Kansas City Chiefs

War Paint

From show arena to football field
horse, rider and trainer transition easily
to new demands of mascot role

Text Katie Navarra **Photos** Courtesy Kansas City Chiefs

Plenty to cheer about!

Imagine charging through a tunnel on your horse into a football stadium echoing with the thundering cheers of 75,000 fans. A wolf and waving cheerleaders' pom poms are also waiting to greet you.
Likely, not a scenario most horses take in stride.

But for Chiefs Warpaint, a 1998 APHA sorrel tobiano mare, it's just another day at work.

The 19-year-old mare is a member of Kansas City Chiefs cheerleading squad. In 2009, the National Football League (NFL) football team enlisted the help of this four-legged cheerleader to commemorate the franchise's 50th anniversary.

An equine ambassador wasn't a new concept. It was a throwback to a previous tradition that ended in 1989 when the then "Warpaint" was retired. In 2009, the new Warpaint was only slated to make one appearance.

"The fans had an overwhelming response to her and requested she remain a part of the home game day activities," said Susie Derouchey, a Kansas City Chiefs Ambassador Cheerleader and Warpaint's rider.

Since then, the mare has attended every home game at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri.

Derouchey was hand-selected to ride Warpaint because cheer director, Stephanie Judah knew that she was the perfect fit. Derouchey is an accomplished rider who regularly competes in AQHA, APHA, PtHA and PHBA shows as an all-around competitor.

Although Warpaint's show pen is nothing like the arena performance horses are familiar with, she receives the same top-notch treatment Merle Arbo, trainer and AHQA, PtHA, NSBA, PHBA, ABRA and IBHA judge based in Kingsville, Missouri, provides all the show horses in his barn.

The trio, Arbo, Derouchey and Warpaint spend countless hours preparing for and traveling to represent the Kansas City Chief equally to dedicated fans and local community members.

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Susie Derouchey and Warpaint attend every home game at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City. Derouchey is pictured on the opposite page (top) at the Palomino World Show with her show partner, I'm a Golden Goodie,and conducting an equine-assisted therapy session at home.

A perfect pairing

Finding a "dream job" is at the top of most people's bucket list. For some, it's a lifelong quest that is never quite fulfilled. Derouchey has not only found one, but two, riding Warpaint.

Raised on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, she got hooked on horses thanks to her older sisters' interests. She started riding at 3-years-old and participated in 4-H and FFA as a youth. It wasn't until she attended South Dakota State University that she started competing in AQHA, APHA and PtHA shows. At that time, the equestrian activities at South Dakota State University were part of the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA).

THE 1998 APHA SORREL TOBIANO MARE IS A MEMBER OF THE KANSAS CITY CHIEFS CHEERLEADING SQUAD. EVERYONE LOVES HER

Today, the equestrian team is a school sponsored women's sport as part of the National Collegiate Equestrian Association (NCEA) team as it is today.

At the same time she competed in the show pen, she was also a member of the university's Sensations Dance Team. The team performed at basketball and football games and she was captain her senior year. She juggled dance and showing with her studies. She graduated with a masters in counseling and human resource development.

Her first two years out of college, she danced for the Sioux Falls Storm, an arena football team.

"It has always been my ultimate goal to just audition for an NFL team and I felt like dancing for the Storm would help prepare for that," she said.

When she wasn't dancing, she was working first working as a school counselor and then transitioned to community mental health position.

Then in 2009, her personal and professional passions collided when she was asked to ride Warpaint. "It's the biggest adrenaline rush you could ever imagine," she said, "it's absolutely surreal. To have this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to incorporate my love for cheerleading with my passion for horses is such a unique opportunity.

In addition to piloting Warpaint around the stadium on a victory lap after every touchdown, Derouchey attends a variety of community events. At schools she speaks about anti-bullying, dream chasing and healthy lifestyle topics. After the presentations, the children are invited to meet and pet Warpaint.

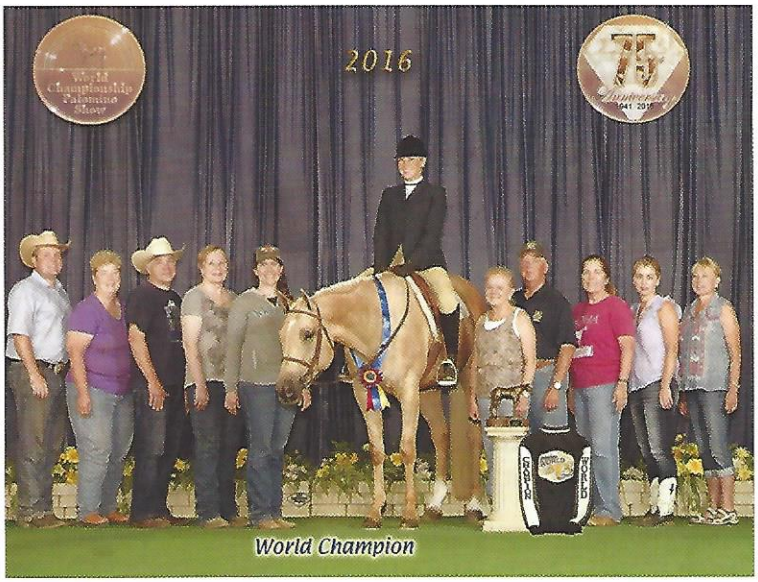
"I enjoy telling people the story of Warpaint and what she represents, everyone just loves her," she said.

The pair also makes appearances at rodeos and parades. In 2010, the mare was awarded the APHA Legendary Achievement Award and in 2012 was invited to the Pinto world show. There, Warpaint and Derouchey won the Celebrity Walk-Trot class.

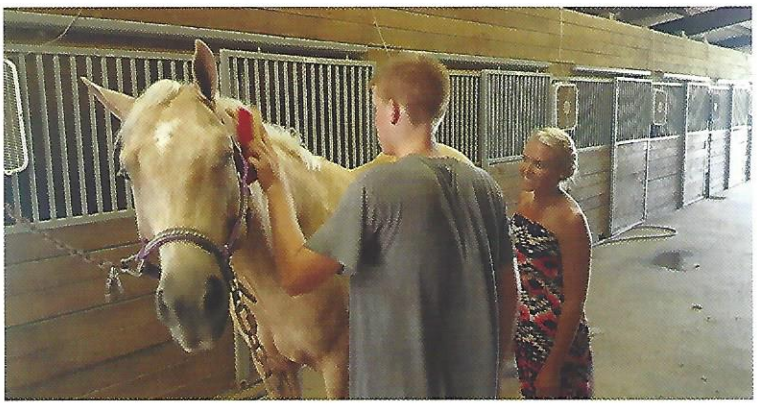
"We say that Warpaint is a world champion too," Derouchey said.

The mare was also awarded the APHA Legendary Achievement Award in 2010.

Despite a busy schedule with Warpaint and her career, she has continued to compete in Western Pleasure, Horsemanship, Showmanship, Equitation and Halter events. In 2010, she was Reserve Grand Champion at PtHA World Show in Amateur Junior Hunter Under Saddle on SB A Zip In Time. At the 2014 Color Breed Congress she won the PHBA Amateur Hunter Under Saddle, Equitation, and Hunter-in-Hand with I'm a Golden Goodie. In 2015, she and I'm A Golden Goodie were reserve at the PHBA World Show in Novice Amateur Showmanship in 2015. The same year, she won the PtHA Solid Bred Hunter Under Saddle at Color Breed Congress with A colorful Deck.



World Champion



Most recently, she was named the 2016 PHBA World Champion Hunter Under Saddle W/T on Connect the Decks.

The training

While Derouchey is the public face fans associate with Warpaint, behind the scenes Arbo is equally involved. In 2010, he was hired to take over Warpaint's day-to-day care and transportation to and from events. She lives alongside his string of show horses and receives the same care. He keeps her well-groomed, fit and in condition.

Training Warpaint was a new challenge. His show horses don't need to calmly walk through an entrance tunnel, tolerate massive crowds or enter school gymnasiums and other community venues not built for horses.

"There's no handbook, that's for sure," he said, "much of it is on the job training because you can't simulate those atmospheres."

Desensitizing Warpaint to KC Wolf, the Chief's other mascot, was the biggest challenge.

"Initially she was terrified of KC Wolf," he said, "it's about eight feet tall and moving and shaking a lot. It's the opposite of what any horse wants to see."

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The team sent old wolf heads and costumes to the barn so he could spend time getting her used to the mascot. Once Warpaint tolerated KC Wolf, skits were created that included the wolf riding her.

"We did a lot of practicing of having the wolf get on and off Warpaint," he said, "when the day actually came, she handled it really well."

Warpaint has taken much of the activity in stride. Fireworks are the one thing she won't tolerate.

"I've had the boys working for me shoot off bottle rockets while I'm riding her, but fireworks at the stadium are much bigger and louder in person," he explained, "we've found it's better to avoid fireworks than force her through it."

"She does things that my show horses wouldn't do for me," Derouchey said, "we have really come to trust one another."

Arbo isn't only responsible for Warpaint's daily care, he hauls the mare and is on-site for nearly all of her appearances.

Sometimes that means leaving a day early from a show, skipping a show all together or hauling really early in the day, dropping horses off and coming back to take Warpaint somewhere.

Both his clients and the Kansas City Chiefs have understood when Arbo can't be in two places at once.

"I have two good helpers that I trust to take Warpaint to an appearance if I can't make it," he said, "the Chiefs are really understanding that I may have committed to judging an event a year in advance and my customers are really understanding."

Game day

So what actually happens when Warpaint attends the eight regular season and two pre-season home games at Arrowhead Stadium?

Unless you've attended a game in person, chances are you didn't even know Warpaint was on the field at home games. That's because the television crews typically cut to commercial when she's on the field.

Warpaint and Derouchey start every home game at the Ford Fan Experience. Two hours before kickoff, they are available for 30 minutes for fans to meet Warpaint.

Warpaint and Susie are part of the pre-game activities taking place on the field during the "Chiefs Chop" song. For most of the game, she waits in a stall inside the tunnel. When the Chiefs are within striking distance of the end zone, Warpaint, Derouchey and Arbo move down close to the action ready to make a victory run.

Currently, Warpaint runs a loop on the far side of the stadium. But, most of the route decisions are based on where the TV camera carts are along the sidelines.

Some of the bigger camera carts make it nearly impossible to get by them.

On games with more camera carts, Warpaint and Susie usually run a loop on the field rather than walking the track behind the opponents' bench.

The speed of the victory lap is determined by the field conditions that day. Always wanting to streak across the field, they must go slower if the field is slick, wet or frosty.

Warpaint is fitted with boots to limit damage to the real turf field. Her "Boa" boots more evenly disperse her weight and provide added traction on concrete or asphalt surfaces.

"A 350 pound lineman can tear-up the field pretty well, but we don't want Warpaint to add to that," Arbo said.

Even though riding Warpaint is the opportunity of a lifetime, it can be stressful. Derouchey's extensive show experience has taught her composure that is helpful on the field.

"The stress of being in a show pen at big competitions has helped tremendously with Warpaint," she said, "having a "performance" face and confidence that even when a small mistake is made that there is a good chance the judge didn't see it has helped."

When something happens on the field that I know wasn't according to plan, there's a good chance 99 percent of the people watching are unaware that something didn't go as planned.

"The first time I rode Warpaint onto the field she reared," she recalled, "the crowd went wild and the whole time I was thinking, she's not supposed to do that."

When the pair aren't at games, they are visiting schools and participating in community events. She gives presentations about having a positive attitude, anti-bullying and health lifestyle topics.

After the presentation, the students are invited to meet Warpaint and touch and pet her.

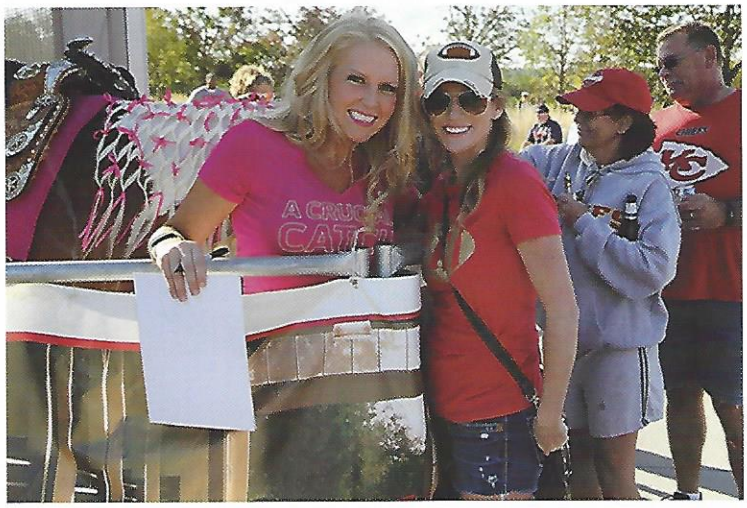
The community interaction compliments her other career as a counselor.

Two years ago, she established Country Crossroads Counseling in Lone Jack, Missouri where she uses horses and dogs in animal assisted psychotherapy sessions.

"I've always dreamed of being out on a ranch and that is where my office is. The practice has really taken off and is doing well," she said.

She offers life coaching, motivational speaking and staff training services to help clients gain a new perspective on life and work through difficult situations.

"This experience has definitely been a journey," she said. "I had no idea what to expect when we first started, but we have bonded and we trust and take care of one another."



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Above, Susie Derouchey and Warpaint meet with fans. When they aren't at games, they are visiting schools and participating in community events. Derouchey gives presentations about having a positive attitude, anti-bullying and health lifestyle topics.