

Clifford's Rosie

*Destiny comes in all sizes.
Words & photos by Lyn Miller.*



Clifford in '22, exercising patience on a long spring day, bumping calves along behind their mamas in Charleston, Nev. OPPOSITE: First Night Rodeo. At the age of 12, Rosie decided to try her hand at open rodeos where she would compete alongside adults in barrel racing. Sometimes all you need is a steady friend to encourage your dreams. Clifford did that for Rosie.

She'd never been a mama. Instead, her purpose seemed to lie somewhere wholly in muscle, reliant on speed and agility to earn her keep. She'd already spent years in service, starting out with an experienced hand that taught her well, to eventually being entrusted with the inexperi-



enced. This gave her a rather discerning eye and a wary heart, quick to judge the ability of those around her.

She'd earned her name from a children's television show. The character had also done a popular stint in picture books. We all know it; Clifford the Big Red Dog. Somehow, strangely, despite being a filly and bay to boot, the name Clifford stuck. Then she grew into it. Her heritage was deep in cutting horse bloodlines, so when she finished out at 16 hands, she appeared to be an anomaly. Clifford was a dyed-in-the-wool cowhorse.

However, Clifford was extremely hard to handle. With so much size in her favor, she could make up her mind and enforce her own decisions. And why not? She'd made many breakaway runs with inexperienced pilots at the helm, making her uneasy in the roping box. Clifford was consistent at putting the roper in position, but when that got old, amusing herself she'd fade left and cheat the roper out of a shot.

Day workers at the ranch were always put on Clifford. She was expected to put her prowess away for another day, always carefully picking her way. Clifford was relegated to the broodmare band when she became too much to handle, when there were too many better horses for day workers to ride. There, she was supposed to contribute to the ranch through genetics. Clifford wouldn't settle. Worse yet, she was wicked mean to the rest of the mares, so she spent many of her wasted years alone.

Clifford just wasn't dependable. Wasn't a producer. The mare got overly excited in the branding trap. Always passed up for a more dependable head horse, she never saw her day in glory in team roping. But, she was beautiful with her dark and intelligent eye, her gleaming hide, and her excellent conformation. So, Clifford hung around the ranch until finally, on a whim, it was decided she'd be sold.

Then, Clifford, named for a child's storybook, met someone who changed her life entirely. No bigger than a minute, with unruly hair and a devilish grin, Rosie walked into Clifford's existence and informed all that Clifford would be her very own. More than a few eyes rolled at such a bold statement from a nine-year-old half-pint girl.

However, not one to be turned away with a mere no, Rosie determinedly wormed her

way into Clifford's heart. It all started simply enough, little Rosie would drag a bucket over, tip it on its lid and climb atop so she could brush Clifford's back. That seemed harmless enough to Clifford, for it was fly season and her back was itchy. Then there were the little palms open, reaching up with a nibble of grain in the center for Clifford to enjoy. That was alright. There was no binding contract in a nibble of grain.

Just as we could have predicted it would, the day came Clifford stood dozing by the fence. Rosie shimmied her way up and slipped over the top rail and onto Clifford's back. Startled awake, she looked at the child on her back and processed what she saw. For a moment, the decision hung there, heavy in the air, like a piece of dry chicken lodged in the throat. Oh, but that little hand rubbing her neck just seemed alright. So, she decided

to go back to dozing with a wiggly girl on her back.

Whether Clifford knew it or not, that day she became a mother for the very first time. Clifford had to grow into the position of motherhood, just as all mothers do, learning to gauge what Rosie could handle bareback, how fast she could lope before velocity started to force Rosie's seat. Now, instead of creeping



her way around the gather, Clifford was running cattle down all while keeping her feet and Rosie's seat atop her back.

And baths.

Rosie, while not so inclined to have her own hair braided, loved to wash and braid Clifford's. When Rosie decided to take Clifford to playdays and junior rodeos, she wore sparkly paint when before fly spray was an unwelcome application. It took Clifford a while to catch the drift of those playdays. She was expected to go fast, or at least appear to go fast, so Rosie could win a ribbon or a halter, or even a buckle a time or two. But that really wasn't Clifford's job. No, not the winner's circle. Her job was to stay under Rosie no matter what. To catch that weightless bundle by stepping back under her when she slipped.

Clifford still liked to get hot in the branding trap, but for Rosie, she'd hold herself together by sheer determination. And where once she'd scotch a breakaway run just to amuse herself, she'd put Rosie in position for



ABOVE: When Rosie was old enough to begin breakaway roping in junior rodeos, Clifford had to find the balance between speed, and keeping Rosie in the saddle. **RIGHT:** Clifford and Rosie today. Rosie has grown from a half-pint wiggle-giggle girl into a talented young horsewoman. I think Clifford can take credit for that. Here the duo comes out of the box in a team roping run.

the best shot every time, unruffled the many times she'd take a rope to the face in a miss-swing. That 16-hand beast found her passion was pole bending and trusted her little Rosie to weave her through clean each time.

Clifford carried Rosie through many long days of cow work; sorting, branding, pregging, and shipping. She exuded endless hours of patience while she learned to rope, to put pressure on cattle at the right time, and as Rosie took a scolding from her father. Those days were a natural part of life and work. Her favorite, however, were the quiet days when the pair would wander through the empty desert, winding their way through the sagebrush, Rosie's legs dangling down at her sides as she shared her deepest secrets with Clifford.

Obviously, Rosie has grown, no longer the wild-haired girl that first giggled her way into Clifford's life, but now instead a capable young woman. Clifford still proudly carries Rosie, but now it's only for the glory work; the rodeos, the divisional barrel races, and the long weekends out of state. She still under-



stands her job has nothing to do with the winner's circle, and she still steps back under Rosie when she loses her seat. Now, however, there's younger colts that do the harder, longer cow work.

Honestly, I've shared the role of motherhood with Clifford. We've both contorted ourselves to ensure the safety of a slip of a girl named Rosie, watched her grow, nurturing her all along the way. Neither of us is young anymore, but I like to think, like me, Clifford enjoys admiring her accomplishment in building the confidence of a lovely young woman full of aspirations. I owe Clifford for all she's done, making my portion of motherhood a little lighter.

For all the great horses who've shaped the destiny of many a small rider, I say, thank you would never be enough. ■

Lyn Miller divides her time between writing and ranch life in Idaho. Check her perspective via www.authorlynmiller.com.