

Thinking about Barbaro

By: Dr. Stephen Fine

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My father bred, raised and raced several quality thoroughbreds during his lifetime. Having grown up on a thoroughbred farm I know a bit about race horse families so I've been thinking about Barbaro. Thinking about the pain and fear of a catastrophically injured animal, thinking about a brilliant racing career severed in its prime, thinking about the anguish and sorrow of the Jackson family, Barbaro's owners. In Barbaro's case this super-star of horses received the same degree of care and medical expertise afforded to any human accident victim. But beyond this particular horse's international status and monetary worth as a stallion there pulsates a genuine love that supercedes any self-interest. It is the affection of the Jackson family for a beloved creature they have raised and nurtured from birth – something any pet owner can relate to.

I've also been thinking about Barbaro in my present capacity as the director of an equestrian summer camp. What happened so suddenly to Barbaro can happen to any horse in a variety of ways and in a variety of circumstances including the circumstances at summer camp. This raises a number of issues about the overall care, feeding, and observation of the animals, the educating of campers and staff, and protocols in the event of a catastrophe.

Our Own Timely Story

Here is a current story of our own. Sunrise at The Hollows Camp promises another gorgeous day in late spring and I go to the barns for the routine turnout. We are in pre-camp preparation with our first group of campers arriving in less than ten days. "Strate" is our twenty year-old thoroughbred gelding, a magnificent animal that belies his age. Though never a star on the race-track, within our program he has shown himself an intelligent and talented school-master. He was born on our farm and I remember his birth. This is the kind of experience that bonds humans and horses. He is a member of the family and as such has enjoyed a life of exceptionally good care and thus good health.



As I turned him out into his paddock that morning it became apparent he was not at all well and so we immediately called the vet. Strate was shaking indicating a dangerously elevated heart rate. Most apparent was a copious nasal discharge and he had difficulty moving. How could this have happened? He was perfectly healthy only 12 hours earlier! Upon examination our vet found that he had aspirated some hard feed into his lungs – a real fluke because he eats hard feed everyday – and this had resulted in a choking episode during the night. She sadly told us that the prognosis was grim. Pneumonia resulting in death was a strong likelihood. Did we want him to be transported to the veterinary hospital at Guelph University? Did we want to try home care? Given his age, perhaps the best thing might be for him to be "put down" right away. We decided we would care for him at home.

Once again, Strate was the long-shot and the next 72 hours would tell the tale. He was put on a round the clock series of antibiotic injections which we administered via a catheter. We soaked his hay in water to soften and protect his esophagus. We took him for hand walks to graze every few hours. We were diligent with his drug regime, kept in touch with our vet by phone, and true to his racing heritage - against the odds - Strate's condition improved.

Five days later his lungs were clear and showed no signs of permanent damage. Strate was back to his round bale enjoying the spring weather. We were elated!

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Doing Things Right the First Time

With horses as with campers, safe routines, observation and follow-up are paramount.

- Watch for any change in a horse's routine, physical appearance or disposition. Beyond concern for the animal, a healthy horse is a safe horse around rider campers.
- If illness is suspected take immediate action and call the vet for advice or a visit. Colic is a serious condition. I can't count the times I have had to explain that horses can't "throw up". If they have a stomach ache its not like a human stomach ache which usually goes away. It can be life threatening. Simple to treat successfully if caught early but serious if not attended to immediately.
- Follow your vet's instructions. "Owner compliance with medical directives is imperative and often means the difference between life and death." says Dr. Katherine Hunnisett of the Hillsdale Veterinary Clinic.
- In looking for the person who is going to run your barn you will need a multi-talented individual. Someone with solid long-term experience in the care and training of horses as well as someone who is experienced in maintaining a safe environment for horses and children.
- Give comprehensive hand-on lessons to campers and staff on the practical aspects of stable management, proper grooming and hoof care, feed and water and turn-out.

Have a Game Plan for Health

Acquiring Healthy Horses

A healthy horse is a good investment from many standpoints. Sick or broken down animals will only prove more costly in the long run and are also a potential danger to your staff or campers. An experienced eye for conformation and disposition along with a veterinarian pre-purchase report and any



pedigree or show records are a must. Buying or renting horses unseen from a herd is unwise and risky for your program.

Note that vaccinations are costly. Although rabies shots for horses are required by law, regulations for flu, tetanus or West Nile injections may vary. We do all at our camp. And always have a coggins test (blood test) done on your new stock. Don't bring a Trojan-horse into your camp that could cause serious illness to your other horses. There is just no getting away from the high cost of maintaining good healthy riding stock. For safety's sake, both camp owner/directors and camper parents should understand and accept the economic realities when it comes to horses and riding.

Feeding

Kid's just love to feed apples to horses and so do their parents. There are many apple trees on our camp property and campers are always asking if they can feed them to the horses. The connection between proper diet and good health in a horse is a delicate balance. Feeds vary according to a horse's preference, season of the year, work schedule, age and weight. It is something that is determined by the wisdom of experience or nutritional recommendation by a vet or equine feed specialist. Horse feeds can be any combination of hay, alfalfa, sweet feed mixes, crunches, silage cubes, beet pulp or bio feeds. Altering or adding to a horse's diet indiscriminately can seriously compromise health. Always make certain that clear and age appropriate lessons on

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feeding are part of your equestrian program. Oh, and the most important element is water. Always have a full bucket for your horse – or better yet two. How much they drink will vary but become aware of their regular pattern so you will know if there is a change. In horses regularity is best and change is often an early warning sign. If you use automatic watering bowls, remember, you will not be aware of your horse's water consumption.

Plan for Illness or Death

Dependable horses are often older horses and therefore more susceptible to illness or death. We as camp directors have protocols in place for the death at camp of a child or staff member but those who have horses in their programs must also consider how they will handle an equine death. How such an event is handled can be the difference between a sad but important life lesson and a devastating experience for the campers. When an animal dies or must be humanely put down you are immediately faced with the decision of what you will tell the campers. Children quickly develop a close bond with the horse or pony they ride and we must remember that this may be their first experience with a death.

Each case is unique and we believe that we have responded appropriately in several instances. We had an older pony who suffered a severe bout of colic. His two

riders were both eight year olds and this was their first experience at residential camp. In this instance we told them that the pony was very sick and we had taken him to the veterinary hospital. We did not tell them that the pony had died. We felt that this decision was age appropriate. In another case one of our longtime thoroughbreds suffered a compound leg fracture slipping on the ice. Unlike Barbaro, our horse's age and the severity of the injury dictated that she be humanely put down by the vet. When the campers returned to camp the next summer we told them the circumstances of the accident and the necessity of putting this animal out of her misery. There was the expected initial shock but soon we were all reminiscing about how wonderful she was and how much everyone had loved her.

No Triple Crown but Hopes for a Happy Ending

Barbaro continues to recuperate at the George D. Widener Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center in Kennett Square, Pa where Dr. Dean Richardson fused his hind ankle with a plate and 27 screws. It will no doubt be several months before the practical outcome of surgery will be known. Until then, many thousands of horse owners and equestrian sport enthusiasts will follow Barbaro's progress with hope in their hearts.