

Wez and the Magic Blanket

Many people reading this may have heard of Wez but some may not have. He is a fjord gelding of humble beginnings, born on a ranch in Alberta, Canada who gained international notoriety for his accomplishments in the sport of Dressage. He was written up in articles and graced the cover of magazines and calendars world wide.

To me he was a food driven, hard working, good natured fellow who distinguished himself by his huge personality and by pouring his heart and soul into any task at hand. Once described as “Old Shep” by a horse show judge, Wez went on to reach the Grand Prix level in dressage and ultimately earn the coveted USDF Gold Medal; the only fjord horse to ever do this.

He was (is) my once in a lifetime horse who I eventually retired from the show ring at the age of 24 because of a stifle injury. Like everything else in life Wez embraced his disability with grace and determination, learning to limp quite effectively and efficiently, whatever it took to get what he wanted! He has a spirit to match none.

One afternoon a year ago I came into the barn and to my horror found Wez down in the stall. Soaked with sweat, sides heaving, eyes wide and nostrils flared, he was in a panic and couldn't get up. How long had he been down? I was alone... what could I do? I had arranged to meet two people at the barn who wanted to “learn about horses” and they arrived and watched helplessly as I pulled and pleaded and frantically tried to help him. I gave it everything I had but the harder I tried the less he did. Finally his eyes rolled back in his head and he lay back and gave up. I tried to be brave but my heart was breaking as I faced the most devastating decision of my life. I had to make the call I had long rehearsed but desperately dreaded for years.

The first call I made was to my partner, Bill. When he answered I could only squeek out “Wez” and the sob on the other end told me he understood. I hung up. The vet call was more difficult because I had to actually speak... the vet said he was on his way. It was Dr. Ernie Grubb DVM from Chambers Prairie Veterinary Clinic who had cared for my animals for over 20 years

The visitors asked if they should leave and I said probably. I didn't think I could share this moment with strangers.

I sat down with Wez and held his head in my lap. What could I say to my old friend? My soul mate? There were no words. As I waited for the vet I decided to indulge my old food hound with any treat he wanted. His eyes were closed now so I knew it was more a gesture for me than for him but WTH. I got up and got a big carrot and on my way back to the stall snapped it in half like I always did. That's when things changed..... Wez's eyes popped open and his head jerked up.

“Carrot? Carrot? Did I hear a carrot?”

OMG!!!!

Ernie had just pulled up and, braced for a grim scene, he was instead met by a giddy, tear streaked lunatic dancing around the stall with an old horse keenly watching for that promised carrot.

I told him Wez was not ready to go and that we just needed to find a way to get him up. Never one to turn down a good challenge, Ernie quickly changed gears and set about attacking Plan B. Turns out that the visitors had not left yet so we quickly recruited their help.

Drawing from a lifetime of experience lifting and moving large animals, Ernie put us all to work with ropes, hay bales and pry bars and after much swearing, pleading grunting and sweating, Wez all of a sudden heaved himself up and VOILA!! "Hi, How you all doing? What's going on? Did I hear something about a carrot? Helloooo!!?"

He was fine... just stuck....

We were in all in shock. Ernie left with prophetic words. "You know, with these old horses... this will happen more and more frequently..."

And it did.

A few months, then a few weeks, then days. I created a long phone list of people to call (luckily he has a lot of local fans!) as it took at least three people but later, more, to get him up. We resorted to all kinds of techniques, some more radical than others but as time went on each became less effective and eventually failed. Ernie even came out on his days off sometimes to help and one day he remembered he had an old horse sling in his clinic and suggested we should try it with our tractor.

Question.... How do you get a sling under a 1000 lb horse on the ground? When Wez would struggle to get up he would often end up in a dog sitting position. I took that moment to slip the sling under him. Then, in true Wezzy fashion, he soon learned to "sit up" on command and wait until I had him all buckled in. We rigged up ropes, pullies and cables and, using Bill's Bobcat in the barn aisle, soon had a workable, albeit quite complicated, system.

We installed a video camera in his stall and, watching that and monitoring his pasture, we were on call 24/7. I was under the false impression that laying down too long was harmful for horses and we would rush out at all hours when he was down. Ernie soon dispelled that myth and we started leaving him down long enough that he could actually get some rest!

The sling worked great for Bill and I but the critical details made it difficult to pass on to other people. One day Bill casually said wouldn't it be great if there was a horse blanket that had a sling built in that could be worn 24/7. I got on the internet. How about those carts they use to mobilize disabled dogs? I found one designed for a cow and called the woman. We decided it would not work for a horse and she gently suggested we "Do the loving thing..." NO!!!

Then I found the Hast Large Animal Rescue site and Dr. Kathleen Anne Becker, DVM. She designs slings for all manner of large animal rescue; Rhinos, elephants, horses, humans; by helicopter, water... she does it all. A short paragraph on her web page mentioned a horse blanket sling she had in mind but had not made yet and please call if interested. I did... immediately. She was wonderful and said she would love to help but was swamped with other projects and couldn't get to it. I asked if she might consider lending me her blueprints and assured her it would only be for our use and not commercial gain. She generously agreed.

With Kathleen's help I ordered materials, made some minor design changes and found an old Rambo blanket as a base. I then found a friend with great sewing skills and a commercial sewing machine. Bill fabricated the lifting bar and after juggling work and family and employing amazing ingenuity and patience my friend finally finished the blanket. (two machines later...☺)

It was six months since the original incident and now, with his new blanket in place, we were ironically excited for him to go down!! When he finally did we rushed in and hooked him up but no sooner put tension on the cable than he hopped up by himself. Weird coincidence. We tried again the next time but the same thing happened... over and over... Was this a magic blanket?

One day in early spring it was quite hot out and Wez was sweating heavily out in his field. We decided to take the blanket off for a couple of hours to let him cool down. Bill suggested we hang the blanket on the fence so he could be "near the magic"! When we came back he was down and couldn't get up. He tried.... We tried... no luck. Then I asked him to "sit up" and put the blanket back on. No sooner had I buckled the last buckle than he hopped up! Magic Blanket indeed!!

A year has gone by and Wez continues to get up by himself most of the time. He will wait until the morning feeder arrives and when he hears their car or the barn lights come on he will hop up. He has a good side and a bad side and when down on his bad side he always needs help.

We installed an overhead hoist which can be operated by one person pushing one button. Finally Bill and I are free to come and go!

Wezzy turns 33 this year. He now sports two blanket slings, one for summer and one for winter. I toy with the idea of making more or changing the design but hesitate when I think of his age. Then I see him squeal and bolt across his field or dash into someone else's stall to steal their food and I realize that his future holds just as much mystery as anyone else's around here. Why not make those blankets?

Wez is not immortal but his spirit is strong and I am grateful for every day I have to spend with him. He has taught me so much over the years and I am beginning to think that one of those things is the power of magic. For everything and especially that I am eternally thankful!

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