him into Dressage training with a top trainer who stands seven Hanoverian stallions. From that came the feedback I needed—she adored him and praised his ability. At 19, after a lifetime of jogging, he easily learned that the next gait up from walk is a big "trot!" One day while at that trainers, top U.S. Dressage rider, Denny Callin, was conducting a clinic, saw him and said, "Now *that's* what an Appaloosa Sporthorse is *supposed* to look like!"



**Honest and dependable, Clipper here lowers his head so the first-graders can pet him on "farm day."**

Iris' faith in the young horse was well-put. After further training with Wymon Brown, Clipper went on as a two- and three-year-old to accumulate points in reining, trail and rope race, and his show career was underway.



**As a young stallion, Clipper accumulated points in reining, trail and rope race. Wymon Brown, up.**



**Clipper entered Dressage training at 19. His noted dressage trainer, Linda Waldeck, said of him, "His trot is big and it's real. He's not just throwing out in front and dragging behind."**

## Sunspot's Eclipse

His athletic ability did not flag with his age. At about 21, a neighbor brought over a high school exchange student from Spain who, with his father, has a set of "dancing horses" that performed at various events. My meager Spanish enabled me to ascertain that the young man did a fast and entertaining show consisting of high school Dressage moves. He asked to ride, and within ten minutes had an out-of-condition Clipper doing canter pirouettes!

As the years went on, we jumped a little—just messing around—and he took to it like he had done it his whole life. Whether it was a downed log on the trail or a over-decorated jump at a schooling course, he never once refusing anything I put him over. I came to admire his surefootedness in our steep mountains. Many times, I gave him his head and trusted him with my life on narrow trails with sheer walls on one sides and drops of hundreds of feet on the other. He never let me down.

### Clipper's Get

Clipper's intense old-line leopard breeding shows in his babies. With over 30 get on the ground, he has produced 85% color out of solid and colored mares. With five of six of the horses in his first two generations leopards, it isn't surprising that most of these are leopards. Of his colored get, 75% fall into the range of leopard horses—few-spots, leopards or near leopards—with only 12% blankets. Clipper has always thrown more fillies (65%) than colts (35%), leaving us over the years with wonderful leopard daughters, but hopefully waiting for a son to carry on his lines.



**Impromptu, halterless starting session with two 1995 Clipper fillies, Sunspot Celeste and Tierra del Sol. Miles Schuster, up.**



**Another leopard daughter, Sunspot Morning Flip, 1997 filly out of Toby's Lady Mae. (Photo by Joyce Tausch.)**



**One of all those leopard Clipper daughters, 1997 Sunspot's Red Moon, with dam Sonora Moon.**



**Bloom n Sunspot Lily, 2000,—yet another leopard Clipper daughter—out of M&M Classic. (Photo by Betsy Bloom, horses shown with her son Danny.)**



The astute breeders of Clipper's stellar ancestors did not introduce a variety of "types" into the bloodlines, but rather bred like to like. Because of this type-to-type breeding it appears—through looking at his cookie-cutter babies—that many of the traits of the Old-line horses are "locked" into Clipper's genes. All his babies fall within a predictable range of conformation and type. Like him, they all have good bone, balanced conformation, graceful high-set necks, relatively flat croups, and work naturally off the back end. His babies are leggy, substantial, intelligent, and inherit his super disposition.



## Sunspot's Eclipse

Over the years since we rescued him from obscurity, most all of Clipper's get have been snapped up by breeders. They know the value of his type-to-type breeding and the rarity of his close-up old lines.

Recently, though, owners of several of his get are planning or starting to show them. I have no doubt that like their sire, they will excel in anything asked of them. Two to watch are Kreider's Red Eclipse, a 1999 leopard stallion out of Ulrich Inspiration. Owner Helen Hansen plans on a Dressage career for this promising young stallion.



**Kreider's Red Eclipse, 1999 stallion out of Ulrich Inspiration. (Photo by Helen Hansen.)**

Another son, a 2000 gelding named Wishfull Thinkin (aka: Tuxedo), owned by Linda Hopper, is being prepped for English disciplines and already has acquired points in Hunter-in-Hand and Most Colorful. Linda also owns a 1999 solid gelding, Classic Eclipse. She said, "I can say the two of them have the best loving people oriented temperaments. I had the bay for sale but I think I'm going to keep him because he will make a great kids' horse. I was trail riding him on the fifth ride. Extremely easy to break out. Never a buck."



**Sunspot's Eclipse son, Wishful Thinkin. (Photo by Linda Hopper)**

After years and years of fillies, finally this year Clipper and our 16.2-hand mare Sonora Moon, gave us the leopard colt we'd been waiting for. Although there will never, in my mind or heart, be a horse to replace Clipper, we will groom Sun Son Shen to be our next herd sire. Calm and unflappable, correct and elegant, he has that intangible presence of his sire—and the same twinkle in his eye.



**Our 2001 colt, Sun Son Shen, at three days with his dam, Sonora Moon.**



### "Sitting on the Front Porch"

Clipper is 26 now. Jaws drop when folks meeting him for the first time hear his age, as he truly looks half as old. He has lived more years than most horses—a testament to both the hardiness of the old-line leopard horses and to the incredible heart that is his alone.

Clipper's "Black Beauty with Spots" story will come to a close one day. Like that black horse in the book, he has prevailed over maltreatment that characterized the majority of his life, and has come to a place in the Autumn of his life where he is cared for and much loved. We call these his "sitting on the front porch in a rocker" years. He continues to settle mares bred to him. He creaks a little, and his teeth don't work as well as they used to. I know that if I asked him to, he would do anything he ever did—jump or spin or run hard for an hour straight. But I don't ask anymore. His greatest enjoyment—and mine—is when I hop on him bareback and we together head off down the mountain road, both sets of our nostrils flaring to take in the sweet scent of pine and freedom. I wonder as we ride together like this if in his mind he ponders the years of imprisonment. In my mind I hope he is content now; in my heart I know he is.

As I was writing this article, I tried to stick to a straight rendition of pedigree, background and color production statistics. I tried to focus on the fact that Clipper comes from close-up, royal, Foundation breeding. I wanted to spend more time

# Sunspot's Eclipse



Clipper at 25, content at last.



It has been said that for each person no matter how many horses touch your lives, there is *one* horse: *the* horse of a lifetime. Not everyone is fortunate enough to find that one horse, but I did. For this I shall remain forever grateful.

Because, like Chief Plenty Coups, I have many times seen my horse's soul in his eyes. It is pure, and it is good.

discussing how he throws sensible, athletic, cookie-cutter leopard babies that are finally being recognized for the athletic potential they have. I wanted to say that to me, he is the epitome of what a Foundation-bred horse should be—big-boned, long-muscled, free-moving, honest, versatile and elegant.

But for me, this is not his story. Clipper's story is one of heart and of spirit: an indomitable spirit, a spirit that was neither sullied nor turned sour by having spent over half of his life in deplorable conditions. Throughout all, he has remained "who" his is—stoic and proud, gentle and sensible, smart with a sense of humor, and honest as the day is long.



Sunspot's Eclipse and the author.

