



Another Man's Treasure

Spot the Diplomat: A Healing Cal-Bred

by EMILY SHIELDS

A young boy exits a school bus at home and is immediately met by a waiting chestnut horse. They exchange a quiet greeting, and then walk towards the house together, the horse dutifully keeping pace two feet behind the boy's shoulder.

This is a scene from many of our childhood fantasies, but for Grant and Greta Hays, this display is both a blessing and a curse. Both of their sons, six-year-old Jack and two-year-old Dylan, are autistic, and it has taken the magic of Spot the Diplomat, a dual stakes-winning California-bred, to bring all four family members together.

The plight of the Hays family first came to national prominence last March when they visited Hollywood Park to meet the mighty Zenyatta and her trainer John Shirreffs. While touching the superstar mare and riding one of the Shirreffs stable ponies, young Jack lit up and was able to communicate with delight. It became apparent that horses ignite a spark inside of him.

Pursuing this revelation, Grant and Greta attended a camp for families with autistic children run by Rupert Isaacson, renowned author of the bestselling book, *The Horse Boy*, and founder of The Horse Boy Foundation. Horseback riding is a fundamental part of the experience, and the couple noticed astounding results. "While at the camp, there was a transformation that blew our minds," Grant said. "A diagnosis of autism is depressing and discouraging for parents, and most rush to doctors and specialists and spend quite a bit of money getting their children evaluated. But we discovered that being around horses and in nature is the best cure; that's what the children need. They start to glow."

Grant and Greta, who lived in and had successful careers in Southern California, then packed up and moved to Texas. Part one of their two-step plan—getting out into the open range—was complete. They just needed a horse.

Enter Spot the Diplomat, a gelded son of Worldy Manner. Bred by Harris Farms Inc., Spot the Diplomat had a solid 41-start career, which included seven wins, four seconds and 10 thirds. As a juvenile in 2006, he not only won the \$133,400 Graduation Stakes and the \$106,400 I'm Smokin Stakes at the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club, but also placed third in the grade II, \$247,000 Norfolk Breeders' Cup Stakes at Santa Anita Park.

As he got older, Spot the Diplomat's time in the limelight faded. He switched barns five times via claiming races, finally ending up in the hands of Peskoff Haymes and Summit Racing LLC. He was retired due to injury after finishing third in an allowance optional claiming event at Santa Anita in April of 2010. He had earned \$342,231.

Bob Ike, a noted handicapper and one of the managing partners of Summit Racing, contacted Grant and Greta with a proposition. "He asked if we would be interested in giving 'Spot' a good home, and then shipped him out for us," Grant explained.

The family is now leasing a ranch south of Austin in Texas, but the transition from a busy city lifestyle to a more laid-back one was difficult. "It was total culture shock," Greta said. "It honestly took a month to unwind, but we realized we were running out of control for no reason. Now we've settled down."

Jack and Spot the Diplomat, also a six-year-old last year, had no trouble. "While 'Spot' is obviously a Thoroughbred and can be difficult with me," Grant admitted, "he is miraculously gentle with the boys. He has never once done anything aggressive with them. He will let them do anything, such as pull on his tail and run under his legs."

Spot the Diplomat's new home is ideal. He is in a three-acre pasture that borders the ranch house, and miles of open range stretch out in front of him. "It's quite beautiful," Grant commented. "He has free reign and is without shoes."



\$133,400 Graduation Stakes—July 26, 2006

\$106,400 I'm Smokin Stakes—September 4, 2006

We've done some riding on him and some halter training."

Grant and Greta are novice horse owners, and admit there is a huge learning curve to their undertaking. "It's been such a learning process," Grant said, "because while he's wonderful with kids, he's been a challenge for me. He can still get hot and I'm trying to train him to be a safe walking horse for children."

"We are trying to take in as much information as we can from anyone willing to give input and direction," Greta said. "If the horse runs into the fence and gets a cut, we are still figuring out if the right thing is to call the vet or take care of it ourselves."

The couple credits Becky Florence as being instrumental in helping. "She leases us the property, built the corral, and gave us a halter and some supplies," Grant clarified.

With the help of Spot the Diplomat, the Hays family is changing. "Jack doesn't speak other than a few words," Grant said. "It can be so frustrating for them because they can't communicate. But when he's out in nature and with Spot, all of that goes away. He gets really happy, and before

the horse camp and having Spot we'd never seen him happy." Spot has helped the adults, too, especially Grant. "Before, I was so focused on the negative. 'Oh, my kids are autistic and it's a tragedy.' But Spot has been healing for me. My creative energy is higher, my career is flourishing. He's beautiful and graceful and gives off a healing energy. I no longer look at the autism as a burden."

"We changed lives completely in the course of three months, but we're not looking back," Greta stated. "We know this is the best thing for the kids, and while we don't know how to make their lives better in every way, we know that being in nature and being around horses is the most important thing for them. They respond to it better than any other therapies we've tried. And, in the meantime, we're giving a great horse a good home."

The Hays family could use more supplies, tack and general horse and retraining advice. If anyone is interested in donating or helping, or simply wants to learn more about autism and horse therapy, please contact Grant Hays at radiohays@gmail.com.



Spot the Diplomat with the Hays Family, Grant and Greta and their autistic sons Jack (6) and Dylan (2), at their ranch south of the city of Austin in Texas during December of 2010.

Jack Hays with Alli Goss

Greta and Dylan Hays with Carl Goss