



Cutline: *A Special Horse.*
Smokin' Leo Lad, a paint horse affectionately known as Apache, is back in the thick of competition with his main rider Ramie Hoover, after a long, and successful battle with cancer. The horse, beloved by novice riders as well as experienced horseman because he makes them all look good, lost his right eye to cancer last year.

Horse with Heart Triumphs

by PATTI WALKER

Of the Hells Canyon Journal

(originally published March 23, 2005 in the Hells Canyon Journal)

The movie *Sea Biscuit* is a wonderful film. Part of the storyline is about a horse and jockey badly hurt in an accident. The story follows horse and rider as they struggle to beat all odds and go on to race again, winning the Kentucky Derby during the depression, when our nation badly needed a message of hope. It is a story of character, courage and heart.

Today is perhaps a similar time in history; a time when our collective spirit is sagging. And, as in *Sea Biscuit's* time, there is just the horse, living in Eagle Valley, whose experience could provide the story line for another hope-filled movie. Apache is not his real name, just an affectionate nickname given to him by kids who thought he looked like an Indian pony and deserved an Indian name. Officially, he is registered with the American Paint Horse Association as Smokin' Leo Lad, but Apache seems to fit. He is intelligent, beautiful, patient, forgiving, willing to please, and now, completely blind in one eye.

Apache's story began five years ago when the then eight-year-old horse started having soreness and discharge from his eyes.

"This is common in horses with blue eyes," said JoLinn Hoover, "but is of concern when the skin pigment around the eye is pink and not dark. Apache has two blue eyes, one has dark pigment and the other has pink. The pink pigmented one was the most susceptible to cancer."

After several years of monitoring and medicating the eye and keeping a fly mask on year-around, Apache underwent surgery in 2003 to remove several cancerous growths from the outer and inner eyelid.

"It was a terrible struggle throughout the year to get it to heal," JoLinn said. Then in January 2004, the Hoovers noticed swelling under Apache's eye socket bone and more growths inside the eye. Apache's options suddenly became limited.

"The choice was either have the entire eye removed or let the cancer run its course, resulting in his painful death," said JoLinn. "For us, there was no option. Apache is one of our special ones; he has given us so much of himself there was no way we could not give back to him."

The expensive surgery that would render Apache sightless on the right side was scheduled for the very next month. Under anesthesia and lying in a padded surgery room in the Baker Veterinary Clinic, veterinarian Tom Hill completely removed Apache's eye, stretching skin over the vacant eye socket and stitching it shut.

That was the beginning of a long and difficult recovery for the horse. "He recovered from the first surgery fairly quickly," JoLinn said. "His second surgery was a long recovery. It was very intense and he was in shock for quite sometime afterwards."

According to Hoover, the combination of pain and sightlessness was very confusing for Apache, and he was kept in a safe stall for several days before being taken outside to his own corral. The Hoovers had to flush the healing eye socket with antibiotics three or four times a day for many weeks while also administering daily oral antibiotics.

A continual infection of the socket plagued the horse, and in the waning months of 2004, Apache underwent four rounds of chemotherapy. The treatment was successful, and his prognosis now is good.

But that was only part of the recovery. Six months of difficult and tiring retraining was necessary before Apache adjusted to his new partially sighted life.

"We spent many sessions just getting him used to traveling around, learning to trust us to take care of all the obstacles that might be on that blind side," JoLinn said. "His biggest fear is bumping into things he doesn't know are there, so learning to trust that we'll watch out for him has been the biggest hurdle for him to overcome."

While JoLinn's sister is technically Apache's owner, he lives fulltime at the Hoovers' ranch in Richland, and Ramie Hoover has been his exclusive rider for the past three or four years. Ramie has done all of the training with Apache in barrels, poles, goats, keyhole and other areas, and the two have been a winning combination in those events.

His blindness meant complete retraining. "He is was so well-trained that before, he always covered for her inattentiveness and kept her out of trouble," JoLinn said of the fully sighted Apache. After Apache's recovery, the tables were turned. It was Ramie who had to "hone her attentiveness to helping her horse." It was not an easy process for either animal or rider.

"It was really hard for me, and I sometimes resented having to spend so many hours working with him all the time," Ramie said, "but I knew if I didn't I wouldn't gain his trust in order to be ready to rodeo that spring."

Ramie spent many a tear-filled practice session sharpening her ability to focus and give Apache the cues he needs to successfully avoid barrels, poles and other obstacles. It was one of the hardest aspects of the retraining of rider and mount.

"It was frustrating because I would run him into everything all the time, and I would feel really mad at myself or blame it on him when it wasn't his fault," said Ramie.

But again, the horse with the big heart was an inspiration.

"He always forgives me when I make a mistake," she said. "He keeps trying and trying for me no matter how tired he is; that takes a lot of heart."

According to JoLinn some horses never get accustomed to partial or complete blindness enough to be safely ridden again, the outcome depends on the type of retraining and how well-trained the horse was before losing its sight.

Apache was clearly a very special horse before losing his eye, and the qualities that endeared him to all before his disability, carried him through this adjustment.

"It takes an extraordinary horse to give everything they have to their rider every time they're used," said JoLinn. "Apache gives 200 percent, and he's a real gentleman. This was really evident after the loss of his eye. His willingness to please won out over his fear, and he has come to depend on his rider with complete trust."

The trust between horse and rider is so complete that Ramie and Apache finished a season of competition in late 2004 that, as JoLinn described in her Christmas newsletter, "had them winning, placing and running faster times with only three eyes between them than they did with four."

Apache will be back in action again this season, starting this spring with a Team Sorting and Ranch Rodeo in Baker City, play days in Halfway and jackpot team roping around the

county. This summer, you can expect to see Apache in the Hells Canyon Junior Rodeo and parade, the Haines Rodeo and Baker County Fair and Panhandle Rodeo.