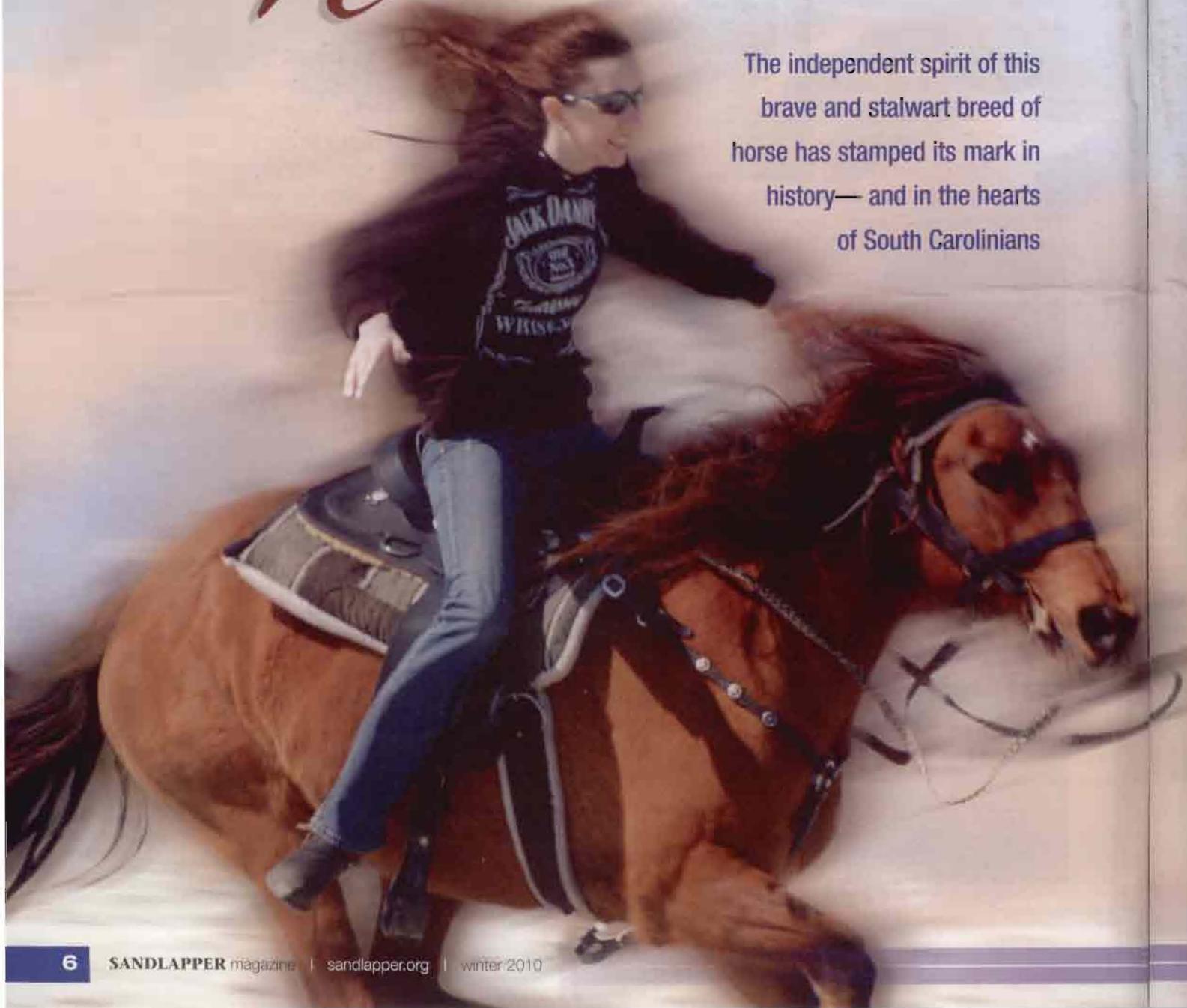
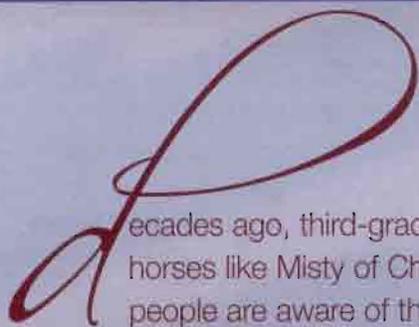


Horses AS HEROES

The independent spirit of this brave and stalwart breed of horse has stamped its mark in history— and in the hearts of South Carolinians





Decades ago, third-grader Jackie McFadden asked why South Carolina didn't have wild horses like Misty of Chincoteague Island. The story of Misty is familiar; however, few people are aware of the existence of South Carolina's wild horse breed, the Marsh Tacky.

"There are wild horses in South Carolina," Jackie's teacher said. "But very little is known about our wild ponies. Perhaps someday you'll change that."

Little Jackie determined she would do just that.

History of the Marsh Tacky

The ancestry of East Coast barrier island wild horse breeds traces back to Spanish explorers, who were adept at the use of horses for travel, work and war. Questions remain as to whether the horses were left ashore to allow explorers to return home with more treasures from the new country or whether horses swam ashore from sinking galleons.

South Carolina's wild horses were ignored for many years until early settlers and ancestors of the Low Country's Gullah residents tamed these spirited mounts for use in transportation and farming.

It seemed as if the hardy horses' warrior duties ended with the departure of the Spaniards. Just as tides turn on coastal shores, however, in 1776, the colonial tides of quietude gave way to the rat-a-tat drums of the Revolutionary War.

The encroachment of British troops into the Carolinas resulted in a clash of cultures—cultures that had formerly been in accord. General Francis Marion, one of South Carolina's great protectorates during the Revolutionary War, was known as the Swamp Fox because he outfoxed the British by leading them into the swamps and marshes between Florence and the coast. The British troops' flatland training and logistics were rendered ineffective, thus they were unable to maneuver.

It wasn't just a territorial familiarity that gave the Swamp Fox his edge—it was the wild horses from the coast he chose for his troops to ride. Marion named these mounts the "Marsh Tacky" because of their capacity for surefootedness, which was as tacky as glue in the quicksand-like plough mud and in slick, mucky bogs.

What is certain is that we would not celebrate our country's independence without the independent spirit of this brave and stalwart breed of horse.

After the war, much like other citizen soldiers, the Marsh Tacky horse retired to the relative ignominy of farm life for a century or two, mostly in the secluded Gullah segments of Carolina life. The horses' time was spent plowing fields, pulling wagons, being ridden into town for supplies—and racing for fun and glory! Races were a way for owners to prove they owned the best horse, to breed their horses to the best mares and stallions and, most importantly, according to Janson Cox of Camden, "to hold a winner's bragging rights for a year or so."

Thundering Hoofbeats Amid the Sea Air

Each year, as part of the Gullah Celebration in late February, the Marsh Tacky races are held on Hilton Head Island. In 2010, the races were relocated from Mitchellville Beach to Coligny Beach and attracted more than 5,000 spectators, owners, friends and fans on an especially crisp, sunny day. The salty sea air practically crackled.

As onlookers squeezed next to each other for a chance to view the contenders, the riders galloped toward the track. Whinnies could be heard over the occasional impatient stomp, which was muffled by wet sand. Riders sat tightly on their compact packages of equine dynamite. The Tackies are a small, but excitable bunch, so riders worked to contain their mounts. Some horses champed at the bit and tossed their impossibly long, beautiful manes while others reared and spun around on hind legs, expressing frustration with being reined in. None were immune to the excitement that was to come.

Modern-day races retain their easy, country charm with no firm starting line and a finish line that is simply a flag. The announcer gives a brief history of the Marsh Tacky. Then, suddenly, the first race is off! Sand sprays behind unshod steeds as they race down the strand. Subsequent heats— or run-offs— continue until the final race determines an overall winner. In thoroughbred racing, a horse runs one race, then is rested for several weeks. In contrast, these hardy horses run heats as long as they win.

A gelding named Blue Duck, owned by William Green, and a mare named Molly, owned by Janson Cox, stood out as horses to watch at the 2010 races. Despite her beauty, Molly would not have “looked good” to most horse race handicappers. Not only was she pitted against stallions and geldings, which are stronger and faster than mares as a rule, but she was already more than 20 years old. Horses peak in terms of speed and endurance between 3 and 7 years of age. Using the standard formula for equivalency to “human years,” Miss Molly compared chronologically to senior citizen status, but was running against male athletes in their prime for strength, conditioning and stamina.

Molly’s eyes were fierce...but not as fierce as her run on that sandy track. In heat after heat she left the competition in her wake, but in the final race Molly was up against two males. She ran valiantly against a gelding and a stallion without benefit of a rest period between races.

That race was won by a nose, but not by Molly’s pretty nose. Her only loss of the day was to the beautiful, prancing, dun-colored young gelding named Blue Duck, who gave this race his all. Providing proof of the heart of this breed in the championship race, Blue Duck edged Molly out in the last few seconds, earning this year’s bragging rights in spite of a bloody nose.

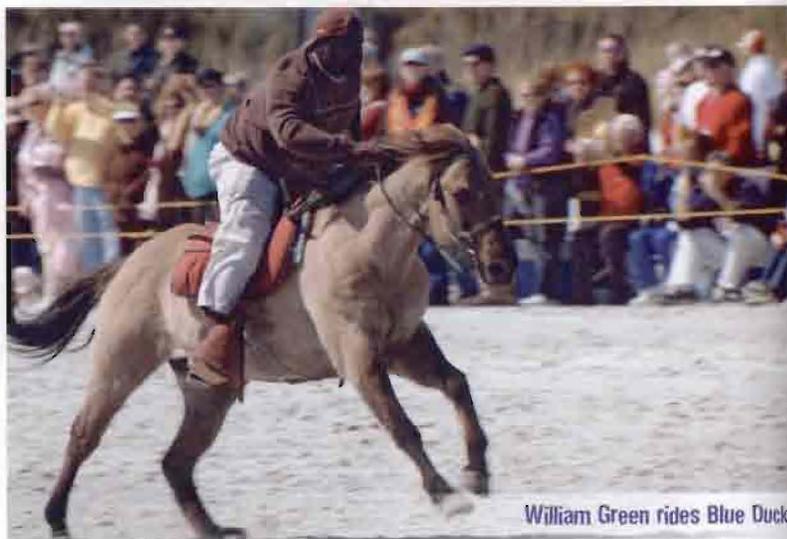
A Third Grader’s Inspiration Becomes a Dream Fulfilled

In the meantime, that third grader with the dream of recognition for the Marsh Tacky had grown up. Jackie McFadden and the Marsh Tacky Association worked to get a legislative bill sponsored to proclaim the Marsh Tacky as the State Heritage Animal. Jackie championed the effort to educate the public and rally support for each Marsh Tacky bill proposed at the Statehouse over a five-year period.

It was during heated debate about the 2010 Marsh Tacky bill among legislators that the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a group of descendants from soldiers who fought the first war for our country, did something revolutionary.

Molly became a DAR darling when she was selected as the first and only horse ever inducted into the organization. As the famous rock’n’roller, Little Richard, might proclaim, “Good golly, Miss Molly!”

“SAND SPRAYS FROM BEHIND UNSHOD STEEDS AS THEY RACE DOWN THE STRAND.”

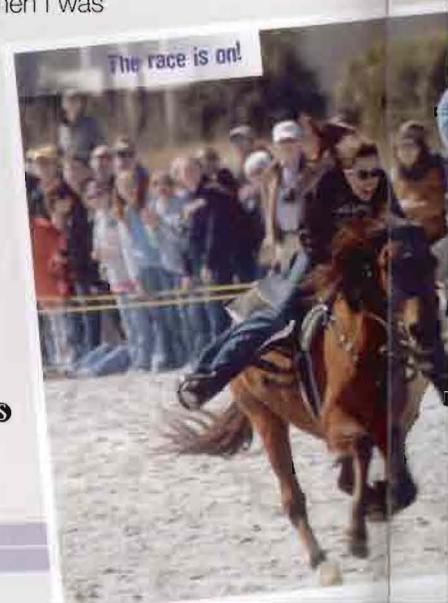


William Green rides Blue Duck

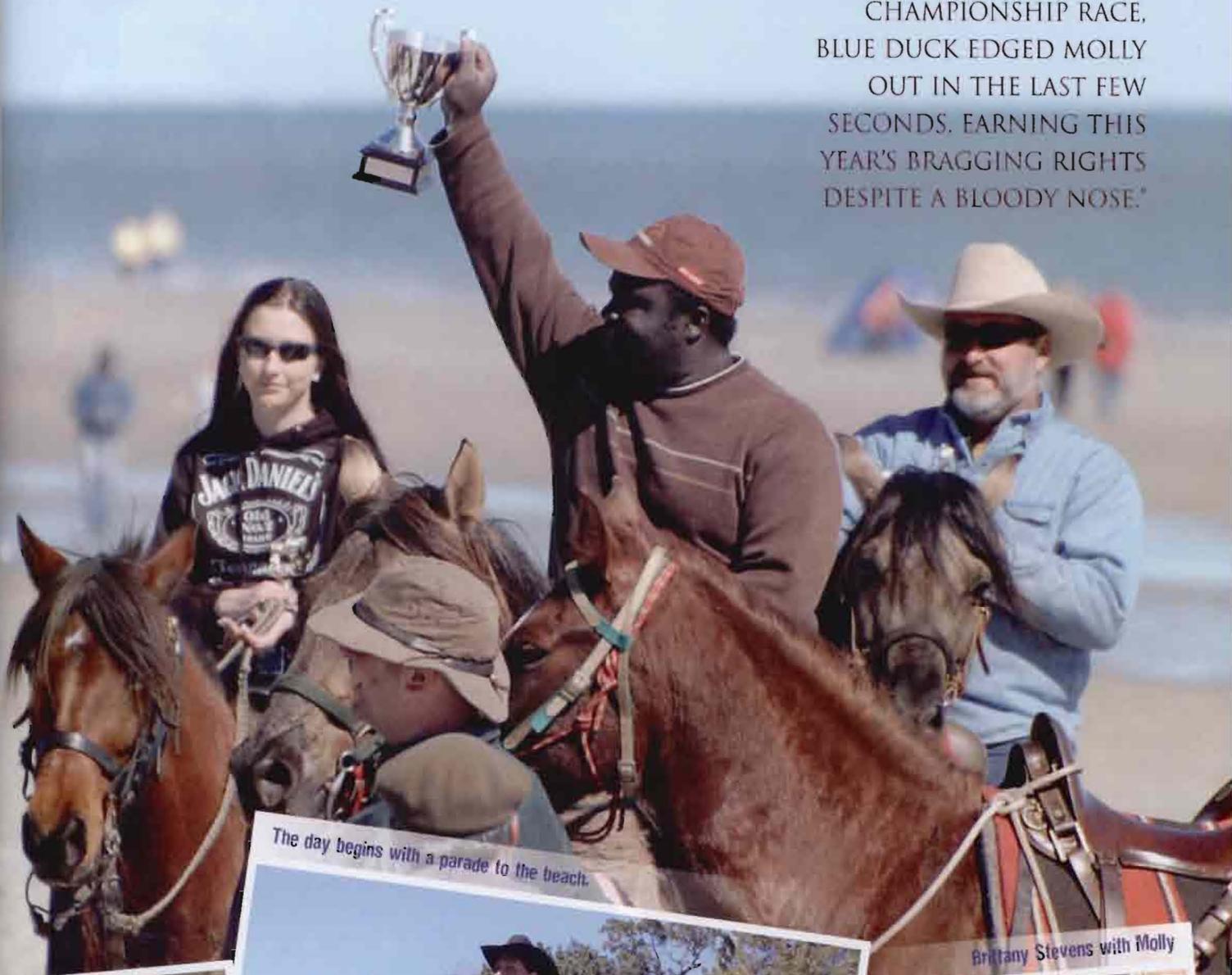
Shortly thereafter, the S.C. Legislature passed the bill making the Marsh Tacky the State Heritage Horse, a bill which also honored the mule as the state’s Heritage Work Animal. On July 28, 2010, Jackie McFadden smiled as Gov. Mark Sanford prepared to sign the bill into law at the Statehouse. The governor said, “My family owned Marsh Tackies when I was a young boy and this breed is dear to my heart.”

With one swift stroke of the Governor’s pen, this rare breed finally received its due: formal recognition as the official State Heritage Horse of South Carolina.

For more information about the breed and sponsored events, visit marshtacky.org.



"PROVIDING PROOF OF THE HEART OF THIS BREED IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP RACE, BLUE DUCK EDGED MOLLY OUT IN THE LAST FEW SECONDS. EARNING THIS YEAR'S BRAGGING RIGHTS DESPITE A BLOODY NOSE."



The day begins with a parade to the beach.

Brittany Stevens with Molly

