



High Sierra Haflinger

By

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I rode my first Haflinger over 20 years ago in the Italian Alps. It was one crazy ride; pouring rain, treacherous rocks and some very brave Italian cowboys ran us throughout the hills for 2 to 3 hours at a time. Each time I climbed into the unfamiliar English saddle I prayed and gave my little draft a solid scratch, as if begging him to bring me back safely.

For years afterward, I remembered not only the wonderful temperament of these blond

bombshells, but the surefootedness, heartiness and strong build they had. In my mind, Haflingers were the perfect all terrain vehicle. For years, I settled with another favorite trail breed, Arabians. This was until I found my dream Haflinger just 20 minutes from where I live in Oxnard, California. Even now, there aren't many Haflinger sightings in this neck of the woods. It was meant to be; a horse named A-Star HHHH, who was primarily used for Pony Club and Dressage. My fiancée thought I was crazy, but I loved him the minute I looked into his eye. And the day I brought him home, I begin reacquainting him with his roots, the mountains.

I've since renamed A-Star to Schnapps, It just seemed to fit his personality. And although we've only been together since December, I must say this sarcastic, constantly hungry little horse really dazzled me when we went to the High Sierra's in Mammoth, California. I took him and our other Appendix Quarter from Sea Level to 9,000 foot elevation. We planned on letting them adjust for a few days, I promptly got us lost the first day out. This lead us to a 4 1/2 hour ride through dramatically increasing elevation and rocky terrain. It got even more rocky when we wound up on a shale rock slop that I thought was a horse trail. It wasn't, it was a deer trail.. But I realized



that when we got to the bottom and we had to climb back out. Schnapps just collected that muscular chest and pulled himself right up without ever faltering. I figured it was a lucky first day.



We rode the tough stuff for 4 days, over steep terrain, through rocks, up steep rock stairs, through overgrown branches and into large gravel creeks. My Schnapps never faltered. I just gave him his head and he knew what to do, as if his ancestors of the Alps were guiding him. During these treks, we also came across many hikers and mountain bikers. Schnapps' natural Haflinger curiosity always got the best of him and he promptly dug into this travelers pockets when the opportunity presented itself. I know he gave some friendly hikers a few giggles. One day, a nice hiker stopped to pet the horses and Schnapps managed to very quickly search and seize a granola bar hanging out of the gentleman's back pocket. I felt horrible, but the gentleman started laughing immediately and was amazed at how agile Schnapps lips were. He stated, "this horse uses his lips better than an elephant trunk."

On another day, we did have a run-in with a Mother bear and cub. The mother took us quite by surprise while we were headed up a somewhat challenging trail. I think we caught her by surprise too. The biggest surprise was that she wasn't worried about us at all, which made me worried. When she turned around and faced us, both horses wanted to get out quickly, but Schnapps never challenged my request to stand and face her. Once she went up a bit, we turned and went back toward our original trail. The peace didn't last long, when we turned around (again) to find a cub curiously following us. I don't know how Schnapps felt, but I was frozen in fear. I started clapping and screaming to chase the bear off, as Schnapps stood facing him. It was our pup who ultimately got the cub to cross our trail and run off into the brush. Surprisingly, Schnapps thought he'd done it and was now ready to continue to chase him. I never thought I'd have to hold a horse back from wanting to chase a bear! But we all know Haflinger's aren't just an ordinary horse!

During each of these rides, we would start at 8,000 ft ele. And sometimes climb to above 11,000 foot elevation. His stamina and energy never faltered. Quite to the contrary, he really seemed to be enjoying it. He learned quickly how sweet the creek water was, and soon would choose to drink out of a running creek rather than a lake. When we got to a difficult spot, he would slow down drop his head a bit and assess the situation, than I would let him carefully pick his path. At one point, his partner (the Quarter horse) got way ahead of us. I wasn't paying attention, which is no surprise to my friends, and before



I knew it they had disappeared ahead of us. Well, Schnapps knew it and was concerned. But he never panicked or got careless, he just picked up his step a bit and continued to navigate through the narrow terrain.

Better yet, Schnapps has only been barefoot for 8 months. Each time the ride ended I carefully checked his hoofs and watched him walk him out . I was sure he would have some major chip or be lame, but nothing. He was just looking at me wondering when we would be going again. Each morning, I was convinced he would be tender when crossing the rocky gravel road to get to the tack area, he was just as eager and sure footed as ever. It was nice to bring the duct tape and Bute back unused at the end of each ride. We rode into a Pack Station oneday for lunch. When we came out, there were three "Old Time" cowboy fellas standing around Schnapps looking at his feet. They said a barefoot pony couldn't handle the trails. When I told them where we'd ridden from, they went dead silent. They were shocked his feet were so hard. They ran when Schnapps charge them (in a friendly way) because one of them pulled out a carrot! So, off we went back into the hills, with three old time cowboys trying to remember the breed of the amazing mountain pony.

Each ride, had it's challenges and demands and Schnapps met each of them with eagerness, surefootedness and a sense of pure enjoyment. And each ride resulted in magnificent beauty. I think the horses enjoyed themselves on the fresh water of the crystal clear lakes and green meadow grass. Each day, I saw in my little Haflinger a flicker of his ancestors in his eyes and they were saying, "Ya hoo, this is what life is all about".

It appears that many of the Haflinger horses are used for Dressage and jumping. It seems these small but mighty horses excel in whatever they are asked to do, and with eagerness and willingness to please. However, I am utterly shocked I don't hear about more of them on the trail. Their tough feet, natural surefootedness and calm demeanor make them the perfect trail adventurer. I know, recently, I have gotten a lot of questions about other trail riders we meet on the trail. Either way, I am sure Schnapps' Haflinger ancestors of the past are smiling upon him. And I know he's ready for more High Sierra Haflinger Adventures!



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