

It was 1992 and a typical weekend at a horse show. Heidi Coop and her children were doing their usual showing with one horse, three kids and the multitude of tack changes needed to go from Leadline for Art, Walk Trot for Haley and All Around Classes for Heather. They had been looking for another horse that would be the right fit for Heather for some time.

Heather had gone up to check a pattern and came running back to the trailer and said "MOM, come quick! You have got to see this horse!" Heidi followed her oldest daughter and watched a big buckskin mare that just floated around the ring like poetry in motion in a huntseat class. They both stood there and watched that mare in awe as the class and finished and she, Vans Mark, was announced the winner. Later that day, Heidi approached the mare's owner and introduced herself. She asked if Vans Mark might possibly be for sale. The answer was no. Over the course of the summer, they continued to see Wendy & her mare at open shows and fair shows and always stood in awe watching her float around the ring.

Well, those of us in this room tonight who truly know Heidi, knows that she can be a very persistent woman! Over the course of that summer and talking with Wendy, Heidi was finally able to convince Wendy to sell Vans Mark to them. They arrived at a price and parted ways. Heidi and her kids were feeling on top of the world. A couple of days later, when Heidi called Wendy to make arrangements to pick the mare up, Wendy was crying on the phone. Wendy told her that she didn't think she could sell the mare because she had grown to love her so much. To make a long story short, Heidi's persistence paid off and by the end of the summer, Van's Mark became theirs.

The bond that Heather and Vans Mark – or Decka as she was known around the barn, was almost immediate and they were inseparable. Other than the time spent in school, she spent every waking hour with Decka. Heather even found a way to get a job at the barn and keep Decka there instead of at their house simply so she could spend even more time with her horse.

Heather's first show with Decka was just a few months after they purchased her at a Quarter Horse show in Gordyville known as the Turkey Run. Heather was very excited to show her new horse and didn't want to leave Decka out of her sight for very long and she ended up sleeping in Decka's stall on a cot that weekend (where she later admitted that it was VERY cold). This new team ended up winning the Novice Youth All Around at that show.

From 1993 thru 1995, Heidi and her family showed Decka at AQHA shows all over Illinois and some of the neighboring states. Heather was showing in the youth all around events and even Haley got into some of the action with the walk trot classes. Heather and Decka enjoyed immense success on the Quarter Horse circuit during those years with many weekend all around awards and year end awards in both the Illinois and Land of Lincoln Quarter Horse Associations. In 1994, Haley was even

was name the Illinois Quarter Horse Association Rookie of the Year when she was just a 10 year old. In 1993 and 1994, they showed Decka at the Quarter Horse Congress where Heather made the finals in Novice Western Horsemanship and both girls had respectable goes in their classes. In 1994, Heather and Decka qualified for the AQHA Youth World show in Fort Worth, Texas in Mare Halter, Showmanship, Western Pleasure and Western Horsemanship.

1995 to 2000 found the Coop family showing Decka at the buckskin shows. First in ABRA in 1995; where Heather and Decka earned several ROMs. One of Heather's most memorable moments in the show pen was at the 1995 ABRA World show in Youth Showmanship. They ran the pattern several times in practice and when they went into the ring, she said that it just felt like Decka was an extension of her arm and was so tuned in to the cues and knew what Heather needed her to do. They ended up nailing the pattern that day and came out of the ring as World Champions.

Heather aged out of the Youth division at the end of the 1995 Show season and Haley was coming up the ranks from the walk trot division into the 13 & Under Youth classes; so in 1996 Decka's reins were turned over to Haley be used has her mount in the show ring. Haley and Decka quickly became a polished show team in the 13 & Under classes and wasted no time racking up awards. By the end of the show season, they earned many ROMs in both ABRA & IBHA, their ABRA Youth Championship, several ABRA Honor Roll Titles and even were the ABRA Honor Roll All Around 13 & Under Champion!

From 1997 thru 2000, Decka and Haley showed mainly on the IBHA circuit. Besides Year end awards on the club level too numerous to mention, this pair earned IBHA ROMS in both Open and Youth, their IBHA Youth Championship, Several Superiors and many IBHA World Show Top Ten placings. At the end of the 2000 Show season, Decka was retired from the show pen and turned out to pasture all winter to relax and get hairy.

UNTIL....

Haley found out that they were a few points shy of their IBHA Youth Supreme Championship. They pulled Decka out of the pasture and took her up to the Mother's Day show in Jefferson, WI. They needed 3 points in the Category 2 classes. Haley figured that their best bet was in the barrel class. WBHA had a lot of kids that ran the speed classes, and they were good at it. They were hoping to get those three points needed during the summer. By the end of the weekend, they found out that their retired show horse could rock and roll with the best of them and they earned their Youth Supreme Championship. Haley was ecstatic and Heidi cried tears of joy. Decka was retired for the second time at the end of that show.

When asked to share their more memorable moments in the show ring with me, both Heather and Haley had some fun stories to tell.

Like the time that Heather was showing in a Hunter Hack class. Decka refused the jump, but Heather went over that jump quite flawlessly. Decka on the other hand, did not. As Heather was getting up and brushing herself off, Decka just looked at her and then turned and walked away. Everyone thought that was funny, with the exception of Heather at the time.

The Illinois Heartland Holiday Circuit was giving out a champion All Around Award. This was given to the youth/horse combo who earned the most points at the three Illinois State Buckskin Association Holiday shows - Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day. The reward was a Crates Saddle. Hayley knew that there was an all around, but didn't realize it was a saddle AND that there was an awards presentation at the end of the show. She says that she always laughs at those photos because she is in shorts, a t shirt and flip flops, sitting bareback on Decka, who is in a halter and lead rope. That photo just summed up the casual way that they always hung out and spent time together when they weren't all dressed up for the show ring.

Hayley said that she always wanted a barrel horse, but they didn't go that route of competition, so instead, she decided to dress Decka up like she was a serious runner....which Decka could have been, but Haley admits that she didn't know how to make that happen. Haley had the barrel saddle, splint boots and had just gotten a new red bridle to match all their red stuff. She was in a hurry to get everything together before the Barrel Class so her mom put the bridle together and threw it on Decka for her. Well....when they came around the last barrel, the darn bridle came apart and Hayley was left hanging onto some reins attached to a dangling bridle around Decka's neck. Although she was panicked, it never fazed Decka and she just ran for home and curved around at the fence and stopped. Apparently Hayley didn't need steering or brakes that day!

When Hayley was 16, she convinced her mom to let her take Decka in the Senior Hunter Under Saddle class at the IBHA World Show. They were in the class with lots of trainers and some "big time horses" has her mom told her. They ended placing third in the World that day. While a little part of Hayley was disappointed that they didn't get a buckle, there was an even bigger part of her that was so proud as she had just taken her youth All Around Horse into a Hunter Under Saddle class against trainers and placed third!

Decka was also a 4-H mount for both girls. Heather was asked to do a reining exhibition at the Kendall County Fair. She practiced that reining pattern at home like crazy and when she performed the pattern at fair, it went smoothly and without any hiccups. And when she entered the ring, she took off Decka's bridle and performed it bridleless.

In Heather's 4-H career, she only qualified for the Versatility class at the State 4H show one time and this was a class that Heather always wanted to qualify for. That year, she won the class with Decka. Heather was so excited and she was crying. She leaned down to hug one of her friends and

promptly fell off Decka. Decka just stood there and looked down at Heather as if she had two heads and just seemed to say “What on earth are you doing done there?” Whoops.

The first year Hayley was able to show at the State 4-H Horse show she was a 10 year old, she won both Western Showmanship and English Showmanship and had an awesome weekend placing top 5 in their rather large Western & English Riding classes. Both Heather and Hayley contributed nicely to the high placings for the 4-H Team Tournament every year they went to the State 4-H Horse show.

And perhaps one of Heather’s most treasured memories of all time was watching her two young daughters, Zoe & Venus, ride Decka. Not only did they show her in leadline a few times, but they were also able to ride her out on the trails.

During her show career, Decka amassed some pretty impressive awards.

In AQHA, she earned 52 points, 4 ROM’s, her AQHA Championship, 9 All Around Bronzes and 9 Grand Champion Mare Bronzes from the shows.

In ABRA, she earned 231 points, 12 ROM’s, A Youth Championship, 5 honor Roll Titles, An Honor Roll All Around 13 & Under Title, A world championship and several World Show Top Ten awards.

In IBHA she earned an impressive 801 points; 4 Youth Superiors, 11 ROM’s, A Youth Championship, 1 honor Roll & 3 Reserve Honor roll titles, A Youth Supreme championship and numerous World Show Top Ten placings.

Heidi was able to log over 800 hours in the AQHA Recreational Riding Program on Decka and Decka carried her throughout the terrain on the Shawnee Forest on the 100 mile State Stock Horse Association Week Long Ride without missing a beat.

The Coop family also won awards at open shows, 4-H Shows, including the IL State 4-H Show, and year end championships in the Local AQHA, ABRA and IBHA charter clubs that are just too numerous to mention.

When I met with Haley and Heidi last fall to talk about their mare, I asked what were some of the character traits that they remember the most about Decka. It was very clear to me how much this horse truly meant to this family as the tears of joy were abundant as their memories came flooding back to them and how much it truly meant for them to have their amazing horse inducted into the IBHA Hall of Fame. The words Trustworthy, kind, quiet, lips and ears were abundant in our conversation.

Decca's Ears....oh those ears. As Hayley said, Decca had "airplane ears". Her ears were just a little longer than average and they would flop out to the side a bit. THOSE ears became the vain of every photographer that turned their camera on Decca. They all seemed to have a hard time trying to get Decca's ears to come completely forward. They would come mostly forward, but to get them completely forward and perky looking was nearly impossible. Their farrier used to tease them and call her "the mule". But those ears were also a telltale sign of how relaxed she would be. Heidi always knew when her daughters were having a good ride in a class as Decca's ears were flopping off to the side. Undoubtly, when that happened, they typically won their class. Hayley said that when they had to stand in a lineup on the rail in showmanship, Decca would always have her eyes closed and ears straight out to the side with her bottom lip dangling.

Decca also had huge floppy lips, like Mr. Ed and from time to time would be a source of amusement for the girls. They would always take Decca's lips and make her talk and I am told that what she said was mostly inappropriate stuff. And while they were laughing at this, Decca would just look at them with a look in her eye that was un-amused and old-lady like. But she never flinched when they did this. Decca would often times clap her lips together when she was grabbing for a treat. And speaking of treats, she was a "cookie snob". Decca only liked Mrs. Pasture's cookies. If you tried to give her something else, she would just drop them out of her mouth like it was just disgusting.

Hayley said that her 4-H club was one of the larger horse focused clubs in their area. They had a wide range of kids in the group - kids who showed one time a year at the county fair to kids who showed every weekend on the circuits. The club often hosted grooming and showmanship clinics before the fair. Hayley would usually do a grooming clinic. She would put Decca in the cross ties and she'd have at least 20 kids and their parents around her in a circle. They went over everything from brushing to clipping and banding. Hayley usually showed them how to do something and then ask who wanted to try it. She would show them the different brushes and what they were for and then pass them out to kids who wanted to brush her; sometimes 5 or 6 kids would be brushing Decca at the same time. Hayley would show the kids how to pick a hoof and then let someone try. One time she was showing the kids how to band a mane, and everyone moved in close to see better - from both sides of Decca - peaking over Hayley's shoulder; under her arm and over Decca's neck to see what she was doing. Then she let them try. There were 3 kids at a time with stools pulled up and practicing banding. Decca never got flustered or nervous; she just stood in the crossties with her ears out to the side and her lip drooping in relaxation. When clipping, Hayley didn't usually let anyone else do this because she didn't want the mare getting clipper marks, but she could have let anyone clip Decca. She was always pretty calm and laid back. One time the 4-H office asked them to do a video on grooming for them. The guy taking the video brought out a big camera and lights and they had to do the video outside, not far from the road. Decca never flinched and just went along with it.

Decka was always the go to horse for people who didn't really know how to ride. They could just bring her out of the pasture, brush her off, and throw anybody up there for a ride. Anytime their friends came over with their little kids, Hayley would put them up there and let them go. She was a tall horse and kids were usually a little intimidated, but Decka would always put her head way down by them and look at them with her kind eye, and by the end of riding around, they would slide off her butt like a park slide. Hayley remembers one summer when Heather's kids were visiting from Florida and they wanted to go for a ride. She threw them up on Decka bareback and they walked up to the house. At the same time some cousins came over. She threw them up there too. Decka had 5 little kids – all under the age of 7 - on her back, and she just hung out, ate some grass, and walked around. The giggles were infectious and it was the epitome of the joy that horses bring to humans.

After they retired Decka, one of Hayley's favorite things to do was to take a book and blanket to the barn in the summer. She would put her on a lunge line and lay out in the grass on a blanket and let Decka graze around her while she read her book. Hayley often thought "this breaks all the rules of 4-H safety" but she never had to worry. Being around Decka, she was spoiled. Hayley didn't have to experience fear of horses or the thought that she needed to be on her toes or on the look out. She felt completely comfortable with her and anything she ever wanted to do; she knew I could do with Decka. Parades, Trail Rides, Carrying the Flag, Clinics, Obstacle Courses, Grand Entries, anything. Once she "dressed Decka up" as a racehorse at a derby party they hosted and all of her co-workers took pictures with her.

Decka passed away on March 3, 2015 at the grand old age of 27. Hayley told me that she is so sad that Decka isn't with them anymore as she has a 2 year old daughter who is horse crazy; Hayley often thinks "if we still had Decka, I could just throw her up there and let her go". They completely trusted that mare. She can't even count the number of times she said, "Decka will do it" or "I'll take Decka" or "I wish I had Decka". It's like having a first child that did everything right and was the best and everyone else gets compared to it. All of the poor horses they have had since Decka, although they were and are good horses in their own right, none have compared to the all-around incredible mare she was.

Decka was truly that horse that raised the bar for the Coop family. She had a great mind and would just handle anything that she was asked to do. She epitomized the height of versatility and was a true all around horse from halter to Barrel Racing. She was their once in a lifetime horse.

Ladies & Gentlemen, I present to you Heidi Coop and her daughter Hayley, the owners of this remarkable mare, Vans Mark.

Respectfully Submitted,

Michele Zimmerman