

A Miracle For Excalibur

By Meredith Hodges

c. October 2003

It was the first week in December. The trees had long since lost the brilliant fall colors, the grass had turned to brown and the air held the chill of winter. The mules, donkeys and horses of the Lucky Three breeding farm basked in the peaceful morning sun, awaiting their morning feeding. We made the rounds, checking each animal and were surprised to come upon our jack, Lucky Three Excalibur, otherwise known as “Zee,” in a depressed state. This wasn’t normal for him and caused us some concern.

Zee was a very special donkey jack. His grandsire, Little Jack Horner had been famous for his production of refined, attractive and horse-like saddle mules. For years, we searched for just the right jennets to begin producing jackstock that would carry on this tradition. But Little Jack Horner kept producing daughters from the jennets. Finally, we bred 3 daughters to another fine jack, Blue Zebulon, from the Bitterroot Mule Company and they each had a jack colt, but Lucky Three Excalibur was the finest of the three. He was tall, refined, black and beautiful! He was the successful culmination of years of work.

No other was as loving, affectionate and willing as Zee! His ground training went smoothly and he was trained to breed in hand with no difficulties. Clients were exceptionally pleased with his offspring and he went on to become a star when he was actually broke to ride while shooting the donkey training videos for the Lucky Three Ranch. Zee’s career soared when the videos were revised for television and he had a starring role in the making of the Discovery Channel’s, “The Ultimate Horse.” If he was born handsome, he grew to be even more magnificent. In adulthood, he matured at 15.2 hands sporting the shiniest black coat and incredibly good conformation for a Mammoth donkey.

When I saw him standing so depressed, I thought about the years that went into his making and hoped this wouldn’t be more than a mild colic. We called our vet who came out and did a complete checkup. He said he wasn’t really sure what was going on with him, but it wasn’t colic and after a week with no change, suggested we take him to Colorado State Veterinary Teaching Hospital for further examination. Trooper that he is, Zee loaded easily, but it was evident that he was in distress.

Zee was presented to the veterinary hospital with a history of being off his feed for about a week. At the hospital, they did a barrage of testing and diagnosed him with “idiopathic hematuria and interstitial nephritis.” At this point his prognosis was only fair. Physical exam findings and laboratory results revealed that Zee initially was presented with “signs of mild hematuria and azotemia (decreased renal function). His kidney enzymes were increased in his blood and he had an inflammatory complete blood count. He passed blood-tinged manure on several occasions, but this resolved. He was treated with antibiotics, anti-ulcer medications and intravenous fluids. Over the course of his hospitalization, his attitude and appetite improved as his azotemia improved. He was removed from intravenous fluids when his creatinine stabilized at about 3.”

“Shortly thereafter, the hematuria worsened and he was urinating large amounts of frank blood. Bladder endoscopy initially revealed urine coming from both ureters, but at the time, the hematuria worsened endoscopy revealed that the blood was originating from the left kidney and the right kidney was not producing much urine. A biopsy of the right kidney revealed an interstitial nephritis (inflammation) with signs of regeneration. The bleeding continued and Zee’s pack cell volume fell to 10% necessitating a transfusion.”

Back at the ranch, Little Jack Horner knew something was really wrong. My face and demeanor must have said volumes. I had been to the vet hospital everyday, spending at least an hour with Zee, brushing, massaging, talking and doing everything I could think of to keep up his spirits. He was nearly immobile, but on good days, we could take a short walk. He was so weak, even the short walks were laborious. He would stop and put his head down to consider nibbling the dried grass, but quickly gave up the effort. He would have to stop and rest after only a few steps. He had dropped over 100 pounds of body weight. It was apparent...he was dying.

I told Little Jack Horner that this day he would have a very important mission. He was the best choice for the blood transfusion to his grandson. L.J. seemed to understand and gave me no trouble when I loaded him into the trailer and took him to the vet hospital. When we arrived, they asked if we needed to sedate him. All I had to do was look at him to know he was going to be a trooper, too. No sedation was necessary. L.J. stood like the champion he is while they extracted pints and pints of blood from him. I let L.J. know how grateful I was for his contribution to his grandson’s health. He was quietly appreciative.

The days immediately following the transfusion, Zee seemed to improve, then crashed again. “A renal nuclear scan revealed that the left kidney was producing the majority of the urine, but that the right kidney was functional. This made removal of the left kidney impractical.”

The vet hospital told me that there wasn’t much hope and that I would probably have to make “a decision.” I knew what they meant, but I wasn’t ready to give up quite yet. I believe in miracles and I also believe in exhausting every possible avenue of hope. I had but one last long shot left. I asked the hospital if they would mind if I brought in my equine chiropractor/acupuncturist, David McClain. Since there was no more they could do for Zee, they agreed. Dr. McClain treated Zee three different times at the hospital over a period of days. “Zee was monitored daily for a falling hemocrit and periodically creatinine measurements and complete blood counts were performed. Zee was removed from antibiotics when his blood count normalized. On 1/11/00, Zee’s urine no longer contained frank blood and he was observed for two more days and then discharged.”

It was almost comical the day he was discharged. When I arrived with the trailer to take him home, doctors, vet techs, students and a hoard of others emerged from the hospital to see him off. It was incredible to see the number of friends that Zee had made during his stay and each of them had tears of happiness on their faces knowing how close to death he had come.

We monitored Zee very closely for the next year and he steadily improved. We can really only guess what caused all this, but the most reasonable assumption would be that he wrenched his back after covering a mare, pinched the blood supply to the kidneys and caused a secondary infection. Manipulation by the chiropractor and acupuncture relieved the pressure and promoted healing. There was a great deal of trauma to his body and we still weren't sure he would really make it back to normal with his kidneys being so compromised, but today he is happy and healthy and you would never know he had been through so much.

Zee's illness brought a lot of people together, sharing the things that each had to offer. If I have learned nothing, I have learned to value what others have to offer, no matter how insignificant it may seem. When we share what we are, we can create miracles. Zee shared his miracle with all of us!