

Follow That Horse

By Shannon Teper

Cuddles is on the job! Her owner, Dan Shaw, grips the handle of her harness. He says, "Take a walk," and the pair starts off. Because he is blind, Dan can't see the road ahead, but he knows he's safe with Cuddles. Cuddles is one of only a few trained guide horses for blind people.

Cuddles, a chestnut miniature horse, stands knee-high next to Dan. At 26 inches tall and 80 pounds, she's the size of a large dog. Since Cuddles is compact,

she can go everywhere Dan goes. She rides elevators, fits under restaurant tables, and flies with Dan on an airplane. Cuddles is also housebroken. A horse that isn't housebroken cannot be a guide horse.

People expect to see a guide dog leading a blind person, but a guide horse is something new!

Wherever she goes, Cuddles wears four tiny sneakers. At first, the sneakers must have felt strange. Cuddles lifted her hooves high and tried to step out of them. Now she wears sneakers everywhere. They protect her hooves from being hurt by broken glass or hot pavement, and from slipping on polished floors.

Cuddles is the first miniature horse to guide a blind owner. Janet and Don Burleson trained Cuddles at the Guide Horse Foundation in Kittrell, North Carolina. The Burlesons wanted to offer another choice to blind people who are allergic to or afraid of dogs.

Dan feels more comfortable being guided by a horse. "I've loved horses all my life. I'm proud to walk down the street with a horse," he said.

Cuddles learned 23 different commands during her training. Like guide dogs, guide horses learn commands such

Is that horse wearing sneakers?

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Dan Shaw and Cuddles go shopping.

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Cuddles was trained by Janet Burleson of the Guide Horse Foundation.

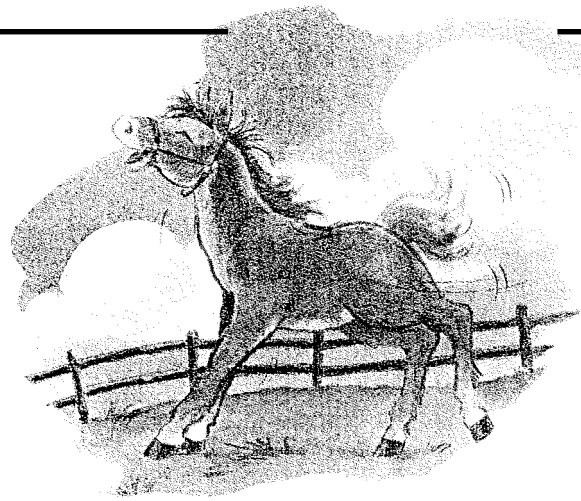
as *forward*, *right*, and *left*, as well as requests such as *Find the door*.

Cuddles also learned to “spook in place,” to stand still instead of running away when something frightens her.

“I’m proud to walk down the street with a horse,” Dan said.

To keep Dan safe, Cuddles was taught to decide when to disobey. If Dan commands her to cross the street when a car is coming, Cuddles won’t cross.

Cuddles saved Dan from danger recently when a bike raced into his path. She quickly stepped between him and



Big Facts About Little Horses

- Miniature horses are cheap to feed. Hay costs \$4 per week, and oats cost \$.25 cents per day.
- They don’t have fleas!
- Most people are not allergic to miniature horses.
- They need room to exercise. A fenced-in yard works best.
- Guide horses need special care. At this time, only people over age 16 are taught to care for and handle guide horses.
- So far, there are only a few trained miniature guide horses.

the bicycle. “She makes sure I’m safe,” Dan said.

Cuddles has been guiding Dan since May 2001. Now he wouldn’t be without her. Dan says, “The best thing about Cuddles is the freedom and independence she’s given me. She’s brought a lot of happiness to my life.”